

The Use and Abuse of Immigrant Labor
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists

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My family came to Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s from the German Palatinate. My grandfather was the first to speak English as his first language. My sister has a schoolbook of our great-grandfather's that has English, German, and Pennsylvania Dutch, a German dialect, side by side. Of my people Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1751, "Why should the Palatinate boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements, and by herding together, establish their language and manners, to the exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them...?" Steinberg, Stephen, *The Ethnic Myth*.

Where did that animosity come from? I don't know, but maybe it had something to do with some lost business. According to Wikipedia, "Around 1735, (Christoph) Sauer (a German immigrant) took up the idea of becoming a printer and publisher. Benjamin Franklin dominated this trade at the time and was a supplier of printed materials to the large German community around Pennsylvania. Significantly, Franklin used only Roman typefaces. Sauer obtained Fraktur type from a foundry in Nuremberg.... In 1738 Sauer began to publish almanacs, calendars, books and newspapers, in 1739 using a type face that his German readers could more easily read," [Christoph Sauer - Wikipedia](#).

My first ministry out of seminary was a two-point United Methodist charge in the coal region of eastern Pennsylvania. In the mid-80s when I was there a mixed marriage meant a Catholic and Protestant had married. There were many stories of grandmothers sneaking babies away to the "right" church to be baptized "properly." But where did this animosity come from? A friend gave me a book on the history of the region. When German and English (Protestant) miners began to feel they could demand better pay and safer working conditions, rather than give in to their demands, the mine owners began recruiting miners from Italy and Eastern Europe (Catholics).

In more recent years I was walking down a street in DC with a black man when we passed a Latino man washing down a sidewalk. The black man commented saying that the Latino man had taken that job away from a black man. Animosity again.

Labor Day weekend is a good time to consider the ways that racism and nativism have been amplified by those who have benefited and still benefit today from the labor of those they classed as other often turning one set of "others" against another for economic benefit.

In Stephen Steinberg's book, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* he quotes a very derogatory 1910 article on "The Negro" from of all places the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Steinberg says after the quote, "It is not difficult to see how these characterizations were originally tailored to a slave system...In all these ways, racist allegations functioned as an ideological smoke screen designed to give moral equivalency to a brutal and inhumane system of labor exploitation."

Moving on in the history of American labor Steinberg notes that, “Unlike the millions of Africans who were imported against their will, and unlike Indians and Mexicans who were conquered by force, European immigrants came as a matter of choice.” That, however, does not mean that they were not exploited or that racist tropes weren’t used against Jews and Italians and Irish and others. Speaking of the time of the Industrial Revolution Steinberg writes, “In effect, Europe functioned as an immense labor reserve for America’s burgeoning industries. Immigrant labor was especially desirable because it was so malleable. Uprooted from their families and communities, immigrants could be deployed to remote areas of the country, and specifically to such low-wage industries as mining and railroad construction that could not attract native workers in sufficient numbers. As indigents from abroad, lacking alternatives and living on the edge of survival, they were ripe for exploitation. Forced by their circumstances to accept the dirty, backbreaking, and menial work that native workers were unwilling to do, immigrants constituted a cheap and highly mobile labor force for the most exploitative jobs at a time when American capitalism was in its most rapacious phase.”

Today we do not have the liberal immigration policies of the Industrial Revolution, but we still have industries who want easily malleable workers who will work long hours in poor conditions for low wages. And we have consumers who want low prices for Washington apples, Maryland crabs, Wisconsin dairy, Virginia hams, all industries today that depend on immigrant labor.

If you are a farmer, you can go through the paperwork and regulations of applying for workers with H-2A visas. “An H-2A visa allows a foreign national worker into the United States for temporary agricultural work. There are several requirements of the employer in regard to this visa. ...All of these workers are covered by U.S. wage laws, workers' compensation and other standards; additionally, temporary workers and their employers are subject to the employer and/or individual mandates under the Affordable Care Act. Because of concern that guest workers might be unfairly exploited the U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division is especially vigilant in auditing and inspecting H-2A employers. H-2A employers are the only group of employers who are required to pay inbound and outbound transportation, free housing, and provide meals for their workers. H-2A agricultural employers are among the most heavily regulated and monitored employers in the United States. Unlike other guest worker programs, there is no cap on the number of H-2A visas allocated each year,” [H-2A visa - Wikipedia](#).

