

Jobs Americans Used to Do

Foreign workers in the meatpacking industry

by Roy Beck

Steam rises from the big hog slaughterhouse of Storm Lake, Iowa. The plume catches the gaze of American-born workers watching traffic from a nearby gas station. "This was a completely different town in 1980," says Ted Kramer from the middle of the group gathered around a cowhide work glove display.

The cars passing by are filled with Laotians, Mexicans, Thais, Vietnamese, Somalians and Central Americans. Like kill plants across the country, the one here relies on immigrant labor.

The tasks of disassembling America's hogs, sheep and cattle are nasty, tedious and risky. They look like jobs most Americans would rather not do.

In damp conditions surrounded by animal offal, meatcutters often stand in a single place, making the same cuts all day long, trying to keep up with the fast-moving line while not being struck by the lifeless livestock or slashed by knives, their own or their co-workers'. "Workers have little time for idle conversation or even work-related discussion, as car-

casses whiz by at 400 or more an hour," explains Donald D. Stull, a University of Kansas anthropologist and noted expert on the industry. In a recent year, more than 126,000 people nationwide labored the red-meat slaughter industry at relatively low wages. Stull says the rapid, continuous repetitive tasks frequently lead to hand, arm and wrist disorders, the most common being carpal tunnel syndrome. Anthropologist David Griffith of East Carolina University says workers report that they feel like "old used up pieces of machinery after occupational injuries: 'used up and tossed out the door.'"

For a worker, meat-packing is the most dangerous industry in America.

The foreign workers sacrificing their own bodies as they carve up those of large animals are prime examples of what immigration advocates mean when they say the U.S. economy depends on the importation of workers to "do jobs Americans won't do."

What galls the natives gathered this morning in the Mid-Town Service station in Storm Lake, however, is that the immigrants at the slaugh-

terhouse are doing jobs these Americans once *did*. Every Iowa man in this station used to work at the hog plant. Every nasty part of the killing and butchering process throughout this country was done by a native-born American, not that many years ago. And Americans prized having those jobs.

Before the immigrants started coming 15 years ago, "the local people lined up to get jobs in that plant," growls Richard Krout from behind the gas station's cash register. Referring to the meatpacker corporations, he adds, "But now the

A common claim by immigration enthusiasts is that "immigrants just do jobs that Americans won't do." Although that often isn't true at all, there are some occupations that now are dominated by foreign workers and which few Americans would want to enter. This case study explains how such jobs got that way.

Roy Beck is the author of *The Case Against Immigration: The moral, economic, social, and environmental reasons for reducing immigration back to traditional levels*, released by *W. W. Norton & Company* this spring. (See ad inside the back cover.) This article is a condensation of one of the book's chapters. Footnotes for all information in this article are available in the book.

bastards won't pay up." A group of scholars writing for the Aspen Institute Quarterly said the meatpacking industry has "broken unions, initiated internal and international labor migrations, taken advantage of ethnic, gender, regional and legal-status differences among workers and revitalized methods of labor mobilization and labor control resembling peonage and servitude."

With the cushion of an unending stream of fresh immigrants, the meatpacking industry slashed the pay, sped up the lines and allowed safety conditions to deteriorate back toward the level described by Upton Sinclair in his book, *The Jungle*. Surveying the workplace of today, Professor Stull says conditions are alarmingly similar to the ones described in the 1906 book that shocked the nation.

How Did Things Get This Way? Every time somebody points to a job and declares that it depends on immigration because it is beneath an American to take, it is important to ask how it became so unattractive. Until Congress began flooding the United States with immigrants in 1965, all jobs were filled overwhelmingly, and often almost exclusively, with native-born American workers. In the United States, there were no "jobs Americans won't do."

Many observers — including some highly educated ones — have made the mistake of looking at foreign workers performing lower-skilled tasks today and assuming that, if not for them, there would be no one to do the jobs. Their thinking reveals a misunderstanding of three key aspects of the labor market and immigration:

- (1) Shutting off immigration would not mean that recent immigrants would leave their jobs.
- (2) In many cases, so-called "immigrant occupations" already have Americans working alongside foreigners. There are plenty of unemployed Americans who might take those jobs if they began opening up after a halt in immigration, especially if the workplace culture once again became American and English-speaking.
- (3) For other "immigrant jobs," there may not be a sufficient number of Americans who would take them as they now exist because the pay and working conditions are so deplorable — the meatpacking industry being a notable example. The presence of immigrants keeps those wages

and conditions from improving to the point where Americans would take the jobs. Without the availability of new immigrants, though, employers would have to make innovations and improvements in their employment, and in doing so, most would find enough Americans to keep their business running.

