



Powered by

## Immigration raids yield jobs for legal workers

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

When federal agents descended on six meatpacking plants owned by Swift & Co. in December 2006, they rounded up nearly 1,300 suspected illegal immigrants that made up about 10% of the labor force at the plants.

But the raids by [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) (ICE) agents did not cripple the company or the plants. In fact, they were back up and running at full staff within months by replacing those removed with a significant number of native-born Americans, according to a report by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS).

That was the most extreme example of what has become an increasingly common result of the raids: "They were very beneficial to American workers," according to [Vanderbilt University](#) professor Carol Swain.

"Whenever there's an immigration raid, you find white, black and legal immigrant labor lining up to do those jobs that Americans will supposedly not do," said Swain, who teaches law and political science.

Exactly who is filling the jobs has varied, depending on the populations surrounding the plants:

- Out West, one of the Swift plants raided by ICE, had a workforce that was about 90% Hispanic — both legal and illegal — before the raids. The lost workers were replaced mostly with white Americans and U.S.-born Hispanics, according to the CIS.
- In the South, a House of Raeford Farms plant in North Carolina that was more than 80% Hispanic before a federal investigation is now about 70% African-American, according to a report by *TheCharlotte Observer*.
- Throughout the Great Plains, a new wave of legal immigrants is filling the void, according to Jill Cashen, spokeswoman for the [United Food and Commercial Workers](#) union, which represents 1.3 million people who work in the food-processing industry. Plants are refilling positions with newly arrived immigrants from places such as Sudan, Somalia and Southeast Asia.

### Recession plays a factor in shift

Steven Camarota of CIS said native-born Americans are not only willing to take on those jobs, but currently fill a majority of them.

Native-born workers outnumber immigrants 3-to-1 in construction jobs and 2-to-1 in farming, fishing and forestry jobs, according to Camarota.

T. Willard Fair, president and CEO of the [Urban League](#) of Greater Miami, said it has taken the greatest recession in a generation for poor Americans to line up to work in fields and factories.

"We'll take anything now," Fair said. "We're willing to be exploited for a while."

After ICE agents descend on poultry-processing plants, pork factories and meatpacking facilities across the USA, in some cases plant owners are forced to raise wages to get Americans to sign up, Swain said.

Catherine Singley, a policy analyst for the [National Council of La Raza](#) (NCLR), the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights organization, said the post-raid increases in salaries were also necessary for Americans to accept the harsh, dangerous working environments.

She said wages did not plummet in recent decades because of immigrants undercutting Americans, but because employers took advantage of the immigrant population fearful of seeking help from authorities.

"If you've got a segment of the workforce that's afraid to speak out against violations of their labor rights, then that drags down wages and working conditions for all workers," Singley said.

A report released last week by the NCLR found that the occupational fatality rate for Latinos remained the highest among ethnic groups in the country for the 15th straight year in 2007, when 937 Latinos died on the job.

"That's something that native-born Americans and native-born Latino workers are dealing with for the first time," she said, referring to the general working conditions faced by workers in factories, plants and fields.


### New leverage for workers

As the face of factory workers changes, so do the issues that workers and employers must tackle.


Cashen said her union had to negotiate with plant managers in Nebraska and Colorado to allow employees to properly observe the Islamic holiday of Ramadan.

This month, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled that the Colorado plant was wrong to fire more than 100 Muslim workers who walked out during Ramadan last year in a dispute over prayer breaks.

Open Now



Squirrel it  
away.  
You'd be  
nuts not to.



Save your money

Member FDIC

"Ten years ago, we were negotiating to provide for Cinco de Mayo," Cashen said, referring to the Mexican holiday. "If you walk in the doors of a plant, you're going to see ... the [United Nations](#)."

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.usatoday.com/money/workplace/2009-09-13-plants\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/workplace/2009-09-13-plants_N.htm)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2009 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.