H-2A workers obviously have documentation, but Newsweek reports that, “According to [a 2018 report](#) by the U.S. Department of Labor, 49% of the U.S. agricultural workforce is undocumented...” [With Nearly Half of U.S. Farmworkers Undocumented, Ending Illegal Immigration Could Devastate Economy \(newsweek.com\)](#). So if there is no limit on H-2A workers, why are half of U.S. farmworkers undocumented? “Minard (a farmer who uses the H-2A visa program) told Newsweek he realizes there are employers who don't take the same legal steps he does, and said that the complex legal process required, coupled with potential fines employers face for contract violations, may provide an explanation.

“Fines for violations can range from \$1,700 to \$6,000. Fines for layoffs and improperly rejecting U.S. workers can reach \$17,000. Violations of housing and transportation agreements can be as high as \$59,000. The fines are based on individual workers and are multiplied by the total number of workers whose contractual rights are deemed to have been violated.

“These fees may deter some farms from getting involved with the program, especially when, by comparison, fines for hiring undocumented workers range from just \$600 to about \$4,000 for first-time offenders,” [With Nearly Half of U.S. Farmworkers Undocumented, Ending Illegal Immigration Could Devastate Economy \(newsweek.com\)](#).

Moving to another American industry that uses many immigrant laborers, in August of 2021 Luis Velazquez reported for the Missouri Independent that, “(Meatpacking) Industry experts said foreign workers — whose time in the states is tied to the employer sponsoring their visas and, generally, aren’t members of plants’ unions — are probably less likely to speak out about working conditions in an industry where lacerations and amputations are common.

“(Plants) need to employ a lot of people, and you have to push them as hard as possible,” said Joshua Specht, a professor at the University of Notre Dame who has studied the meat industry. “The best way to do that, obviously, is to focus on employing people who are rather marginal and who are willing to put up with being overworked.” [Meatpacking plants have long relied on immigrant labor. Some now turn to foreign visa workers • Missouri Independent](#).

“Under the federal (H-2B visa) program, businesses can hire foreigners for temporary jobs when faced with labor shortages. (These are the visas the meatpacking industry would use.) (Although) Most (of these) visa holders work as landscapers, maids and cooks,” [Meatpacking plants have long relied on immigrant labor. Some now turn to foreign visa workers • Missouri Independent](#).

In an article on the Voice of America Learning English webpage that Stephen Groves and Sophia Tareen originally reported for the Associated Press and Pete Musto adapted for VOA Learning English, it was noted that, “The nonprofit Migration Policy Institute reports that immigrants represent about 40 percent of the nearly 470,000 workers in U.S. meatpacking. Estimates on undocumented immigrants (without visas) vary from 14 percent to more than 50 percent at some factories,” [US Meatpacking Industry Faces Immigrant Worker Shortage \(voanews.com\)](#).

Of both the H2-A and H2-B visa programs Clayton Sinyai, executive director of the Catholic Labor Network said, “They are fatally flawed because the worker's authorization to work in this country is tied to the sponsoring employer's goodwill,” ... “Quitting their job to seek better wages or more humane treatment from another firm is nearly impossible. Workers fear their sponsoring employer's displeasure, making it extremely difficult for them to organize and demand fair treatment through collective action.” [Even in tech sector, immigrant workers subject to wage theft, study shows | Angelus News](#)

Often when we think of immigrant labor it is the farm worker, maid, nanny, landscaper, or meatpacker of whom we think, but there is other immigrant labor. There are more than 247,000 doctors with medical degrees from foreign countries practicing in the United States, making up slightly more than one-quarter of all doctors, maybe some of your doctors. According to the American Immigration Council, “In areas with the highest poverty rates—where more than 30 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty rate—nearly one-third of all doctors are foreign-trained.

