

# Back to the Back of the Bus

By Roy Beck

"If employers hire from the front of the queue and if blacks are disproportionately at the back — behind immigrants and native-born members of other racial groups — then blacks will suffer the greatest deterioration in employment when the number of immigrants grows."

Harvard's Ronald F. Ferguson offered that statement in 1989 as part of the National Academy of Science's expansive study of blacks in America. Certainly, Ferguson's description holds true for most of U.S. history. Only a few journalists have looked closely to see if it is true today. Those few, however, have asked tough questions, pounded the pavement and worked the phones for answers the last two years, providing readers clear portraits of the very real pain that immigration inflicts on African Americans in the job market.

Three of the most revealing journalistic studies have been done by Jonathan Tilove of Newhouse Newspapers, the nation's third largest chain, and by Jonathan Kaufman and Rochelle Sharpe of the *Wall Street Journal*. Along with a few other reporters who have studied the angle, they have found that the job market indeed is discriminating in favor of immigrants and against blacks.

When the hiring line has been short in tight-labor markets, blacks enjoyed their greatest overall advancement. Between 1940 and 1970 when immigration was quite low, for example, the black middle class population grew from 22 percent to 71 percent. With the advent of mass immigration since then, however, the middle class has been shrinking and a third of blacks are now mired in poverty.

By bringing in additional foreign workers, Congress lengthens the hiring lines and almost assuredly moves many blacks farther from the front. Ferguson indicated that since 1973 the propensity for blacks to occupy less lucrative occupations and to work in industries that offered lower pay is at least partly due to Congress filling the front of the hiring line with so many new immigrants.

## Sharpe: Only Blacks Lose

Rochelle Sharpe analyzed all the records of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission during the 1990-91 recession. Her findings were startling: in all the nation's companies that have to report to the EEOC, there was no net loss of employment during the recession for Hispanics and Asian Americans. But there were plenty of losses for the descendants of slaves.

The records pointed to the possibility that

employers were using the recession as an excuse to fire blacks while retaining and hiring people of other ethnicities, in order to keep their total minority numbers looking good.

At those large firms, Asians and Hispanics **gained** 55,104 jobs and 60,040 jobs, respectively, during the recession. But blacks **lost** 59,479 jobs.

Mid-size and big businesses increased their employment of Asians in 39 states while they cut their employment of blacks in 36 states. Only in Alabama, Arkansas and Louisiana where immigration was minimal did the employment of blacks increase significantly.

Blacks suffered their worst losses in the states with the highest immigration. In Florida, black job losses were at a rate five times higher than for all others. In Illinois, blacks were the only racial group to suffer a net loss. In New York, black employment was "devastated." In California, the companies eliminated jobs for 11,000 blacks net, while they increased employment for 9,000 Asians during the recession.

## Tilove: Undoing Affirmative Action

In a landmark series, Jonathan Tilove provided a closer view of how businesses are helping immigrants cut in line ahead of African-Americans. Ironically, he found, programs of affirmative action — meant to compensate for centuries of legalized discrimination against blacks — now are being used by employers to **avoid** hiring blacks.

A pharmaceutical company which had shown a very favorable increase in minority hiring, for example, did so primarily by hiring Pakistani, Indian and Vietnamese workers. William Kilberg, a former Labor Department solicitor, commented: "A lot of these people are easy to hire. They're trained, they're educated, they're hardworking, and you get a bonus. Not only are they people who you would have hired anyway, but they are characterized as minorities." Hiring them lessens the pressure to hire blacks.

A former director of an employment agency for Cambodian refugees in Chicago said he was surprised how often companies would tell him directly, "We want to phase out our blacks and bring in Asians. It keeps us clear in EEOC and gets us better workers."

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Throughout the U.S. economy, affirmative action has become a tool "that greases the displacement of blacks by immigrants," Tilove concluded. "Immigration is undoing affirmative action's underlying mission to undo history by helping America's black people."

### **Kaufman: Unwritten Law**

Immigration enthusiasts often speak admiringly of the entrepreneurial efforts of immigrants. But because of ethnic networking, few of the jobs they create ever benefit actual native-born Americans. Jonathan Kaufman found lots of anecdotal evidence that native-born black Americans are even less likely to find a job at an immigrant-owned business.

