

EASTERN C.F.
INFORMATIONAL PICKET
SCHEDULED FOR MAY 20, 2009

CANCELLED

The informational picket for May 20, 2009 has been cancelled due to the fact that the D.O.C.S. has cancelled the inmate theater production.

Please see attached newspaper article for additional information.

News

Inmates' show won't go on Performance canceled after union threat

By Adam Bosch
Times Herald-Record
May 17, 2009 6:00 AM

WOODBOURNE — State prison officials have lowered the curtain on an inmate theatrical performance.

A troupe of 18 convicted murderers, robbers and other felons at Woodbourne Correctional Facility had been scheduled to perform an original play Wednesday at Eastern Correctional Facility in Ellenville.

But the state Department of Correctional Services has canceled the show because union workers threatened to picket.

"The commissioner does not want to jeopardize the program or the people in it by putting them in the middle of a statewide labor issue," said DOCS spokesman Erik Kriss.

Relations between Albany and prison unions have turned sour since November, when the state announced it would close 12 prison farms, including three local ones, as part of budget cuts. In April, the state announced it would close annexes at Sullivan and Eastern Correctional that house inmate work crews.

That is the backdrop for this most recent flare-up.

In January 2008, inmates began writing and rehearsing their own Broadway-style show about the difficulty of living behind bars and keeping a family. The play, "Starting Over," was funded and supervised by Rehabilitation Through the Arts, a nonprofit group that seeks to reduce recidivism through arts enrichment programs. The group declined comment on the cancellation, but it forged ahead with a production of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" last week at Sing Sing.

Kevin Walker, regional vice president for the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, said prison farms, annexes and print shops have been useful because they teach skills that can be applied toward a job on the outside. The union saw no value in theater work.

"How many of these medium-security convicts do you think will go to Broadway and get a job?" Walker said. "We believe it's a blatant waste of manpower and funding."

Kriss rebutted that, noting that inmates experienced a range of new emotions and kept busy by learning how to act.

"It helps them cope with life," Kriss said, adding that the only cost to the state was transportation.

The cast of the play included inmates serving life sentences for murder or attempted murder. They rehearsed under the direction of female acting students, some of them from New York University, inside a gym at Woodbourne.

On Wednesday they were supposed to get on a bus, along with their costumes and props, for a 1 p.m. show attended by their coaches and inmates at Eastern's maximum-security prison. It's unclear if the show will be rescheduled.

abosch@th-record.com