

Jonathan Phillips
16 April 2020
Latinxs of the South
Dr. Bazo Vienrich

The Ethics of Recruitment for Poultry Processing in the New South

Often when reading on the rapid increase in the Latinx population in the southern US over the past twenty years, authors will portray the immigration process as two-steps. The Latinx immigrants of the prevailing narratives arrive in the US, go wherever their relatives are, and then immediately have a job upon their arrival. Articles will emphasize family and other community ties (with some attention to the lower cost-of-living) over any other pull factor when it comes to explaining the recent boom in Latinx migrants to the US South. Such a broad analysis ignores one crucial step in the immigration process, though: how larger companies actually advertise their positions and connect with Latinx immigrants to fill those positions and also why they will go out of their way to target Latinx immigrants with recruitment.

When it comes to poultry-processing and other industries with high labor demand and significant capital, employers spend huge amounts of money to recruit undocumented and documented Latinx workers. In one infamous example of undocumented worker recruitment, “Tyson managers [in 2001] were accused of a seven-year scheme to recruit and hire hundreds of [undocumented] immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala” for whom Tyson would “arrang[e] counterfeit work papers for jobs” (Schwartzman 91). By offering smugglers \$100 to \$200 per person a smuggler could bring to the Tyson plant in Shelbyville, Tennessee could recruit from Mexico and Central America, Tyson had some role in bringing “more than 2,000 [undocumented people] into the United States” (Schwartzman 92). Tyson was certainly not unique in this practice – “industry experts ha[ve] long believe that American foo companies...knowingly hire [undocumented] workers” (Schwartzman 92). Tyson seemingly just did not do a good enough

job hiding their illicit activity. The question arises then: Why would Tyson, a multibillion-dollar corporation, put such a high price on laborers they knew could get the company in legal trouble?

Data does suggest the presence of a labor shortage arising as the South became more and more industrialized in the late 90s and early 2000s resulted in greater immigration to the region from Mexico, Central America, and Latinxs from these regions who had originally settled in places like Texas and Chicago. As a result, the Latinx population of the South boomed from 1990 to 2000. Some data at the county level suggests that employers might have begun to value the Mexican and Central American labor force more than the local black labor force, leading to a greater job availability for Latinx immigrants than African Americans who lived in the towns of poultry processing centers. Though poultry processing jobs in the South are the least desirable industrial jobs, “a sampling of union and U.S. government documents confirms that...African Americans have maintained [an] interest in these jobs” (Schwarzman 50) counter to the prevailing thought. Personal accounts from across the South corroborate Schwartzman’s suggestion that racial stereotypes might have played some role in the sudden influx of Latinx workers in the South. Karen Johnson-Webb’s cataloguing of employer recruitment tactics in North Carolina describes “the lengths to which [employers] were willing to go to hire and retain Hispanic workers” (Johnson-Webb 80). One employer stated, “the Mexican will not...they will not talk, while they’re working, to each other...you have a hard time getting them to even stop and take a break” (Johnson Webb 81). Compare that description to one who said the new generation of U.S. laborers “Caucasian twenty-somethings...drove me nuts...they never learned how to work” (Johnson-Webb 83-84). Another remark took on a “race-based discriminatory cast”

“I think it’s a mindset...I see ‘em come in...they have \$50 nails, they have \$50 hairdos, they have cellphones, they have pagers. And you know they’re on welfare! ... I think they should have those things the same way I would have those things and that’s by getting your ass up and going to work!” (Johnson-Webb 83)

It would be remiss to not mention any prejudiced and discriminatory aspect when writing on the recent immigration trend of Latinx workers coming to the South for poultry processing jobs – on a general level, employers value Latinx labor more than the labor of other ethnic groups and thus invest money in the recruitment of Latinx laborers

When it comes to long-range recruitment of Latinx workers for the poultry processing industry, informal methods have had significantly more success than formal. The H-2A visa to bring workers to farms on a seasonal basis only serves for agricultural jobs. For NC, advertising in local Spanish-language newspapers yields good results – one employer surveyed by Johnson-Webb said that whenever they had “targeted Hispanic employees in the *Hispanic Job Pages*” they have never “been prepared enough for the amount of individuals that come looking for employment” (Johnson-Webb 91). Classified ads that target Latinxs do more to connect people to jobs on a local level than to bring workers in from out-of-state. Informal methods, then, bring the greatest number of immigrants to poultry processing plants in the South. In one of the most notable cases of Latinx immigration to small-town NC to work for poultry-processing plants, Case Farm’s labor shortage in 1989 accounted for an 824% increase in the “reported Spanish-speaking residents” (Fink 21) of Burke County from 1990 to 2000. “Given the combined circumstances of a booming economy and [the] harsh, unappealing work” (Fink 17) of poultry processing, Case Farms could no longer get local people to come and work for them. The sudden growth started when Norman Beecher, the human resources manager for Case Farms, drove

