

# *What's "Justice and Dignity" Got to Do with It?: Migrant Vulnerability, Corporate Complicity, and the State*

Angela C. Stuesse

In 2001, Tyson Foods, one of the world's leading chicken processors, was indicted on charges that it recruited undocumented migrants to work in its plants across the rural United States. In the following years, Tyson engaged in an operation to purge the largest chicken plant in the country of hundreds of unionized immigrant workers, relying heavily on the Social Security Administration's controversial "No-Match" program to shape its termination practices. In response, a local campaign called for "Justice and Dignity" in the form of an improved corporate policy that would simultaneously serve the interests of the company, its workers, and their communities. This article chronicles that localized struggle and its national aftermath, illuminating the far-reaching effects federal "employer sanctions" have had on transnational corporations and their policymakers, on workers of different backgrounds, and on strategies used to advocate for worker rights. Politically engaged ethnography reveals how differentially positioned actors navigate and experience the neoliberal immigration and employment laws of the United States while deepening our understanding of the workings of the poultry industry, the recruitment of immigrant workers, and the anthropology of organized labor.

**Key words:** Employer sanctions, immigration, labor control, neoliberalism, poultry industry

## Introduction

*Sustainability is an important part of the culture at Tyson Foods, and we take very seriously the company's responsibilities to customers, shareholders, Team Members, and the communities where we live and work. (Tyson Foods 2006:81)*

*Dear Tyson Foods... I believe that all persons should be treated with dignity, that all human beings are equal in the sight of God, and that*

*employers have a moral duty to conform to these principles. ...I stand with the thousands of Tyson workers who demand their dignity and respect.—¡Justicia y Dignidad! / Justice and Dignity! Worker Postcard Campaign. (Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center 2005)*

*The effect of employer sanctions was to put many, many workers underground, expanding the underground economy, creating national insecurity, undermining everyone's civil liberties, dividing workers from one another, and driving conditions down for all. (Break the Chains Alliance 2005)*

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In 2001, Tyson Foods, one of the world's leading poultry processors, was indicted on 36 charges that it recruited undocumented immigrants to work in its chicken plants across the rural United States South and Midwest (Gallagher and Librach 2001; Grimsley 2001; n.a. 2001). While prosecuting attorneys argued that the company cultivated a corporate culture that encouraged management to hire undocumented workers to lower costs and maximize profit, Tyson alleged that company policymakers had no knowledge of the smuggling scheme executed by its middle and lower-level managers (Bixler 2001; Gettleman 2001; Kershaw 2001). After a Mexican store owner in Tennessee admitted he had worked

in concert with Tyson to get papers for its workers, and following the resignation of several individuals in management, a federal jury deliberated for less than a day and acquitted Tyson on all charges (Bell 2004; Lazenby 2004).

The year following the court's decision, I began research on the impacts of new Latin American migration into the poultry processing plants of Mississippi. For six years while studying the contours of globalization and the political economies of race and immigration there, I collaborated with poultry workers, civil and immigrant rights advocates, attorneys, union leaders, and concerned community members in the creation of the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this work, I witnessed Tyson Foods engage in a multi-year operation to purge the largest chicken plant in the country of hundreds of unionized immigrant workers. I also participated in a counter-campaign, organized by the affected workers, their union, and the Workers' Center, in an attempt to stop the unjust firings. The campaign called for "Justice and Dignity" in the form of an improved corporate policy that would simultaneously serve the interests of the company, its workers, and their communities. Ultimately, the campaign failed to achieve its goals. Many workers lost their jobs, Tyson replaced them with apparent ease, and the union was forced to rebuild. Herein lies the story of that struggle and my assessment of its theoretical and policy implications.

Tyson's indictment and acquittal, as well as its corporate policy and local actions in the years that followed, raise critical questions about United States immigration law, employer hiring (and firing) practices, and the exploitation of low-wage workers in the United States at the turn of the 21st century. This ethnography illuminates the ways in which differentially positioned transnational actors—immigrant workers, their advocates, and corporate policymakers—navigate and experience current United States immigration and employment laws. An in-depth exploration of Tyson's practices in one Mississippi plant allows us to analyze the effects of both state and employer policy on workers' lives and on unions' and advocates' attempts to better working conditions.