"You hear the myth so much that immigrant farmworkers take jobs Americans won't do, that Americans won't clean the streets, clean the rooms, wash the dishes," says economist Marshall Barry of the Labor Research Center of Boston and Miami. "But that isn't true. If you pay right, Americans will do everything."

In fact, if you travel inland and away from immigration centers, you will find that native-born Americans are making the beds, washing the dishes, busing the tables, doing the gardening, running the fast-food and all-night grocery operations and filling any number of jobs that appear to attract only immigrants in many coastal cities. You also often find that those jobs pay more in the non-immigrant markets even though the cost of living is lower, thanks to the wonders of tight labor markets.

Denying businesses their stream of cheap new foreign labor would jolt many businesses out of a counter-productive complacency about worker productivity, and market forces would drive today's so-called "immigrant jobs" to improve back to being "jobs Americans *will* do."

Looking Back On Better Times

"The most amazing thing about current immigration policy," comments Peter Brimelow, senior editor at *Forbes* magazine, is that "it serves no economic purpose. It does nothing for Americans they could not do for themselves."

Importation of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers each year is worse than unnecessary: It ruins good occupations; it rewards callous business management; it penalizes businesses with a strong sense of corporate citizenship, and it creates sweeping changes for communities that never request them and seldom approve of them. At the most basic level, it changes the lives, the aspirations and the very identity of many individual Americans.

Perhaps no industry reveals that sad spectacle any more dramatically than the meatpacking industry of the last three decades."

When Ted Kramer moved to Storm Lake, Iowa, in 1959, he figured out quickly that the top-status work in town was at the hog plant. "After awhile, I went to the plant every morning to try to get on. When I did, I never had seen such paychecks in my life! Things really looked up for us. We had guys with a college education who worked there because the pay was so good." From the 1950s until everything changed in the early 1980s, people held onto their slaughterhouse jobs like gold. And they pulled strings to get their relatives and children into the jobs. Because nearly all packing companies offered handsome pay and benefits, no company had trouble remaining profitable while treating its workers well.

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Today, jobs are so deteriorated that it is difficult to keep workers — either native-born Americans or immigrants. Stress-related disorders and injuries drive many workers off the jobs within months. The companies expect it. They have designed their plants for high turnover and may even encourage it, according to the Aspen Institute Quarterly.

A recent turnover rate in the packing plants of southwest Kansas, for example, was between 6 and 8 percent every **month**. That annual rate of 72-96 percent a year was considered low in the industry.

Driving a lot of the turnover is an incredible rate of injuries. Meatcutters are injured 400 percent more often than workers in the average U.S. industry. The annual injury and illness rate is an incredible 44.4 people out of every 100 full-time workers.

The current injuries and the worker-turnover astound the former meatcutters gathered at Mid-Town Service. As they talk of bright futures that

never came and of a present that "isn't what it used to be," they bear witness to the unrelenting power of mass immigration. They say they never saw unsafe working conditions as they exist today. Some scoff at the injury rate, suggesting that it proves the foreigners aren't any good at their jobs. "They don't know how to use a knife," one says. But another interjects, "The company doesn't train them right, not like we were trained."

"I worked there for 34 years," says Joe Kennedy, a grizzled retired man who has just entered the station. "I remember two guys the whole time with carpal tunnel."

"Sometimes you'd see a strained back," says Kermit Hendricks, who now drives a truck.

"I don't think they care if they run through those immigrants," Mark Young says. All agree that their strong meatcutters union in the past made certain that working conditions stayed safe and that everybody was trained properly. "You have to keep your knife sharpened right. Nothing is harder on an arm than a dull knife," Young says.

"It took awhile, but once I got the knack of keeping the knife sharp, the job wasn't nothing to it," Hendricks agrees.

"In 30 years, I never found the knack," Richard Krout mumbles as he leaves the cash register for the storage room. Ted Kramer turns toward Krout's disappearing figure and says admiringly, "Don't let him fool you. There goes one of the best knives there was."

