



### Nordiske Fængselsfunktionærers Union

## 2025 conference summary

At the 2025 Conference of Nordiske Fængselsfunktionærers Union held in Odense, Denmark, union representatives from Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Denmark have looked ahead with concern at the future of Nordic prisons. Nordic prisons have been unique in their high staff-to-inmate ratios, dynamic security, and focus on crime prevention, and key in their efforts are the focus on staff as the most important resource in prisons.

### **Jailcraft: a skill of experienced prison officers**

This was underlined in the main talk at the conference by British National Chair Mark Fairhurst from POA, which is the British trade union that represents most prison officers.

Mark Fairhurst talked about *Jailcraft*, a vital skill acquired by well-educated and trained officers which makes them able to almost 'smell', when trouble is brewing on a landing. This skill is acquired through learning from veterans in the trade, through thorough school education and through lots of time on the job. No static security tool or 'smart prison' feature can replace jailcraft.

### **Present situation in English and Welsh prisons**

British prisons have for decades been subject to longer sentences, harsher conditions for inmates and budget cuts. At one point, the Prison Service suddenly cut 7,000 experienced frontline staff and trade unions were forced to accept a worsening of job protection, work conditions and pay.

One result is that very few experienced officers are left and that new staff are recruited online from overseas and stay on the job for a short one-year contract, not gaining *jailcraft*. He warned the Nordic unions that they should not accept 1) deterioration of pay and work conditions, 2) staff-to-prisoner ratios, 3) curtailing of prisoner rights, 3) deterioration of maintenance standards, or 4) outsourcing of key functions in 24-hour institutions.

### **Gang situation in the Nordics**

On the second day of the conference, sociologist Aydin Soei pointed out that earlier, gangs were able to recruit outside of prison. That has become increasingly difficult, not just because fewer youths commit crime, but also because even the disadvantaged neighborhoods provide lots of legal alternatives to crime.

Therefore, Aydin Soei found that going forward, recruitment will primarily happen inside prisons. Aydin found that for a Swedish gang like *Dödspatruljen* (in English: Death patrol), receiving a decades-long sentence to Danish prison is a business-opportunity rather than a deterrent.

### **Outsourcing prisons – private sector or abroad**

Whether in the UK or in the Nordics, there has been political pressure to outsource prison functions. The experience so far has not been positive.

Norway also has negative experience with outsourcing prison service – this outsourcing was to another country, however. Sending prisoners to Norgerhaven in the Netherlands for three years from 2015 was expensive and inefficient. The initiative was very resource-demanding for the Correctional Service. Still, the

Danish government in 2021 decided to outsource 300 prison spaces to Kosovo, at first intended to open in 2023, but now postponed to 2027. The delay demonstrates the complexity of sending inmates abroad. The Danish project is not intended to save money, but the intention of relieving the serious need for Danish prison officers has also not been achieved.

### **Conclusions from the 2025 NFU conference**

Some take-aways for the four prison officer trade unions from the conference were:

- While it is vital that prisons have sufficient resources, the resource that *must* be fully in place is professionally trained frontline staff. Politicians cannot plan longer sentences without putting the full number of well recruited and educated officers in place. Officers can neither be replaced by technology nor by too young and not sufficiently educated discount substitutes.
- If the resources are not put in place, political promises of long, harsh sentences may be empty promises and the sentenced will be released at a time that was not intended - like in the UK.
- “Cost-effective” measures that rely on discount staff will be more costly, not just inside prisons, but for society. The same can be expected for outsourcing, whether through privatizing key prison services or exporting prisoners abroad.

### **The role of frontline staff in prisons**

‘Deprogramming’ a criminal mind demands human interaction. The closest at hand for that job is professionally trained officers. Politicians are often tempted to peel off tasks from the prison officer role and make ‘security officers’, but earlier Danish experience as well as the example from the UK demonstrates that this does not work well.