While it makes a strident critique of the United States' morally corrupt labor and immigration policies, this case also contributes to the scholarly literature on poultry processing, the recruitment of immigrant workers, and the anthropology of organized labor. First, research on poultry production and meatpacking has demonstrated these industries' shrewd understandings of the neoliberal present, analyzing how their location in rural America, employment of marginalized workers, and strategies to keep labor divided have enhanced production and labor control capacities (Boyd 2001; Boyd and Watts 1997; Chatterley, et al. 2000; Fink 2003; Grabowski 2003; Griffith 1993; Kandell 2006; Schlosser 2001; Striffler 2002; Striffler 2005; Stuesse 2008; Stull, et al. 1995; Stull, et al. 2003). Second, there is a growing body of work on the recent entrance of Latin American immigrants into nontraditional receiving communities, particularly the South (Massey 2008; Mohl 2003; Murphy, et al. 2001; Odem and Lacy 2009; Peacock, et al. 2005; Smith 2001; Smith and Furuseth 2006;

Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2006). Much of this work discusses the challenges immigrants face as they adjust to life in their new communities. Some focus on employer recruitment of low-wage immigrant workers, at times documenting a preference for perceived "hard working" undocumented laborers often compared with locals (Gordon and Lenhardt 2007; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000; Johnson-Webb 2002; Marrow 2008; Weise 2009). Finally, in a review of research on union organizing in the United States, Durrenberger (2007) outlines scholarship to date on policies affecting worker power, conditions under which union organizing has been both successful and ineffective, and the effects of unions' varied organizational structures. This article contributes to his call for further research on the methods and effects of employers' wielding of difference to defeat organizing efforts. As I will demonstrate, this case of Tyson, its workers, and their supporters deepens our understanding of the workings of the poultry industry, immigrant employment practices, and challenges to organizing in the neoliberal present.

## **Poultry Processing and Immigrant Recruitment**

The poultry industry is a critical site for studying the intersections of neoliberal policy, corporate practice, worker power, and migrant vulnerability because, unlike many industries that have left the United States in search of higher profits and more relaxed state policies, poultry has flourished. The consolidation of the industry can be traced from the 1930s, when women cultivated eggs and chickens for their families' consumption and to supplement their incomes, to one of the most highly specialized and integrated agricultural sectors, slaughtering more than 100 million birds each week (Boyd and Watts 1997; Griffith 1993; Jones 2006; Striffler 2005; Stull, et al. 1995; Stull, et al. 2003). This transformation was precipitated by the vertical integration of the industry in the 1950s and 1960s, but under neoliberal globalization it has accelerated at alarming rates.<sup>2</sup> Family businesses have been bought out by multinational corporations, and today a few giant producers—with Tyson leading the way—now oversee every step of the production process. By the early 1990s, a handful of corporations accounted for over two-thirds of the poultry production in the United States (Griffith 1993:83).

Accompanying this shift, the industry began experimenting with labor recruitment strategies that would bring new workers to rural America to process chickens. Over time these efforts caught on, and by 2000 over half of the country's poultry workers were immigrants, the vast majority of them foreign-born "Hispanics" (Cook 1999; Kandell 2006).<sup>3</sup> The recruitment of immigrants has been critical to the industry's success in the neoliberal era, enabling companies to increase disassembly line speed, expand production to two and even three shifts, and grow value-added "further processing" departments while weakening workers' bargaining power, lowering consumer prices, and

maximizing profit. (Boyd 2001; Griffith 1993; Katz 1996; Schlosser 2001; Striffler 2005; Stull, et al. 1995; Stull, et al. 2003; Thames, et al. 2008)

