

# PRIVATE FIRMS SLAMMED AS ESCAPES FROM COURT RISE

BY MAX WATSON

**F**ive prisoners have escaped from the same court on three separate occasions in the last eight months – six months after the Prison Officers' Association (POA) demanded a review of security.

The men all managed to elude the private firm Securicor, responsible for ferrying prisoners to and from the Inner London Crown Court, near Elephant and Castle, and also for courtroom security.

The latest escape is likely to be the most embarrassing for Securicor, as Leslie Lake, having pleaded guilty to burglary in court number six, simply walked out of the building when he discovered his cell had been left unlocked.

The security officers gave chase but the 31-year-old was not recaptured until five days later.

The last escape involving the same Inner London Crown Court took place on June 10, when three prisoners were sprung from a Securicor van outside the court.

Two armed men posing as postal workers forced their way into the van after shooting the driver in the knee.

The trio of escapees, Tony Peters, 41, Noel Cunningham, 41, and Clifford Hobbs, 43, were accused of stealing and conspiring to steal £1.25 million from another Securicor van in 2002.

Peters subsequently gave himself up, but his two accomplices are still at large.

In February, Kevin Smith, 28, managed to slip out of his handcuffs as he was being escorted from a cell at the court to a van by Securicor guards, just two hours after he received 15 years for conspiracy to commit armed robberies.

Mark Freeman, POA deputy general secretary, is angry that no action appears to have been taken since he called for a review of prison van security following the second incident in June.

"The escape of prisoners from private escort has been consistently high due to cost-cutting and the saving of money on the operational costs to provide higher pay-outs to shareholders," he told *The Big Issue*.

"It is not a very good record and one which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The public should not be put at risk by the privatising of prison services."

A Securicor spokesman responded: "We place the highest priority on maintaining the security of prisoners and this latest case is being investigated fully."

He added: "The level of escapes has been reduced by 80 per cent in comparison to the previous service." But Freeman argues the comparison is false, as the state employed taxis to ferry prisoners, which were obviously far easier to escape from than the high-security vans now used.

"If you compare the escape levels from private firms with state-controlled services, eg with Category As (maximum security), you'll find private



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firms do much worse," he alleged.

A spokeswoman for the Department Of Constitutional Affairs refused to discuss security arrangements, but confirmed that Securicor would be called in and asked to explain the latest incident. "Remedial action will be taken as appropriate," she said.

A Prison Service spokeswoman said: "We are rightly judged on our ability to move prisoners securely, [but] Securicor are meeting the national target of one escape per 20,000 movements."

Securicor is one of the four private security firms that currently hold prisoner escort contracts at a cost of £105 million per year to the government, and has the largest jurisdiction, Greater London.

The firm is also responsible for more than 80 per cent (£500,000) of the total amount of fines imposed to date on all four companies since 1999 for "performance shortfalls".

Securicor moves approximately 185,000 prisoners within the capital per year, using 860 staff and 146 vehicles per month.

Fellow contractor Group4 has also gained notoriety for 'losing' prisoners. In 1993 seven absconded in the space of three weeks.

The Labour opposition Home Office spokesman at the time demanded that it is "comedy of errors" end immediately. That spokesman was Tony Blair and his opposite number secretary of state was new Tory leader Michael Howard.