

Meat Processors Look to Puerto Rico for Workers

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Morning Edition, December 6, 2007 · A year ago, immigration agents arrested more than 1,200 illegal workers at Swift meat-packing plants in six states.

The arrests set off a debate about whether immigrants take the grueling jobs away from Americans. Republican presidential candidate U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter said last summer that the day after the raids, Americans were lined up to get their \$18-an-hour jobs back.

In reality, the meat-packing plants pay an average hourly rate of \$11 or \$12 — and no one is lining up to work there.

Many plants, even those that were not raided, must still recruit heavily for legal workers.

In July, a Cargill plant in Beardstown, Ill., began running advertisements in Puerto Rico's capital city, San Juan.

Officials then flew over to conduct interviews there and in four other towns.

Andrea Agosto heard about the jobs and was among the first group of Puerto Ricans that Cargill flew to its pork-processing plant in August.

"It was for a change and for a better life for my three children," she says.

Agosto has doubled her salary.

Puerto Ricans Settle in Illinois

Maria Clayton had been the Beardstown plant's only Puerto Rican employee. She has been shuttling back and forth to the airport to pick up the new arrivals and help them get settled. So far, 50 people have made the trip.

Clayton says even the drive from the airport through Illinois' rural corn and bean country is something of a culture shock.

"Last night, I picked up two people, and they were amazed: 'Oh, my God, it's pitch black, it's pitch black. This is so far, are we there yet?' "

Clayton says they all ask, "What do you do for fun?" She tells them there isn't much to do. "But I always tell them, 'You know, if you want to change (your) life, and you want to save money (and) feel safe — this is a good place to be.' "

Cargill spokesman Mark Klein says the company has long had to recruit outside its plants' locations and targets places with high unemployment. Puerto Ricans make good candidates because they are U.S. citizens and many have experience in the industry.

"What interested us about Puerto Rico was there was a pork plant in Corozal that had closed a while back, and we wanted to hire people that had meat experience," Klein says.

He says he does not think any of his competitors know that, but he expects word to get around.

Mark Grey, who studies the meat-packing industry at the University of Northern Iowa, says there is a premium on finding legal workers because of the crackdown on illegal immigrants.

"A lot of people in the industry have told me that they're running scared. They've looked at the potential for they, themselves, to become arrested — the managers, the recruiters, everyone else," Grey says.

Grey says the industry is doing more to weed out illegal workers, but that cuts into a thin profit margin of 1 percent to 3 percent. To make money, you need to cut up a lot of animals, and that takes a lot of people, he says.

Grey says most of the Americans who lined up to get meat-industry jobs after the Swift raids never got out of training, or they got to the floor and lasted just a few hours — not days.

Difficult Transition

In Beardstown, the transition for the new Puerto Rican workers has not been all smooth.

Shelly Heideman, who organizes aid for immigrants through the Elizabeth Ann Seton Program, says she has had to expand her efforts to secure donations because the incoming Puerto Ricans need so much.

"First of all, they said (they need) winter clothing, especially for their children," she says. They also need furnishings, pots and pans, linens, towels, sheets, blankets and almost anything you need to establish a home, Heideman says.

Agosto says a couple of the other Puerto Rican workers who came with her in August have already gone back.

"They didn't like the work, and it's so cold inside the factory. We weren't really prepared for that," she says.

But Agosto says it is worth it for her. She recently brought one son over from Puerto Rico, and he plans to start work at the Cargill plant in January. She hopes to bring her two other children next summer.