Mississippi, one of the world's leading producers of chicken, is the most recent state to feel the effects of the industry's immigrant recruitment. In the mid-1990s, local processing plants began to bus workers from Miami and South Texas, and within a few years their population swelled into the thousands (Grabowski 2003; Helton 2003; Stuesse 2008). Today the immigrant population in Mississippi's poultry region is remarkably diverse, with representation from over a dozen Latin American countries. In the plants, these newcomers work alongside a United States-born workforce that is almost exclusively African American. Unlike other areas of the United States, where processing lines are staffed almost exclusively by new immigrants, Mississippi's larger black population and its legacy of racism and white supremacy that has limited the upward mobility of people of color means that the industry continues to be a significant source of employment for local African American residents.<sup>4</sup>

### **“Illegal” Workers: IRCA and Employer Sanctions**

While hegemony has normalized the current illegality of hiring undocumented laborers, only 20 years ago workers were rarely asked to show their “papers.” In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). In addition to enacting this country's last sweeping amnesty program, which legalized approximately three million undocumented individuals, IRCA criminalized the act of hiring people without employment authorization and implemented a system of “employer sanctions” that would, through inspections and fines, punish employers who knowingly hired these workers. Employers would be required to check documents to verify the identity and work authorization of all new hires, record this information on an “I-9” form, and archive the completed form in their records. While immigrant and workers' rights advocates were pleased with the path to legalization provided by IRCA, they were concerned that the power to verify workers' documents at whim would give employers a mechanism for discriminating against workers who were injured, organizing, or otherwise “undesirable.” To mitigate opportunities for abuse, advocates lobbied Congress for strict limitations to employers' document verification powers. In compromise, the final law included numerous anti-discrimination provisions. First, it recognizes that employers are not trained immigration officials and that their responsibility is to verify only that each document provided by the new hire “reasonably appears on its face to be genuine.” (See chapter 8 of the United States Code, section 1324a(b)(1)(A).) If it looks legitimate, the employer must accept it. Second, except for in a few limited circumstances, employers are authorized to verify such documents only within the first three days of hire. Finally, the I-9 includes a long list of acceptable documents that can be used to verify a new employee's identity and au-

thorization to work. Workers are permitted to choose which of the accepted documents they will present, and employers are legally barred from demanding any particular document on the list. (Break the Chains Alliance 2005; Equal Justice Center 2003; National Employment Law Project 2005)

### **The Social Security No-Match Letter: Round One**

In 2004, Tyson Foods operated five chicken plants in Mississippi. Some of these were acquired the previous year when Tyson bought out a locally-owned processor. At the time of the transfer, Tyson became the “successor employer” of the existing—and largely Latino immigrant—workforce at these plants. While federal law does not require a successor employer to reverify its workers' identity and work authorization documents, Tyson began to do just that. In the spring of 2004, Tyson began reverifying select employees' documents at one newly-acquired facility. Those whose names appeared on a Social Security Administration (SSA) “No-Match” list or letter were told they had three days to go to the Social Security office, rectify the problem, and present “corrected” documentation or they would be fired. The vast majority of workers on the No-Match list were immigrants, and alarm spread quickly.

The workers' union immediately called a meeting, and over 100 immigrant workers showed up at a soccer field to compare notes. The union's convocatory power was palpable as we strategized in the sweltering Mississippi mid-day heat. Only two years prior, the plant of 2,200 workers had only 270 union members. Today there were nearly 800 members, many of whom were Latino—a huge feat in the “Right to Work” and largely monolingual rural South.<sup>5</sup> The union's popularity among immigrant workers was remarkable and unmatched by other unions in the area. Its success was due in large part to the foresight and persistence of one longstanding African American steward, an inquisitive Mexican worker she mentored, and the union's subsequent investment of resources into hiring a Spanish-speaking representative and conducting Latino steward trainings. Days into the crisis, workers were already assessing their options and beginning to think about alternative job prospects, which were limited. The union vowed to file a grievance should the company terminate any employees based on receipt of the SSA No-Match letter. A union representative later recalled, “I went to Tyson and I told ‘em. I said, ‘This is what we're gonna do. ... You can tell as many people as you want to go [to SSA] to get this paperwork [corrected]. I don't care. But the first person you fire, I'm filing a grievance and I'm carrying it to arbitration.”

The Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center sent a community sign-on letter, endorsed by 11 local and state-level organizations supporting poultry workers, to the local plant's head of Human Resources. The letter proposed a meeting between Tyson and the signatories of the letter to “discuss additional ways that we can help you and your workers comply with the obligations and responsibilities surrounding the SSA

No-Match letters while maintaining a stable workforce and economic security in the community” (Mississippi Poultry Workers’ Center 2004:3). To our surprise, within days, top executives from Tyson’s headquarters in Arkansas arrived via private jet to meet with the union, concerned community groups, and worker advocates.

At the meeting, the Workers’ Center provided Tyson with a binder of nuanced legal information about the No-Match letter, the I-9 document verification process, and the limits to employer sanctions in hopes of convincing the executives that it would be in the company’s, the workers’, and the community’s best interest to reconsider the proposed termination policy. Among this information was an overview of the mission of the SSA—to “advance the economic security of the nation’s people,”—in no way affiliated with federal immigration enforcement (U.S. Social Security Administration 2008). It also included an explanation of the No-Match system, clarifying that it exists to “ensure that employers and employees have an opportunity to correct the information in order for workers to receive proper credit for their earnings,” (Mehta, et al. 2003:48). In fact, SSA began sending the letters to employers simply because its records were often out of date and there was a better chance of notifying an affected worker of the problem through her/his workplace than via mail to an outdated home address. Furthermore, participants at the meeting highlighted the following No-Match letter passage:

You should not use this letter to take any adverse action against an employee just because his or her social security number appears on the list, such as laying-off, suspending, firing, or discriminating against that individual. Doing so could, in fact, violate state or federal laws and subject you to legal consequences. (Mississippi Poultry Workers’ Center 2004:1)

In response, Tyson’s representatives agreed to suspend firings based on the No-Match letter pending their review of the materials. The workers, their union, and community organizations all celebrated and publicized this success as an illustration of what can be achieved through community-labor partnerships.

### **Green Card Expiration: Round Two**

The celebration was short lived. Two months later, workers again notified allies that documents were being reverified. Tyson was true to its word, however; the new strategy had nothing to do with the No-Match letter. Instead, it had found another avenue for firing immigrant workers. This time, local management was reverifying the documents of workers whose green cards had expired. Workers felt humiliated. They reported that Human Resources was calling people off the production line in the middle of their shifts, amid their United States-born coworkers’ snickering the word “illegal” and hollering “*Adios, amigo!*” Once in the office, management would confiscate their badges and send them home. Workers were given three days to present a green card with a new expiration date.

Affected workers formed a committee and concluded, based on legal research, that an expiration date on a green card reflects only that the card must be renewed, not that the bearer’s work authorization has expired (National Employment Law Project 2002). Tyson’s unnecessary and possibly unauthorized reverification of workers’ documents was a serious concern for workers, but even more palpable was a collective feeling of disgust at the ways in which local management was conducting the layoffs. The Workers’ Center, in collaboration with the worker committee, the union, and local churches, conducted “know your rights” workshops on the topic of document reverification and immigrant workers’ rights. At workshops and meetings, worker testimonials expressed fear, uncertainty, humiliation, anger, and worthlessness:

The most frustrating thing is that...no one knows how they are choosing who to call into the office. Some of us have green cards with dates way past expiration and we haven’t been called; others have dates that are nearing expiration and they have already been fired.

I go to work every day wondering if today will be my day. ...I just wish they would tell us before or after work instead of pulling us off the line in front of everyone. It’s humiliating.

What they are doing is very ugly. ...They really just consider us machines for working. They say we are Team Members, but they treat us like machines. They should treat us like human beings.

Sometimes I feel like I’m not worth anything to Tyson. I have given them all I have for the last six years, and now I’m left hanging, waiting to see when [the personnel officer] will decide she is done with me.

Stories abounded among workers about so-and-so who presented false documents with an updated expiration date within the three day limit and was allowed to return to work and so-and-so who spent \$900 to get a newer-looking “*laser*” green card but was inexplicably sent away. Then there was the couple who bought updated papers from the same black market vendor, and she was permitted to continue employment while he was denied.