Mark Young is getting nostalgic. "I miss most of the people there. You could leave your tools and knife lying around and never lost any. You never locked a vehicle in the company parking lot. Now they can't do any of that."

Kramer stares back toward the hog plant: "There wasn't a better production crew in the United States than what we had."

Like veterans of ancient wars, the former meatcutters speak of camaraderie and pride now bathed in a valiant glow. Their own knives long ago sheathed, they recall their prowess at sharpening and wielding their tools of battle. They speak of lives that might have been if they had not been run out of their jobs and about the town that once was and is no more.

When anthropologist Stull says nothing much has changed between Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the slaughterhouses of today, he doesn't mean that nothing changed in between. In fact for

decades, the meatcutters across America worked and lived great middle-class American lives. The jobs didn't maim them. And the pay allowed workers to buy houses and cars, to take vacations, to raise families and to retire on a decent pension.

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“What was nice was that the head of the household worked and the other half could stay at home and take care of the kids,” one man says.

But all of that in Storm Lake came crashing to an end in 1981 when changes in the industry resulted in some 500 of these Iowa men losing their jobs and only a fraction of them being hired back later at half-wages to work with immigrants. A lot of the old meatcutters spent years after that just doing pick-up jobs by the day, says Mark Young who has farmed with his father-in-law ever since. “I never have made as much money as at the plant.” The consensus of the men here is that very few of the native workers ever again matched their earnings. The town’s population size remained fairly stable as natives left in about the same numbers as the foreign workers entered.

Such a significant cut in wages for hundreds of jobs works its way through all parts of a town’s economy. Downtown merchants saw a significant change in spending patterns and, through the years, in the whole culture of commerce.

Unsurprisingly, the foreign workers in Storm Lake encounter a lot of bitterness among some of the natives. Mark Young, though, appeals for understanding, suggesting that the immigrants are just looking for work like everybody else. The culprits, he says, are the state and federal government leaders who make decisions based on what is best for big business: “This immigration is damned good for big business. There’s nothing better than cheap foreign workers.”

Recruiting Foreign Workers in the 1890s

Immigration has a long history of turning jobs into — or keeping them as — ones nobody but a desperate foreign worker would be willing to accept.

Consider Kansas City a century ago. Laborers in the sprawling slaughterhouses had organized to force improvements. The laborforce was filled with freed slaves and Americans of English, Irish, German and Swedish backgrounds. As again is true in the 1990s, the work was dangerous; a consumer often got a shoulder roast at the expense of permanent damage to the shoulder of a poorly-paid laborer who butchered it. When the packinghouses balked at demands for reform in 1893, the workers went out on strike.

Because of the mostly-open immigration policies of the time, Kansas City industries didn't have to pay any attention to their workers. During a time when Booker T. Washington was eloquently pleading with industry personnel managers to “cast down their bucket” where they were, the meatpackers were sending recruiters to Europe — especially the Balkans — to find strikebreakers. New waves of Croatians, Serbs, Dalmatians, Slovenians, Herzegovinians and Bosnians poured into the “West Bottoms” area of Kansas City and crushed the strike.

American workers were driven out of the industry.

Upton Sinclair noted that in order to maintain horrible working conditions, the industry continuously brought in more foreign workers — thanks to President Cleveland’s veto of immigration restriction legislation in 1897. In Kansas City, the flows came from Poland, Greece, Russia, Italy, Japan and Mexico, as well as from families in the Balkans.

It was nearly impossible to organize labor in those conditions. By vetoing new restrictionist legislation, Presidents Taft and Wilson would ensure that immigration continued to keep conditions so bad that packinghouse work remained a job most Americans wouldn't do until after 1924.

Over the next few decades, however, the meatpacking industry would prove that the dominance of immigrants in a job category at any given time does not mean that Americans won't take the jobs in the future.

During the Immigration Lull

Meatcutters began to live a little higher on the hog after Congress sliced annual immigration numbers in the 1920s. Without a virtually unlimited supply of foreign labor with which to intimidate their workers, the packing companies slowly were forced to offer decent working conditions and pay. And with a heavy dose of ingenuity, the companies found it possible to do so and remain profitable.