down to Florida in May to see if he could find any immigrant workers looking for employment after the orange harvest had finished. Within the visit “he quickly signed up ten men who agreed to drive up to Morganton in a pickup truck the next weekend” (Fink 17) and opened up a channel between Morganton NC and the Guatemalan labor community. Little about the subsequent recruitment of Latinx workers to Morganton was done formally from then on, as recruits would reach out to family and friends and notify them about the great number of jobs in poultry processing there. Long-distance recruiting on a massive scale occurred near-entirely through informal channels. We might compare this to the recruitment tactics wealthier meatpacking companies in the Midwest to get employees. After an ICE raid on their meatpacking plant that ended in the arrest of 62 employees, Cargill “sent mobile recruiters to Little Havana in Miami...[and] Puerto Rico to recruit citizens from the island’s high numbers of unemployed youth” (Miraftab 67-68) from Beardstown, Illinois to fill the sudden vacancies. Cargill, though, is one of the wealthiest companies in the meat processing industry in the US. When it comes to the smaller poultry processing operations in North Carolina that do not have the money to send representatives all over the country to attract workers, informal recruitment is essential if they want to get Latinx laborers.

In some ways, one could consider informal recruitment more ethical; to work in poultry processing for an extended period does lasting damage to the body. Poultry plants offer poor working conditions: they “[are] notorious for unreported accident claims as well as the third-highest reported rate of carpal tunnel syndrome among US industries” (Fink 17). The US Department of Labor in 1990 “reported that one of every six poultry workers suffered a work-related injury or illness every year,” (Fink 17) part of the reason why poultry processing plants encountered issues filling their vacancies in the first place. Informal recruitment can have a more

informative and honest quality to it – since it comes between friends and family, the recruiter has the best interest of the worker at heart. Compare that to the Cargill’s official recruitment, where some of the Puerto Ricans the company recruited “got off the plane...with flip flops in December [in Michigan] having no idea what the weather is like” (Miraftab 68) in the Midwest. One would think that a company with the resources of Cargill to recruit from places as far away as Florida and Puerto Rico would have more thorough informational sessions, but clearly, they lacked in some regard. Especially when it comes to jobs that cause health issues as severe as meatpacking and poultry processing do, a thorough description of the pros and cons of the job is needed. If a company’s recruits do not know about the climate to which they go to work, then the company has most certainly not told them about the way the repeated motions of poultry processing will destroy their hands.

Of course, informal practices can still leave migrant workers at risk for exploitation as happened in the Tyson case – Tyson in 2001 paid so much for the recruitment of undocumented workers since “fear of deportation meant they would accept [bad] working conditions,...tolerate faster line speeds, take fewer bathroom breaks, and...were less likely to file workers’ compensation claims” (Striffler 98). One supervisor at Tyson even said on the record “I don’t want [undocumented workers] after they’ve been here for a year and know how to get around. I want them right off the bus” (Striffler 98). Clearly, employers value Latinx labor in part for the exploitability of undocumented workers. If major poultry processing plants get too much access to the informal lines of recruitment, then migrant workers can find themselves even more vulnerable to exploitation, since the people who recruit them are paid to give them imperfect information.

If one aspect of the recruitment of undocumented and documented Latinx workers by the better than that produced by other ethnic groups. That sentiment can only arise from two modes of thought, both problematic: the stereotypical assumption that most Latinx workers one hires are undocumented and more inclined to work hard, and the other stereotypical assumption that the other members of the laboring class are lazy. The former assumption places value on the undocumented Latinx worker for their inability to advocate themselves and get exploited by their company. Likewise, that value does not manifest itself in the near-minimum wage poultry processing plants pay their undocumented workers. If employers do value Latinx workers so much more over others, then they should raise wages accordingly. The second assumption, though, is just as harmful because it influences the narrative about immigration in the US. As Johnson-Webb noted earlier, statements about the laziness of non-Latinx workers often have a racial aspect to them and draw from the racist portrayal of African Americans as lazy. This racialized profiling, where employers think of Latinx workers as better than others also promotes a harmful narrative that poses Latinxs and African Americans as economic rivals within the laboring class. Vanessa Ribas in 2015 noted “a critical limitation across much of the literature on migrant incorporation and intergroup relations in the US” where many books do not “adequately account for relations among subordinated groups” (Ribas 103). The “near-exclusive focus on the potential for ‘tense’ relations between Latin[x]s and African Americans fails to adequately account for [their] relationships with...whites, and obscures the continuous white dominance...at the highest institutional levels” (Ribas 105). The narrative of racial tension between groups of color in the laboring class simply fails to account for the discrimination of the white hegemony that has fueled any tensions in the first place.

Works Cited

- Fink, Leon, and Alvis E Dunn. *Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South*. Chapel Hill, United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Johnson-Webb, Karen D. *Recruiting Hispanic Labor: Immigrants in Non-Traditional Areas*. New York, United States: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2003.
- Miraftab, Faranak. *Global Heartland: Displaced Labor, Transnational Lives, and Local Placemaking*. Bloomington, United States: Indiana University Press, 2016.
- Ribas, Vanesa. *On the Line: Slaughterhouse Lives and the Making of the New South*. Berkerley, United States: University of California Press, 2015.
- Schwartzman, Kathleen C. *The Chicken Trail: Following Workers, Migrants, and Corporations across the Americas*. Ithaca, United States: Cornell University Press, 2013.
- Striffler, Steve. *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food*. New Haven, United States: Yale University Press, 2005.