“Where per-capita income is below \$15,000 per year, 42.5 percent of all doctors are foreign-trained.

“Where 75 percent or more of the population is non-white, 36.2 percent of the doctors are foreign-trained.

“Where 10 percent or less of the population has a college degree, nearly one-third of all doctors are foreign-trained.... The demand for foreign-trained doctors will only increase as the need for doctors and accessible, affordable healthcare in the United States continues to grow. The Association of American Medical Colleges found that the demand for doctors will continue to outpace supply, leading to a projected shortfall of between 46,100 and 90,400 doctors by 2025, many in primary care,” [Foreign-Trained Doctors are Critical to Serving Many U.S. Communities | American Immigration Council](#). Still when a recent review of proposed legislation on physician visas was held in Congress at least one group of doctors protested that the problem of the supply of doctors could be addressed by making sure more citizen aspiring physicians were matched to residencies. I don’t have an answer as to what is the best way to solve the problem, but even among physicians it seems as though it is the immigrant worker who ends up working for less money and in poorer settings.

We use and we abuse the immigrant work force in this country. The world is a small place, and employers will always be able to find people somewhere more desperate for work than the people they already have. It helps no one when the animosity of those workers is directed against each other. It is not each other we need to fight but the system. Like climate change, employment issues need to be addressed nationally and internationally. As Unitarian Universalists our congregations affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice equity and compassion in human relations; and the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Let us turn away from animosity toward the immigrant and work together to create a system that is fair for all.

I will let Rev. Sarah Skochko end this sermon for me. She wrote in this week’s Braver/Wiser email,

“I was waiting for my chalupa in the drive-through when I saw a sign on the back door:

DANGER!!

NEVER open this door after dark

ALWAYS look before you open this door

YOUR LIFE COULD DEPEND ON IT!!

She continues, “One of my first jobs was at Wendy’s, and I remember having to watch the video about what to do in an armed robbery situation. We were taught where the escape latch was on the inside of the walk-in freezer. This inadvertently made armed robbery seem like the more attractive career path; certainly, it seemed more profitable, but had all things been equal I’d still rather be on the outside of the freezer than in it.

“Nobody should die at their job, but it seemed especially crummy to be risking my life for (at that time) \$6.35 an hour. It was tiring and hectic work, and it came with duties I would have never imagined before working there. Sometimes, giant tropical spiders would jump out of the crates of potatoes. Once, it was a scorpion. Whose job was it to catch the scorpion?

“I worked with a married couple who had immigrated from Iraq and who had three small children at home. In their old country, she had been a doctor; he had been an engineer. I still think of them whenever I hear the argument that if ‘unskilled’ workers want to get paid more, they should get an education and find a better job. (At my first job at a sandwich and ice cream shop a Vietnamese refugee couple were the slicers; cutting the meat, cheese, tomatoes, lettuce and onions for each day.)

Skochko continues, "The back door at the Taco Bell reminded me once again that there is no such thing as unskilled labor, and everyone who works behind a cash register or flat top or fryer deserves to be paid well for the work they do. The hours and days of a human life have value beyond measure."

"The hours and days of a human life have value beyond measure." May the work of us all be honorably used and not abused.

A Labor Day prayer:

"As the sun rises to bring in the new day:

"We remember those who descend into the earth, their work begins in darkness, pulling from the earth, the resources we steward.

"We remember those who work inside a building away from the light and brightness of the day.

"We remember those who work outside in the harsh elements of our world, the bitter cold and sweltering heat of extremes.

"We remember those who do not have a job to go to, who are struggling to meet the needs of their daily living expenses, for whom the day becomes long and arduous.

"As the sun sets to bring in the evening of rest:

"We remember those who work in the night.

"We remember those who are trying to recover from their labor and toils of the day.

"We remember those who participate in unsafe and dangerous work.

"We pray for a renewed sense of dignity in their lives and in their work," Amen. [Prayer for Labor Day | USCCB](#)