

Alabama Immigration Law Has Surprise Result

By Margaret Newkirk and Gigi Douban on September 24, 2012

Esene Manga, an Eritrean refugee living in Atlanta, hadn't heard of Albertville, Alabama until a recruiter offered him a job there. Now Manga, 22, earns \$10.85 an hour cutting chicken breasts on a poultry-plant night shift, an unexpected beneficiary of a year-old law designed to drive out illegal Hispanic immigrants.

This isn't what the law's backers said would happen. Republican state Senator Scott Beason, a sponsor, said at a news conference last year that the restrictions on undocumented workers would "put thousands of native Alabamians back in the work force."

Instead, it caused a labor shortage that resulted in the importation of hundreds of legal African and Haitian refugees, and Puerto Ricans, according to interviews with workers, advocacy organizations and businesses. Most were recruited by the poultry industry, in a segment of the economy that has been a heavy employer of undocumented workers, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, a Washington research group.

Alabama is one of five states that last year passed immigration laws modeled on a 2010 Arizona measure largely invalidated by the U.S. Supreme Court in June. Last month, an appellate court in Atlanta said many of the Alabama law's requirements also aren't constitutional. Other provisions, including one allowing police to arrest suspected illegal immigrants, remain in place.

Destination: Albertville

In Albertville, a city of about 21,000 in the northeast corner of the state, Manga, his friend Abrahaley Araya and about 18 other African refugees started at Wayne Farms LLC's plant in the days after the law took effect a year ago, according to the two men and Albert Mbanfu of Lutheran Services of Georgia, which helps refugees find jobs.

Johnell Rodriguez, 26, said he was among 17 Puerto Ricans who arrived at another Alabama Wayne Farms plant a week after the law took effect. Haitian Saul Jules said he was recruited in Miami to work in Albertville by JBS SA (JBSS3)'s Pilgrim's Pride Corp. a few months ago.

Plants sought refugees because too few local residents were interested or qualified, said Frank Singleton, a spokesman for Wayne Farms, based in Oakwood, Georgia.

Many legal Hispanic employees left after the immigration law took effect, he said. The company, which operates six plants in the state, spent \$5 million to replace and train new workers, he said. Turnover in North Alabama was 50 percent last year, and is now as high as 90 percent in some plants because replacements didn't stay, he said. The company is "having to use alternative methods and sourcing," including recruiting refugees, Singleton said.

Africa to Alabama

Wayne Farms found Eritreans, displaced by war and conflict, and other Africans through East Coast Labor Solutions LLC, a Fairlea, West Virginia-based labor broker. East Coast has about 200 workers in Alabama, owner Ray Wiley said in an interview.

“Our jobs are often in states where immigration laws have hit the hardest, and mostly in the poultry industry,” he said.

East Coast began calling Atlanta refugee agencies several months ago looking for legal immigrants to come to Alabama for a year, said Mbanfu, refugee employment director for Lutheran Services in Atlanta. He said the company would have taken as many refugees as he could refer.

The agency connected East Coast with refugees who had been in the country three to five years, he said.

Fresh Peppers

Chris Gaddis, head of human resources for Greeley, Colorado-based Pilgrim’s Pride, which has four plants in Alabama, said the law didn’t affect its workforce. Worth Sparkman, a spokesman for Tyson Foods Inc. ([TSN](#)), which has two plants in Alabama, also said there was no effect.

Alabama doesn’t track the number of refugees who come to fill jobs. The state had an estimated 120,000 illegal Hispanic immigrants in 2010, of whom 95,000 were in the labor force, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. They were 2.5 percent of the population and 4.2 percent of the workforce.

Changing demographics are reflected on store shelves. Albertville’s main Hispanic grocery, Tienda El Sol, added coconut milk, new varieties of hot peppers and other items to appeal to newcomers, manager Marjorie Centeno said.

The Alabama law’s intent was to attack “every aspect of an illegal alien’s life,” and “make it difficult for them to live here so they will deport themselves,” Republican House sponsor Micky Hammon said during legislative debate, according to a Birmingham News report.

Unwelcome Mat

The measure let police arrest people after traffic stops if they couldn’t prove legal status. It made it a crime to rent property to illegal immigrants, forbade registering their cars or giving them dog or business licenses, and required schools to check students’ citizenship.

Beason, the senator, said that while he welcomes legal immigrants, he isn’t pleased by the arrival of the refugees.

“We would prefer they hire native Alabamians,” he said. The reason refugees are being hired is probably because “they’re cheaper,” he said.

Beason credits the law with a decrease in Alabama’s unemployment rate. It dropped to 8.5 percent in October 2011 from 8.8 the month before and continued to decline. Unemployment was 8.5 percent in August, the most recent month for which data is available.

The drop “absolutely, directly coincides with when our law went into effect,” he said this month. “It put thousands of Alabamians into jobs.”

‘Ghost Town’

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that the rate fell because the labor force shrank. Fewer people had jobs in Alabama in August than did before the law.

In Albertville, poultry plants had long drawn Hispanic workers. In 2010, the Hispanic population in surrounding Marshall County was about three times the state average, according to the Pew Center.

The Pew Center has no estimate on how many Hispanics left Alabama. Anecdotal evidence suggests Albertville lost many.

“Here, it’s like a ghost town for Hispanics,” said Rafael Leon, owner of Accessories La Alianza, near Albertville. Leon sat waiting for customers to walk in and buy prepaid mobile phones and sparkly butterfly hair clips, skin creams and key chains. Rows of glass cases were empty. He said the store was busy before the law.

“Now zero,” he said. “Nobody’s coming in.”

He said he’ll move if business doesn’t pick up by December. Leon said one son is about to go to college, another is in high school and he himself has a baby.

“We’re all kind of depressed,” he said.

Cold Comfort

Centeno, the grocery manager, said she has seen the decline, too. She said poultry companies could have used the money spent to find the refugees to help Hispanics get legal status. She said she has heard from recruits who complain that the plants are too cold and the jobs too difficult.

Jules was one of four Haitians sitting in the Albertville lobby of Alatrade Foods LLC, a chicken-processing company that offers orientation in Creole, hoping for work. Jules said he lost his original job with Pilgrim’s Pride ([PPC](#)) after a month.

“I’m not a lucky person,” he said.

Rodriguez, the Puerto Rican, said he was recruited in a San Juan unemployment office by East Coast. He and 31 others flew to Atlanta the next month for poultry jobs, then split into buses to Alabama and North Carolina, Rodriguez said in Spanish through an interpreter.

Manga and Araya, a 32-year-old who now works for Tyson, found themselves living in a dark apartment in an aging complex rented along with its furniture from the labor broker. It's sparsely furnished, with mismatched chairs and a yellow sofa.

When asked what they do in their spare time, both laughed.

“Sometimes,” Araya said, “we walk to the library.”

He and Manga said working in chicken plants is hard, and pays good money.

“We are here to work,” Manga said. “We go to our jobs and come back.”

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-09-24/africans-relocate-to-alabama-to-fill-jobs-after-immigration-law>