He followed young black men whom he considered employable as they sought jobs at dozens of immigrant businesses without success, running afoul of an "unwritten law" that immigrants don't hire black Americans. Even black immigrants tend not to hire black Americans, Harvard sociologist Mary Waters reported.

Although 25 percent of New York's population is black, only 5 percent of the employees at Korean-owned stores are black, according to studies by Pyong Gap Min, a sociologist at Queen's College who is Korean-American. Even in black neighborhoods, he found, Korean stores hire more Hispanics than blacks. The majority of owners don't believe blacks are as intelligent or honest as others, Min says: "They haven't met middle-class blacks, so it is easy to generalize."

In Los Angeles, only 2 percent of Korean businesses hire blacks. And in the rapidly growing electronics industry which has a large number of immigrant firms, blacks are under-represented by half. David Sun, a Chinese immigrant, said he tries to hire and work with black employees but that he has trouble respecting black culture. Charles Woo, owner of a Los Angeles wholesale toy business, said blacks have a negative image and don't mix well with workers of other backgrounds.

Immigrants settle disproportionately where blacks disproportionately live. As the immigrants gain control of higher and higher percentages of businesses in those urban cores, it becomes increasingly difficult for African Americans to find work. The failure to find work fuels the image of American blacks, especially young men, as being lazy. Actually, they are competing fiercely to get any kind of job. At a single McDonald's, for example, 300 people a month — most of them black — seek jobs at \$4.25 an hour. Katherine Newman, an anthropologist at Columbia University, says the average fast-food restaurant in the area has 14 applicants for every opening.

### **Discrimination In Loose Markets**

Thanks to immigrant-owned firms and ethnic networking among employees of native-owned firms, "there are tens of thousands of jobs in New York City for which the native-born are not candidates," Elizabeth

Bogan wrote in her book, *Immigration In New York*.

As tough a climb as blacks have had within a majority white society, the going gets tougher as the population is composed more and more of other races, ethnic groups and nationalities. A 1994 survey found that Americans of European background have the least negative attitudes toward blacks. People were asked to respond to the statement: "Even if given a chance, (blacks) aren't capable of getting ahead." Only 12 percent of whites agreed. But the pejorative stereotype was held by twice as many Asians and three times as many Latinos.

As the immigrant population burgeoned in California during the 1980s, blacks found the job market deteriorating. The employment of African Americans as bank tellers fell 39 percent while the jobs for foreign-born tellers increased by 56 percent. Stuart Silverstein of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the number of black hotel maids and housemen dropped 30 percent while the number of immigrants with those jobs rose 166 percent. The 1990 Census also found that immigrants replaced native-born Americans in the occupations of garment sewers, restaurant waiters and busboys, hospital nursing assistants and orderlies. Blacks "have been squeezed into a smaller segment of the economy," Roger Waldinger, a UCLA sociologist, told Silverstein.

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— General Accounting Office**

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Reynolds Farley of the University of Michigan notes that blacks should have done much better during the time of national economic expansion in the 1980s. Among the factors in favor of blacks were "the civil rights changes of the 1960s and the apparent removal of the many barriers which once kept blacks in the back of the bus, out of schools, confined to menial jobs, and away from the polling booths in southern states." In addition, the large gaps between black and white school enrollments in 1960 were nearly erased.

What has been missing and what once again would give economic hope to blacks is a tight-labor market, Farley says. Nicolas Lemann suggested the same remedy in his 1992 book, *The Promised Land*.

Immigration moves the nation in the opposite direction. It loosens the labor market, lengthens the hiring lines and drives down wages, the U.S. General Accounting Office confirmed after a study in 1988: "In general, an increase in the number of potential workers will tend to reduce prevailing wage levels. This would occur whether the increase is the result of the growth of the native population, legal immigration or illegal immigration."

The work of a few inquisitive reporters suggests that the social processes that keep many blacks at the back of the hiring line not only are firmly entrenched but are being

reinforced by high immigration. The one remedy that always has helped black employment, even in the midst of the worst racial attitudes, has been to shorten the hiring line — or at least not add to it — according to historians of the post-Civil War period and the era beginning with World War I.

Nothing would tighten the labor market any faster — and in the process improve economic conditions for black Americans — than to stop immigration. ■