

# 13. Why It's Immigrants Who Pack Your Meat: What Trump has called an "invasion" was actually a corporate recruitment drive.

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The immigration raid last week at seven poultry plants in rural Mississippi was a perfect symbol of the Trump administration's racism, lies, hypocrisy, and contempt for the poor. It was also a case study in how an industry with a long history of defying the law has managed to shift the blame and punishment onto workers.

Planned for more than a year, the raid involved at least 600 agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, helicopters, and a staging area at a local National Guard base. The agents carried handguns, wore black body armor, and led 680 immigrant workers—almost all Latino, many of them women—to waiting buses with their hands zip-tied behind their backs. One worker, an American citizen, was shot with a Taser for resisting arrest. Children gathered outside the poultry plants crying as their parents were taken away and sent to private prisons; other kids sat in classrooms and at day-care centers, unaware that their families were being torn apart. It was the first week of school.

"The timing was unfortunate," Kevin McAleenan, the acting head of the Department of Homeland Security, later acknowledged. Twenty-two people had been killed a few days earlier in El Paso, Texas, where a gunman had targeted Mexican customers at a Walmart out of a desire to halt "the Hispanic invasion of Texas." President Donald Trump expressed no regret and applauded the Mississippi raid, arguing that it would deter undocumented immigrants from taking American jobs. "I just hope to keep it up," he said.

Despite the fact that the poultry workers were merely arrested, not yet found guilty, Mike Morgan, the acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, dismissed concerns about an 11-year-old girl photographed sobbing outside one of the plants. "I understand the girl's upset, and I get that, but her father committed a crime," Morgan told CNN. He also denied that "raids" had occurred, calling them "targeted law-enforcement operations." His comments reinforced the big lie at the heart of Trump's presidency: that undocumented immigrants are threatening and scary parasites who can be kept away with a wall. "The Mexican government is forcing their most unwanted people into the United States," Trump said while running for office. "They are in many cases criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc."

As The Washington Post and others have noted, immigrants to the United States are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans. Far from being a drain on the American economy, immigrants have become an essential component of it. According to a

*recent study by the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University, “The industrial produce and animal production and processing systems in the U.S. would collapse without the immigrant and migratory workforce.” The handful of multinational companies that dominate our food system are hardly being forced to employ immigrant workers. These firms have for many years embraced the opportunity to exploit them for profit.*

More than a century ago, when Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, the workers in American meatpacking plants were recent immigrants, largely from eastern Europe. Sinclair eloquently depicted the routine mistreatment of these poor workers. They were employed for long hours at low wages, exposed to dangerous working conditions, sexually abused, injured on the job, and fired after getting hurt. In the novel, the slaughterhouses of Chicago serve as a metaphor for the ruthless greed of America in the age of the robber barons, of a society ruled by the law of the jungle.

During the following decades, the lives of meatpacking workers greatly improved, thanks to the growing strength of labor unions. And by the early 1970s, a job at a meatpacking plant offered stable employment, high wages, good benefits, and the promise of a middle-class life.

When I visited meatpacking communities in Colorado, Nebraska, Texas, and Washington State almost 20 years ago, those gains had been lost. As I described in my book *Fast Food Nation, the largest companies in the beef industry had recruited immigrants in Mexico, brought them to the meatpacking communities of the American West and Midwest, and used them during the Ronald Reagan era to break unions. Wages were soon cut by as much as 50 percent. Line speeds were increased, government oversight was reduced, and injured workers were once again forced to remain on the job or get fired.*

In *The Chain*, published in 2014, Ted Genoways wrote about similar changes in the pork industry. And in 2016’s *Scratching Out a Living*, Angela Stuesse wrote about the transformation of the poultry industry in the rural South, with a prescient focus on the abuse of Latino workers in Mississippi.

All three books reached the same conclusion: What Trump has described as an immigrant “invasion” was actually a corporate recruitment drive for poor, vulnerable, undocumented, often desperate workers.

One of the poultry plants that *Scratching Out a Living* explored, in the small town of Morton, Mississippi, was raided last week. B. C. Rogers, the company that owned the plant in 1994, launched a hiring drive that year called “The Hispanic Project.” Its goal was to replace African American workers, who were seeking a union, with immigrant workers who’d be more pliant. It placed ads in Miami newspapers, arranged transportation for immigrants, and charged them for housing in dilapidated trailers. Within four years, it had brought roughly 5,000 mainly Latino workers to Morton and another meatpacking town in Mississippi, enlarging their population by more than 50 percent.

The poultry industry expanded throughout the rural South during the 1990s, drawn by the warm climate and the absence of labor unions. Tens of thousands of immigrant workers soon arrived to cut meat.

Meatpacking remains an unusually dangerous and unpleasant occupation, with an injury rate much higher than that of other manufacturing jobs. Poultry workers stand close to one another with sharp knives, repeating the same motion again and again more than 15,000 times in a single shift, slicing birds as they pass on conveyor belts every two seconds. A 2013 investigation by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that 42 percent of the workers at a poultry plant in South Carolina were suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome. The work is bloody, difficult, and full of potential harms. Lacerations are commonplace, and the high prevalence of fecal bacteria in poultry plants increases the risk that wounds will become infected.

Poultry workers suffer from respiratory ailments, chemical burns, fractures, concussions, eye damage, sprains, strains, concussions, and exposure to toxic fumes. Reporting on the industry for *The New Yorker*, Michael Grabell counted more than 750 amputations from 2010 to 2017.

Deborah Berkowitz, a former OSHA official who now handles worker-safety issues for the National Employment Law Project, told me that the Trump administration's close ties to the meatpacking industry are making the work even more dangerous. OSHA's enforcement activity has declined since Trump took office, and the agency now has the fewest inspectors since it was created in 1971.

In addition to ignoring the poultry industry's abuse of immigrant workers, the Trump administration has eliminated regulations that protect poultry farmers from being treated unfairly. It has exempted factory farms from Environmental Protection Agency rules governing the release of air pollution. It is permitting the increase of line speeds at poultry and pork slaughterhouses, making worker injuries more likely and jeopardizing food safety.

Over the years, I've spent time with countless farmworkers and meatpacking workers who entered the United States without proper documentation. Almost all of them were hardworking and deeply religious. They had taken enormous risks and suffered great hardships on behalf of their families. Today workers like them are the bedrock of our food system. And they are now being scapegoated, hunted down, and terrorized at the direction of a president who inherited about \$400 million from his father, watches television all day, and employs undocumented immigrants at his golf resorts.

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**ERIC SCHLOSSER** is the author of *Fast Food Nation* and co-producer of the documentary *Food, Inc.*