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Labor organizing moved swiftly, and improvements were made even during the Depression in the 1930s. “I started at the plant in 1935,” says Marvin Goldsmith of Storm Lake. “It was before the humane killing; I stuck pigs while they were still squealing. The union came in June 1937. I was drawing 47 ½ cents an hour. It went up to 75 cents just like that.”

The struggle was hard and sometimes violent. But the low-immigration, tight-labor, booming-economy conditions of the 1940s made it possible for Americans to eat their steak and pork chops without any guilt that their good diet depended on worker exploitation. The unions gained a hold on nearly the entire meatpacking industry, guaranteeing one of the best wage and benefits packages of any industry.

“I worked 40 years,” Goldsmith says. “The industry was good to me. I cut two-thirds of a finger off once and fell and broke a wrist, that’s all. For years, I had six weeks of vacation each year. But we put in lots of hard hours. I honestly can say I didn’t take home a nickel that I didn’t earn.”

As the country entered the 1960s, the meatpacking industry was providing solid middle-class wages and a boost to the middle-class economy of scores of communities, notably Philadelphia, St. Louis, Memphis, Omaha, Sioux City, Kansas City, Wichita, Fort Worth and Los Angeles.

Kay Larson, a librarian in Spencer, Iowa,

remembers that when she was a girl, “we always looked at the kids with parents in the packing plant as the rich kids.”

A chain of national events that began in the 1960s would ensure that by the 1990s nobody would look with envy at anybody working in a meatpacking plant.

Strategies to Lower Wages

In 1960, the year John F. Kennedy was elected president, the IBP meatpacking company was founded. Originally called Iowa Beef Processors, it turned the industry upside down with its innovations and eventually acquired nearly one-third of the national red-meat slaughter market.

It and other new firms that later followed its tactics sought ways to take the market from the old established packers of Armour, Swift, Wilson and Cudahy. The new packers slashed their costs and simplified the process by shipping boxed beef instead of hanging carcasses, eliminating highly paid butchers in the middle. They built new, more-efficient plants, locating more of them near the rural areas where livestock raising was concentrated. The old companies had to follow suit to compete. In the process, tens of thousands of jobs eventually were eliminated.

All of that was in line with the workings of a free, capitalist market system in which entrepreneurs constantly search for cheaper methods of production and distribution to enable them to increase their sales.

If it had stopped there, the workforce would have been reduced by about a third but there still would have been 130,000 meatcutters earning great middle-class incomes. The new efficiencies and reductions in workforce helped the productivity of each remaining worker to rise by 2.8 percent each year between 1967 and 1982. That was nearly a half percentage point above improvements in all U.S. manufacturing and should have supported pay raises, or at least protected previous gains.

But the new companies wanted to drastically reduce the wages. If they could do that, they surely would be able to take market share from the huge packing companies that had controlled the industry for decades and which were locked into major, high-wage contracts with the unions.

At first, the new companies could lower wages on some of their jobs by using another standard

free-market device: They placed plants where there were pockets of rural underemployment and where residents were willing to work for lower, non-union wages, especially in states like Kansas and Nebraska with laws unfavorable to union organizing.

The new companies soon ran into problems, though. There wasn't anywhere close to enough surplus labor in those potential sites to make it possible to move much of the industry away from the urban areas. Recruiters found it was not easy to entice American workers to move to new states for low non-union wages. And the many existing plants in rural areas like Storm Lake already were unionized. The wages of most workers in the industry continued to rise along with their per capita productivity.

Up to this point, the free market system was operating in a normal way, with labor and new entrepreneurs and the other owners of capital jockeying for their best position within the established boundaries of the American economy. Supporters of the system claim that it produces the most overall good for society, balancing benefits and incentives for consumers, for business and for workers.

But the federal government brought in an outside force that would change all the rules of business and tip the tables against the old companies and against American workers.

Congress in 1965 inadvertently came to the rescue of the union-busting, wage-lowering strategy of the new meatpackers. The 1965 immigration law had a major impact on the direction of the meat processing industry by creating surplus labor pools with spiraling family chain migration and massive refugee resettlement operations.

