

Handout 3.3 - Effect on Worker Conditions

What is the effect of millions of undocumented workers on working conditions in the U.S.?

Excerpted from Interfaith Worker Justice’s “For You Were Once A Stranger.”

In the latest wave of immigration, when much focus is placed on undocumented workers from Mexico and Central and South American countries, conflicting interests and fears are expressed.

- **Many businesses want access to pools of immigrants as a cheap and reliable source of labor.** Undocumented workers, who fear being reported to immigration authorities, are less inclined to complain to their employers or to authorities about labor abuses than are workers who are legal residents of the U.S. Therefore, they are more likely to accept sub-standard wages.
- **Native born U. S. workers have seen their standard of living decline steadily since the late 1970s,** for a host of related reasons: the decline of the manufacturing sector and outsourcing of jobs, falling rates of unionization, and the widening of the income gap between the wealthy and the rest of us. Many blame their problems on immigrant workers, who have become more prominent in many industries—services, hospitality, construction, garment manufacturing, agriculture—as wage levels and standards have fallen. In fact, research has shown that low-wage workers are negatively impacted by competition with undocumented immigrants.²⁷

The current immigration “system” reflects these contradictory interests. On the one hand, workplace raids by ICE are sending a message that the U.S. is getting “tough” on undocumented immigrants and employers who hire them. (In fact, unscrupulous employers call ICE on themselves as a way to avoid paying their workers).²⁸ But outside of a radical fringe such as the Minuteman and some talk show hosts, there is not a clamor for wholesale deportation. Some industries would collapse if unauthorized immigrants were removed from the workforce. Undocumented workers make up less than five percent of the U.S. workforce.

The following table shows that these workers are heavily concentrated in occupations that demand hard labor and are often poorly paid.

Undocumented Workers’ Share of Selected Occupations, 2005 ²⁹	
Occupation	Share
Total, Civilian Labor Force (with occupation)	4.9%
Insulation workers	36%
Miscellaneous agricultural workers	29%
Roofers	29%
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers and tapers	28%

Helpers, construction trades	27%
Butchers and other meat, poultry and fish processing workers	27%
Pressers, textile, garment and related materials	26%
Grounds maintenance workers	25%
Construction laborers	25%
Brick masons, block masons and stone masons	25%
Dishwashers	23%
Helpers—production workers	23%
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	22%

Increased enforcement activity results in family separations and it drives immigrant further underground. But ICE raids and border patrols cannot stop the influx of undocumented immigrants, which is part of a global phenomenon created by trade and foreign policies that push people from their homes and countries and pull them to areas where a livelihood can be eked out. A new system is needed that can help immigrants gain legal status and can protect native-born workers from unfair competition.

- Undocumented workers compete with legal permanent residents and native-born and naturalized citizens on an uneven playing ground.** This harms all workers and lowers standards for everybody, to the advantage of unscrupulous employers. Because undocumented workers are under constant threat of deportation, they accept inferior wages and conditions and cannot effectively assert their rights in the workplace. **The problem isn't with the workers, who live, work and pay taxes in the U.S., but with their legal status.**
- Guest workers and work visa programs replace permanent jobs with benefits with temporary jobs without benefits or the legal protections guaranteed to most U.S. workers.** Importing workers from various countries is nothing new. During World War II, the U.S. developed the Bracero program to bring Mexican workers for temporary work all over the country, mostly as agricultural laborers. Although the Bracero program ended in 1965, the importation of temporary workers under various off-shoot programs has continued. Guest workers come from many countries and are employed in multiple industries and professions, from farm labor and meat processing plants to nurses and high-tech jobs.

Guest worker programs create a second-class workforce with fewer rights and lower wages. Large guest worker programs give corporations the ability to bring in a new, low-wage workforce while undercutting recent immigrants and native-born U.S. workers. Some guest workers such as those in the *H-2A* (agricultural) and *H-2B* (nonagricultural) visa programs are not allowed the freedom to leave abusive employers and secure other jobs. Employers can fire and deport H-2A workers if they demand freedom of association for higher wages or better working conditions. H-2A workers are not entitled to disclosure about job terms when they are recruited. Even H-1B visa holders, who have college degrees and specialized training, are exploited, frequently working for lower wages than their

American counterparts. But American citizens and legal permanent residents are not even allowed to apply for H-1B advertised jobs. What ever happened to the American concept of equal opportunity?

The myth behind these programs is that there are jobs that American workers won't or can't do. Just as U.S. corporations claim they cannot find American workers to work in shoe or electronics factories and must move operations overseas, so companies import workers rather than pay prevailing wages and allow full labor and workplace protections. Employers who advocate for guest worker programs want a workforce that can be paid less than one hired from local communities in the U.S.

References:

²⁷ Lawrence Mishel, et al., Economic Policy Institute, "The State of Working America 2004/2005," ILR Press, pp. 187-188.

²⁸ Interfaith Worker Justice, "Working on Faith: A Faithful Response to Worker Abuse in New Orleans," available at www.iwj.org.

²⁹ Adapted from Jeffrey Passell, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.," op. cit.