

Exploiting immigrant workers: Packinghouse communities

by [David L. Ostendorf](#) in the [May 5, 1999](#) issue

The two men had come with other Latinos from Texas to work in a Missouri meat-packing plant. They had once worked the fields, and had experienced all kinds of employers and working conditions. But their Missouri experience left them in disbelief.

They spoke of how the company had hired and trained them (unpaid) for several days, then had no job openings for weeks. They had to eat lunch in the company cafeteria, they were told, to maintain a sterile plant environment--and their wages were docked each day for the lunch. The company deducted costs for company-provided travel between the workers' residences and the plant, 45 miles distance. A local preacher/landlord housed workers for \$50 a week per person in his numerous properties, with extra charges for minor maintenance. With four men to a house, he collected \$800 monthly for a residence that had a fair market rental value of \$300.

For over a century, the U.S. meat-packing industry has exploited immigrant workers, using them as a ready supply of cheap labor, and keeping them divided by stirring up tensions over race, language, ethnicity and national origin. Since the mid-1980s, when they successfully broke high-paying union contracts and jobs, the packers have relentlessly renewed their old immigrant labor strategy, particularly among Latinos. Although they are joined by Lao, Vietnamese, Bosnians and other immigrants, Latinos constitute the majority of the packinghouse work force in the Midwest and Plains states.

Throughout this region and the South, thousands of workers from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, along with U.S.-born Latinos, are being recruited for low-wage meat-packing and poultry-processing jobs in predominantly white, rural communities that are often unprepared for a surge of new residents. In Kansas alone, the number of Spanish-speaking schoolchildren has almost doubled since 1995, from 5,173 to 10,145--an increase largely attributed to such recruitment

practices.

The number of undocumented immigrants working in the packing plants has prompted sporadic but increasing enforcement by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In the past, the INS has even resorted to military-style raids on plants, complete with helicopters and large contingents of law officers. Its "Operation Prime Beef" (now called "Operation Vanguard") has targeted plants in both Nebraska and Iowa, and the agency has prompted the industry to comply with its requests for employee files. The threat of disruptive INS raids can lead to unprovoked and arbitrary dismissal of immigrant workers in the plants, documented or not, according to the National Network of Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

The communities themselves are being exploited by the packing industry, which promises local jobs, an enhanced tax base and a work force that will bolster local business, but seldom mentions the impact on housing, health care, community services, schools, youth and children. Nor are racial and social issues addressed. Prospective packinghouse communities rarely step back to consider the drawbacks of hosting these industries.

In Omaha, packers have not recruited African-Americans in need of jobs. In locales where massive hog production facilities are being developed or operated in partnership with packing plants, the economic and environmental impact on area farmers and communities is frequently devastating. And with hog prices at extraordinarily low levels, in part due to production by the hog factories, some packers are calling for relaxed immigration standards so they can hire even more workers to bolster plant capacity.

The response of the churches to this situation has been mixed. Many are indifferent to the plight of immigrant workers. Frustrated religious and agency leaders in Kansas tell of a city where mainline Protestant churches refuse even to admit that their once-Anglo community has a significant burgeoning Spanish-speaking population.

Churches become unwitting allies with the packers when they rush to provide charitable services to workers and their families without asking why the workers are in need. In one Nebraska community, churches responded to the appeals by the nation's largest packer to assist new immigrant employees with affordable housing and day care, but never asked the company why the workers could not afford either

one. The failure of churches to articulate basic cost-benefit questions--who benefits from and who pays for this system of worker and community exploitation--means that the churches will help foot the packers' bills by providing social-service ministry and community outreach.

Provision of social-service ministries to needy workers and other sojourners is important and necessary. And the churches' efforts have been creative and helpful: they have provided critically needed health care, education, housing, community services and development ministries for Latinos and other immigrant groups. But these ministries should grow out of the expressed needs of workers themselves, and in partnership with them--not in response to "needs" expressed by the corporations.

Moreover, this is not the only response available or needed in packinghouse communities. The gospel demand for justice means that churches in packinghouse communities must press for action on the socioeconomic, racial and political issues precipitated by industry operations. Churches must challenge unjust recruiting and hiring practices. In Iowa, farm, rural and church groups coalesced to pass a comprehensive new law requiring, for example, that employers pay for return trips of workers recruited from more than 500 miles away if the workers leave within four weeks of hiring. The law also mandates that when over 10 percent of an employer's work force speaks the same non-English language, the employer must hire a community referral agent fluent in that language to assist workers with community services.

The religious community must also question wages and working conditions in the plants. In communities across the South, churches and labor groups are joining forces to challenge the wage and benefit structure of the poultry-processing industry, as well as working conditions that result in high injury rates and long-term health problems. Issues addressed by virtually every national church body--international economic inequality, immigrant and refugee rights, racial justice, the rights of workers to organize, environmental justice and corporate responsibility--are at the heart of the packing and processing industry's presence in any community.

In some packinghouse communities churches have led the struggle against the organized racist movement. In central Illinois, local churches took on the Ku Klux Klan when it presented its vile and violent opposition to immigrant workers. And while the anti-immigrant movement has not taken root in packinghouse communities, there is evidence that the movement, which has a significant presence

in the Midwest, may attempt to capitalize on the presence of other immigrants.

In some places, new commitments to long-term, faith-based organizing are emerging from bonds between churches and immigrant workers. When organizing efforts are rooted in biblical and theological reflection, nurtured through the development of lasting working relationships, and aimed at addressing needs and concerns identified by the people themselves, they can build a powerful new voice for the entire community and address the systemic problems underlying its social, economic and political life.

Churches can, for example, help address workers' housing needs by pressing for enforcement of housing codes that prevent overcrowding and rent gouging. At the same time, churches can offer affordable housing by making rental property available through their own members. Church, worker and community coalitions can help assure that new community services--bilingual teachers, police and health services, for example--are paid for through fair taxation of the packers, who are often granted substantial tax abatements and other financial incentives to locate or operate their plants.

The meat-packers and poultry processors and the immigrant work force they rely on are significantly reshaping communities. Churches cannot ignore the sweeping and lasting socioeconomic impacts, nor can they respond blindly and naïvely. If they do, they buy into the corporate goal of maximizing profit at any cost, including the cost to workers, family farmers and communities. If they provide only social service ministries to workers, they assist corporations in reaching corporate goals. If they engage in community mission without organizing with workers and other impacted sectors of the community, they perpetuate exploitation.

The immigrant workers heading north to a new future in the packing and processing plants hope for better lives for their families and themselves. But they are new players in an old scheme to keep labor costs low. From the packinghouse floor, in some of the most dangerous jobs in any industry, these workers help feed a nation. Those in the community of faith must provide hospitality, then join them in the pursuit of justice.