The state of Iowa ran one of the most aggressive Southeast Asia refugee programs in the country. In a devastating lack of insight into the way labor markets always have worked in this country, the Iowa government failed to see that with its refugee program it was importing a foreign laborforce large enough to undermine its own citizens, especially in eliminating the middle-class meatcutter jobs in Storm Lake, Spencer and many other Iowa cities. The growing number of Southeast Asian refugees eagerly took meatcutter jobs at half the wages and at reduced benefits while working faster lines with much less attention to safety. They were especially valued by industry

because — with minimal skills, education and English — they had few alternatives and were unlikely to quit and go back to their home country, says anthropologist Janet Benson of Kent State University.

The Southeast Asians changed the labor market in the small towns of Iowa. They created their own recruiting networks and began to set the terms by which new workers moved into plants through such conditions as posting bonds, giving kickbacks or providing sexual favors to personnel managers, says anthropologist David Griffith of East Carolina University. .

"The use of immigrants was a blatant and obvious attempt to undercut the labor movement," says historian Ken Cox of Northern Iowa University.

Playing Fair with Good Plants

During the 1970s, the old packing companies were in a bind. Washington's new immigration policy and the upstart challenger companies were forcing them to lower their workers' wages, regardless of whether they wanted to.

Over in Storm Lake there were few immigrants. But the Hygrade plant there had to compete with plants that had many. Ted Kramer recalls that during the 1970s "we had to fight every contract because Hygrade would say that over in Dakota City and South Sioux, IBP was paying half the wages." Even though some plants had unions, the presence of a lot of immigrants had sapped them of much aggressiveness or clout.

Up in Austin, Minnesota, the changing conditions caused the paternalistic Hormel Company to change its community personality. According to a team of scholars led by Robert A. Hackenberg:

The Hormel family, company executives, supervisors, line and clerical workers earned annual salaries within a few thousand dollars of one another. Their children played together, learned together, celebrated rites of passage together. George Hormel and his family lived in Austin, participated in community events alongside the women and men

who bloodied butchers' aprons in his plant. Hormel's union-negotiated wages and incentive programs allowed line workers and bosses alike to live in Austin's middle-class neighborhoods.

But beginning in the 1960s, Hormel realized it would have to begin demanding wage concessions if it was to survive the competition of the wage-cutting companies.

The federal government — through its immigration program — was having the opposite effect from what one normally expects from government. Usually, citizens look to their government to set up systems that provide incentives and rewards for behavior that benefits the people, and disincentives for behavior harmful to the community of citizens. At least, we expect the government not to rig the free market against the ordinary man and woman. As long as all businesses have to play by the same rules, such governmental incentives and disincentives tend to enhance the public good without restraining commerce.

Mass immigration turned those incentives and disincentives upside down. It was rewarding companies that offered low wages and poor working conditions to American citizens. And it was penalizing companies that provided for a middle-class lifestyle. By providing unending laborforce and population growth for 30 years, immigration has rewarded sweat-shop owners, land speculators, unscrupulous developers and other environmental marauders while disadvantaging business owners who have tried to be fair and caring employers and good corporate citizens. In highly competitive industries like meatpacking, “good” employers were forced to adopt the practices of “bad” employers if they were to remain in business.

For decades, federal immigration law kept the playing field level in a game that enabled larger and larger portions of Americans to earn middle-class wages. Under that system, U.S. corporations could do the right thing for American workers and communities without jeopardizing their profits.

With the 1965 immigration act, Congress changed the rules without intending to and tore the social contract between management and labor asunder.

Inevitably, the question arises about whether an industry can keep paying middle-class wages now that global competition is so much more intense. If not allowed to use foreign workers and to slash wages, might not an industry have to move its plants overseas to keep from being run out of business by foreign companies?

“There have been whole conferences on whether meat processing might move off-shore,”

says industry expert Stull. “The consensus has been that for beef and pork, and for most chicken, they aren’t going off-shore.”

The reasons are fairly simple. The primary cost is the animal, and slaughtering needs to occur near where the animal is raised. Cattle are traumatized when they are shipped more than 150 miles; they release enzymes that darken meat and make it less marketable. So, American farmers are not going to ship cattle and hogs to slaughterhouses in other countries.

How about other countries raising and slaughtering livestock and shipping it here? First, it is important to remember that most countries depend on the United States for food. Secondly, the price of labor in the United States would have to rise greatly before it would justify the extra shipping costs for most processed meat from other countries, except perhaps for Canada and Mexico. Of the two, only Mexico has low enough labor costs to provide a competitive advantage. But Mexico lacks the transportation system that would make it possible to do large-scale beef processing for the United States, Stull says: “The cheaper labor in Mexico doesn’t save enough to make up for distance and poor transportation to where Mexico grows the beef.”

