

Forced labor – not just in the DDR

Ikea, Aldi, Siemens, Quelle and many others: more than 6,000 firms from West Germany and elsewhere profited from [forced labor in East Germany](#) (the DDR). Up to 30,000 inmates in DDR prisons, many of them political prisoners, were forced to work for companies in the West. These revelations were made in a report published in Berlin this week. Ikea commissioned the report after allegations began to emerge two years ago surrounding the Swedish furniture company's links with forced labor.

That the East German authorities were involved in such activities won't come as a great surprise to anyone. We know that oppositionists in the DDR were kept under surveillance, persecuted and in some cases forced to serve long prison sentences. These included many detainees that could be described as political prisoners in the wider sense of the term, such as members of subcultures – including the gay scene – who were imprisoned for purported antisocial behavior.

Prisoners jailed for other crimes were also subject to inhumane punishment in some cases. Against this background it's little wonder that these practices are resurfacing in the context of the manufacturing practices of Western firms. It should, however, serve as a warning to DDR nostalgists who might be tempted to glorify the authoritarian systems of the past while leveling – justified – criticism against current economic realities.

Also unsurprising is the fact that Ikea and other companies took advantage of the cheap workforce available from DDR prisons without asking too many questions. Yet the “how we were supposed to know?” line of defense is still being used today. Western companies continue to profit from raw materials extracted at great cost to human life, cooperate with criminal regimes and contribute to the exploitation of prisoners in countries like Vietnam and China.

Newspapers report that Ikea paid 120,000 Euro for the study, while it seems the firm has not considered offering compensation payments to the exploited workers. They are only willing to pay if the German state establishes a fund to which other companies also contribute.

It must be acknowledged that Germany has provided rehabilitation and compensation to some of those who suffered grave injustices under the DDR. But this doesn't go far enough. The companies involved should be compelled to make payments either directly to affected groups or through a special fund.

There is real need also for reform of the rules that apply to companies. Any firm cooperating with the perpetrators of human rights violations or profiting from such crimes should be liable under civil and criminal law. All companies have a due diligence obligation to keep themselves informed of conditions in the regions where they conduct business and to take active measures to ensure that they do not contribute to human rights violations. “We didn't know anything about it”, always a weak excuse, should no longer be tolerated.

The issue is still relevant to the current prison system in Germany: the obligation to work in prison should be abolished and prisoners who do work must be properly paid for their efforts.