October 12, 2007

**Crackdown Upends Slaughterhouse’s Work Force**

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/g/steven_greenhouse/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

TAR HEEL, N.C. — Last November, [immigration](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/immigration_and_refugees/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) officials began a crackdown at Smithfield Foods’s giant slaughterhouse here, eventually arresting 21 illegal immigrants at the plant and rousting others from their trailers in the middle of the night.

Since then, more than 1,100 Hispanic workers have left the 5,200-employee hog-butchering plant, the world’s largest, leaving it struggling to find, train and keep replacements.

Across the country, the federal effort to flush out illegal immigrants is having major effects on workers and employers alike. Some companies have reluctantly raised wages to attract new workers following raids at their plants.

After several hundred immigrant employees at its plant in Stillmore, Ga., were arrested, Crider Poultry began recruiting Hmong workers from Minnesota, hiring men from a nearby homeless mission and providing free van transportation to many workers.

So far, Smithfield has largely replaced the Hispanics with American workers, who often leave poorly paid jobs for higher wages at the plant here. But the turnover rate for new workers — many find the work grueling and the smell awful — is twice what it was when Hispanics dominated the work force.

Making Smithfield’s recruiting challenge even harder is the fact that many local residents have worked there before and soured on the experience. As a result, Smithfield often looks far afield for new employees.

Fannie Worley, a longtime resident of Dillon, S.C., a largely African-American town of sagging trailers and ramshackle bungalows, quit her $5.25-an-hour, part-time job making beds at a Days Inn motel four months ago to take a $10.75-an-hour job at Smithfield. But Ms. Worley remains ambivalent.

“It pays a lot better,” she said. “But the trip is too long.”

Around 1 p.m. each day, C. J. Bailey, a Smithfield worker, picks up Ms. Worley and 10 other employees in his big white van. They arrive at the plant around 2:15, and he drops them back home after 1 a.m.

Several of the newly hired workers in the van — they pay $40 a week for the ride — said they were thinking of quitting, unhappy about having to commute so far and work so hard. At the plant, where the pay averages around $12 an hour, many spend hour after hour slitting hogs’ throats, hacking at shoulders and carving ribs and loins. At the end of their shifts, many workers complain that their muscles are sore and their minds are numb.

Employee turnover has long been a problem at Smithfield and other meat-processing plants, but the problem has grown worse recently. Dennis Pittman, a Smithfield spokesman, said 60 percent of the new workers quit within 90 days of being hired, compared with 25 percent to 30 percent two years ago when many new employees were illegal immigrants.

“I’ve heard officials from a couple of other meat processors say they’ve never seen such high turnover with new workers,” Mr. Pittman said.

Several Southern companies have raised wages to attract new workers after immigration raids. “But that’s not the first thing that employers are going to do,” said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies. “They’re going to try to cast their net wider before they do something that will raise costs.”

Smithfield, for example, has run a flood of television advertisements boasting that the company is a good, safe place to work. The advertisements aim to persuade Carolinians to apply for jobs and to counter arguments made by a union trying to organize the plant that Smithfield jobs are high stress and unsafe, with stingy benefits.

One of the toughest challenges, Mr. Pittman said, has been training new employees to handle the highest-skilled jobs at a plant that processes 30,000 hogs a day.

“The big problem is we lost a lot of people who were there a long time,” Mr. Pittman said. “We have been facing difficulties in hiring for a number of years, because as the economy got better, the labor market became much tighter.”

When the plant opened in 1992, the area’s jobless rate was high because tobacco was in retreat and textile mills were closing. Early on, most employees were black. That changed with an influx of Hispanic immigrants, most of them Mexicans, in the mid-1990s.

Chris Kromm, executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies, said the Hispanics should not be viewed as shoving blacks aside, because the plant had such high turnover.

“It’s not as if these jobs were stable sources of employment for creating a black middle class,” Mr. Kromm said.

The way Hector David, a longtime worker from Mexico who quit in February, sees it, Smithfield had been eager to hire Hispanics because they worked so hard. “The Americans just don’t work as well,” Mr. David said. “In Mexico, we work from the age of 5 in the corn fields. We’re used to working hard.”

The New York Times wrote about the sometimes uneasy relations between blacks and Hispanics at the Smithfield plant as part of a 2000 series that examined race relations in the United States.

Mr. Pittman said Smithfield did its best to ensure that immigrant employees had legitimate documentation. But many workers said Smithfield did not look too hard at the paperwork.

Last November, the company notified 640 employees that their identity information did not match government records. In January, federal agents arrested 21 workers at the plant, and in August, helped by information the company provided, agents arrested 28 more, many at home.

Mr. Pittman said cooperating with immigration officials “serves our goal of 100 percent compliance 100 percent of the time.” But for many families, the cooperation has come at a price.

Tears came to Maritza Cruz’s eyes as she described the scene when immigration agents banged on her trailer door at 3 a.m. and arrested her husband, Alejandro, who faces deportation. “Everyone is very scared, especially after they arrested people at their homes,” said Mrs. Cruz, who has four children and is on maternity leave from the plant.

The company and its employees are not the only ones affected by the crackdown.

Since the enforcement actions began, said Jazmin Gastelum, owner of a local Christian bookstore, La Tierra Prometida, business from Hispanic customers has plunged 40 percent at her store and two nearby Hispanic groceries. “A lot of people are going back to Mexico,” Ms. Gastelum said. “And a lot who haven’t moved are scared to go outside.”

As for the workers who remain at the plant, many wonder why so many new employees come from South Carolina. Gene Bruskin, the director of the unionization campaign, sees a simple explanation.

“Thousands and thousands of workers from North Carolina have come through the plant, and they left, saying, ‘No way,’ because they were injured or didn’t want to work in such an oppressive atmosphere,” Mr. Bruskin said. “This plant burned up a large number of people, and the word got around about their bad experiences.”

Mr. Pittman said Smithfield had hired many workers from South Carolina because the counties close to the plant had a low unemployment rate.

The immigration arrests have also created problems for the union, the [United Food and Commercial Workers Union](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_food_and_commercial_workers_union/index.html?inline=nyt-org), which has spent 15 years seeking to organize the plant.

“A lot of the people who left or were detained were strong union supporters,” said Gabriel Lopez Rivera, a Smithfield worker.

Mr. Bruskin, the union official, added, “It’s extremely difficult for workers to stand up for their rights when they’re threatened with arrest or deportation.”

The Tar Heel workers voted against unionizing in 1994 and 1997, but the [National Labor Relations Board](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/n/national_labor_relations_board/index.html?inline=nyt-org) ruled that Smithfield had broken the law by intimidating and firing union supporters.

The company has called for a new election, but the union instead wants Smithfield to accept unionization through a majority sign-up, a process that would give management less opportunity to pressure workers.

In recent months, union organizers have adopted a new role, rushing to the trailers of immigrant workers facing arrest to ensure that someone can care for their children.

Union officials recently organized educational forums at a Roman Catholic church in Red Springs, where immigrant workers were advised, among other things, to sign power of attorney forms designating someone to take care of their children, finances and homes if they were arrested.

“I think all this turmoil is helping unionization,” said the Rev. Carlos Arce, the priest there, “because people feel alone and unprotected, and they see that the union, along with the Catholic Church, is the only organization that is trying to help them.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/12/us/12smithfield.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print>