In short, global competition did not force the industry to slash the pay of meatcutters and would not likely preclude raising wages now to attract American workers if Congress were to declare a moratorium on future immigration.

Stanford economist Paul Krugman says it is nonsense to blame the global economy for lowered wages. In 1991, only 10 percent of the U.S. product was in exports. Krugman states that 76 percent of all U.S. output consisted of services and that most services are insulated from global competition: “Although we talk a lot these days about globalization, about a world grown small, when you look at the economies of modern cities what you see is a process of localization: A steadily rising share of the work force produces services that are sold only within that same metropolitan area.”

The fate of U.S. workers is in the hands of American policymakers, not some faceless global economy.

Competition Supplied By Congress

By the 1980s, the new meatpacking companies weren't so small anymore. Bringing cheap immigrant labor into small towns across Kansas and Nebraska, they built enormous new plants as their lower labor costs allowed them to take larger and larger shares of the market from the old unionized firms.

The old companies slashed wages or declared bankruptcy. Wilson Foods Corporation filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in order to abrogate its labor contracts. Then big conglomerates took over the meatpacking operations of Wilson, Swift, Armour, Morrell, Hygrade and Cudahy. Some slashed the pay of existing workers after taking over; others laid off union workers and reopened with non-union labor. In Columbus Junction, Iowa, workers voluntarily took pay cuts to help save the Rath plant, but it was closed in 1984, to be replaced by new low-wage plants.

In Storm Lake, Hygrade threatened to close operations in 1978. Then in 1981 it did, citing refusal of local workers to accept pay cuts of \$3 an hour.

When IBP announced it would re-open the old Hygrade plant as its own, local bands met the company officials as they arrived in town. The real outlook was not so hopeful, though. The new jobs would pay only around half the wages of the ones just lost. After a year of unemployment since Hygrade's shutdown, however, more than 1,000 local residents stood in line when IBP started taking applications for the 350 jobs it was offering for start-up.

"A lot of us who worked at Hygrade applied for half-wages," says Richard Krout, who has been ringing up the cash register at the gas station ever since: "IBP fooled us. All along they said they were going to use local people. But the Laotians and Vietnamese came almost immediately. A few years later the Mexicans started."

There was no excuse for bringing in foreign workers into plants across Iowa, says professor Cox: "We had plenty of Iowans without jobs to do those jobs. In some towns, they may have been a little slow to take them because of their pride in wanting a better wage."

Rubbing salt into open wounds, the state government gave companies incentives to hire refugees over natives, the former meatcutters complain. In addition, the state gave some tax breaks to refugees. Kermit Hendricks complains:

"We end up paying for them to take our jobs."

The human tragedy of the whole industry was played out on national television, the national press and an award-winning documentary in the form of the 1985-86 strike at Hormel in bucolic Austin, Minnesota. With most of the old high-wage packing industry in shambles, the workers at Hormel staged a last-ditch battle to save the middle-class, meatcutter lifestyle. But they were crushed by the power of Hormel, the state of Minnesota — which ordered the National Guard to protect strikebreakers entering the plant — and even their own national union which argued there was no chance for success.

Paul Larson, a veteran union organizer who is retired in Waterloo, says that, regretfully, the national union officials were correct that the writing was on the wall against the Hormel meatcutters. And the writing had been scrawled by the 1965 immigration act and the refusal of every Congress and president since then to stop its destructive power, he says. No company could remain a good employer to its workers in the old style as long as Congress provided its competitors with all the exploitable foreign labor it could use.

The old line packers are gone, replaced by the new Big Three — IBP, Excell and ConAgra Red Meats. And the meatcutters can no longer hope to earn incomes that once elevated them to solid middle-class status.

An assistant personnel director of one meatpacking corporation notes that of 1,400 retired meatcutters out of a plant in Dubuque, Iowa, not one of them has a child in the industry. A few aggressive corporations and a detached federal government with a careless immigration policy had succeeded in making it possible to say once again, with considerable accuracy, that tens of thousands of meat-processing tasks are jobs Americans won't do. □