

American Workers Victimized by Immigration

Mainly in categories not related to labor needs

by Roy Beck

After some research and writing I did for the *Atlantic Monthly* on immigration in 1994, the distinguished publisher W. W. Norton & Co. asked me to write a book that focused on the effects of current high levels of immigration on America's workers.

My research for the book led me to emphasize the largely untold stories of the victimization of lower-skilled American workers. My testimony today is based on my reporting for that book.

Since 1970, more than 35 million foreign citizens and their descendants have been added to the local communities and labor pools of the United States.

That is the numerical equivalent of having relocated within our borders the entire present population of all Central American countries. The Census Bureau shows that if Congress does not reduce present immigration levels back toward traditional numbers, immigration will add the equivalent of yet another Central America to the United States in an even shorter time.

Demographic change on such a massive scale inevitably has created winners and losers among Americans.

To find the losers, study closely what has happened to wages and working conditions in dry-walling and a number of other construction trades, in the poultry industry, in janitorial and housekeeping occupations, in

agricultural work and in any other occupation with heavy participation by foreign workers.

The meat-packing industry offers a vivid example of how losers are created. The industry today is dominated by immigrant workers. The tasks of disassembling America's hogs, sheep and cattle are nasty, tedious and risky. Most news stories I see about these industries state that these are jobs Americans won't do.

But until this recent renewal of mass immigration, those were jobs done almost entirely by native-born Americans. Until immigration levels began rapidly increasing in the late 1970s, they were jobs that Americans not only would do but formed lines to get hired to do.

Workers with few skills and little education could earn up to around \$18 an hour in today's dollars. Strong unions guarded the health and safety of the workers.

People held on to their slaughterhouse jobs like gold. And they pulled strings to get their relatives and children into the plant. Because nearly all packing companies offered handsome pay and benefits, no company had trouble remaining profitable while treating its workers well.

But by the 1980s, the pool of foreign workers had grown so large that relatively new companies could use them to undercut the established unionized firms. The new corporations busted unions and slashed wages so that the old giants of the industry — Armour, Swift, Wilson and Cudahy — could not compete while honoring their contracts to provide safe, middle-class jobs to their workers. All four eventually got out of the slaughterhouse business.

Jobs have so deteriorated that it is difficult to keep workers — whether native-born Americans or

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immigrants. Stress-related disorders and injuries drive many workers off the jobs within months. During the 1990s, annual turnover rates of 50 to 100 percent have been common. Meatcutters now are injured 400 percent more often than workers in the average U.S. industry. In terms of injuries, meatpacking in the 1990s had become the most dangerous industry in America.

The industry does not have to worry too much about the turnover, though, because the federal immigration program each year brings in new foreign workers to fill the vacant slots.

A small army of scholars has written that the meatcutter occupation has deteriorated back toward the level described by Upton Sinclair in his famous exposé, *The Jungle* (1906).

A historical search finds that Sinclair's book led to major reforms to improve the product safety of the industry, but not the worker safety. Continued flows of high immigration during that time allowed industries to keep pay and working conditions deplorable. The meatcutter jobs improved substantially only after Congress in the 1920s greatly reduced the numerical level of immigration of low-skilled immigrants. It was during the next 40 years of below-average immigration that the meatcutters' jobs turned into one of the best middle-class, low-skill occupations in the country.

It is important to note that the recent deterioration of the meatcutter occupation occurred at the same time as revolutionary changes in the industry.

The upstart corporations in the 1960s and 1970s gained larger shares of the meatpacking business:

- by shipping boxed beef instead of hanging carcasses,
- by eliminating highly paid butchers in the middle,
- by building new and more efficient plants while locating more of them near the rural areas where livestock raising was concentrated.

While all of that created human and economic dislocations, it was fully in line with the workings of a free market system in which entrepreneurs constantly search for cheaper methods of production and distribution to enable them to increase their sales while improving

prices and quality for the consumer.

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.

Instead, we ended up with 130,000 low-wage and dangerous jobs.

The changes in production and distribution should not have caused wage cuts. In fact, they improved the productivity of the workers. But instead of sharing in the fruits of that productivity, workers saw their wages fall precipitously because of the availability of foreign labor.

In many situations like that of Storm Lake, Iowa, the entire American-born workforce at a slaughter-house was laid off as a plant was taken over by a new corporation which hired primarily foreign workers, sometimes at around half the wages of the people they replaced. I have talked with many American workers whose financial and personal lives still have not recovered from their losses.

In many other situations, plants were shut down in urban areas and replaced with rural plants, especially in Kansas and Nebraska. Apologists for the importation of foreign labor often say it is necessary because those rural areas did not have a sufficient laborforce to supply the new plants. But if the federal government had not provided a foreign laborforce, the corporations would have had to provide incentives for the American meatcutters laid off in Kansas City, Chicago, Omaha and other cities to move to the new locations. Remember that the number of meatcutter jobs did not grow but was drastically reduced. There was no national shortage of meatcutters.

The victimization of the American laborforce is not over. Every year, these quadrupled levels of immigration are undermining new legions of American workers.

In many cases, the victims — like those in the 1970s and 1980s meatpacking industry — are American-born workers. But disproportionately the victims are earlier immigrants who cannot pull themselves out of the working poor because of each year's fresh new supply of foreign workers.

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The foreign-born workers in the meatpacking industry today would be chief beneficiaries of reductions in immigration — just as the immigrant meatcutters in the 1920s rose to the middle class after cuts in immigration.

It was sincere concern for the worker victimization wrought by too-high immigration that led the late Barbara Jordan and her bi-partisan Commission on Immigration Reform to recommend numerical cuts in immigration.

The recommended cuts were in categories in which immigrants are allowed into this country without any regard to their skills and or to whether their entrance into the U.S. laborforce would be positive or negative for those already in it.

For the sake of America's lower-skilled workers —

both native and foreign-born — the commission recommended ending the chain migration of extended families and the visa lottery. It also called for eliminating the corruption of the refugee program in which nearly half the people admitted do not meet any standard definition of refugee.

I salute this committee for turning its attention to the plight of America's lower-skilled workers. My personal recommendation is that you work in a bi-partisan fashion to show these workers the kind of respect and relief they deserve. I can think of no better start than to pass a bill ending chain migration.