In addition to insisting that the process of green card reverification be stopped immediately, the worker committee also demanded transparency; just, equal, and humane treatment for all workers; and 30-day written notification of all reverifications. The Workers’ Center contacted Tyson with another sign-on letter detailing these concerns, and eight Tyson executives returned on their corporate jet for a second meeting with 20 union and community leaders in late 2004.

All were cordial as they sat around a conference room table. Tyson’s people explained that they had reviewed the SSA No-Match information they had received at our spring meeting and found it “very helpful,” yet no revised policy was forthcoming. Religious leaders expressed concern for the “ripple affect” the firings would have in the community.



Union representatives stressed that there were less punitive policies Tyson could lawfully adopt. Civil and immigrant rights advocates expressed concern for the discriminatory potential for Tyson's policy to shake out along racial and ethnic lines. Tyson's representatives recognized that this was a "very, very serious issue" for the company. The discussion went in circles, with Tyson insisting that it was being a good corporate citizen by carefully reverifying Team Members' work authorization and identities, and with community members and worker advocates explaining that Tyson's policy was overly castigatory because it went above and beyond the requirements of the law. The encounter ended with Tyson's executives agreeing to again review the information, take into account the discussion, and finalize company protocol.

In a rather uncomfortable irony, no one spoke of the enormous white elephant in the room—the thousands of undocumented workers who, at that very moment, were slaughtering the chicken that Tyson feeds the world each day. I argue that all involved in the discussions were silenced by IRCA's misguided employer sanctions policy, which has obliged undocumented workers to purchase false "papers" in order to be hired, incentivized companies to be "unaware" of their employees' undocumented status to avoid legal liability, and compelled immigrant and workers' rights defenders to pressure companies to adopt more humane policies defined by the boundaries of current laws. The parties in the conference room that day, and others like us, were not alone. The federal government, too, maintains an ever-escalating charade of "border security" while ensuring that lawmakers' campaign contributors—the leaders of businesses like Tyson—have an unlimited supply of malleable and expendable laborers to continue growing corporate profit (Andreas 1998; Chavez 1997; Cornelius 2001; Dunn 1996). Indeed, the ironies run deep.

### **Justice and Dignity!: Round Three**

Following the meeting, the mass firings in Tyson's Mississippi plants again halted. By the end of the year, Tyson had sent letters to the SSA, the Department of Homeland Security, and the United States Attorney General, among others. This correspondence detailed Tyson's proposed termination of workers receiving No-Match letters, explained that "a number of third party organizations have asked us to reconsider this policy," and requested an official opinion on their proposal (Tyson Foods 2004:1). Tyson waited nearly nine months for a response, finally receiving a reply from the Commissioner of the SSA herself. She wrote, "You should not take adverse action against an employee just because his or her SSN appears on the list of unmatched SSNs," (U.S. Social Security Administration 2005:1). Nevertheless, in August 2005 the company instituted a slightly revised but equally punitive policy of firing workers appearing on the No-Match list. This time workers were given a full 30 days to correct their problems with the local SSA office before being terminated, and Tyson would implement its policy gradually over a few months (Tyson Foods 2005).

Immigrant workers' panic reached new heights as each week more were called to the office and given their notice. The union renewed its pledge to file a grievance should any worker lose a job on account of the No-Match letter, arguing that such action constituted unjust firing, in violation of the union contract. The Workers' Center again began holding worker meetings to educate workers on their rights and support them during crisis. Each meeting started with a somber round of introductions:

Good morning. My name is Apolino. I'm waiting to see when they're going to fire me, since I already received the letter. It's been about a month now. My wife already lost her job.

I'm Rigo. They also gave me the letter. I don't know if they're going to fire me or not. I just don't know.

Hi. My name is Pancho. Like the others, I also received the letter. ...But like everyone else, I can't go [to SSA] because how would it help? So I'm here to see if together we can come up with a solution. I think it's great that we're all here.

My name is Ana. I was fired along with that guy over there. I don't know if there were others. ...I came today to see how this can be fixed.

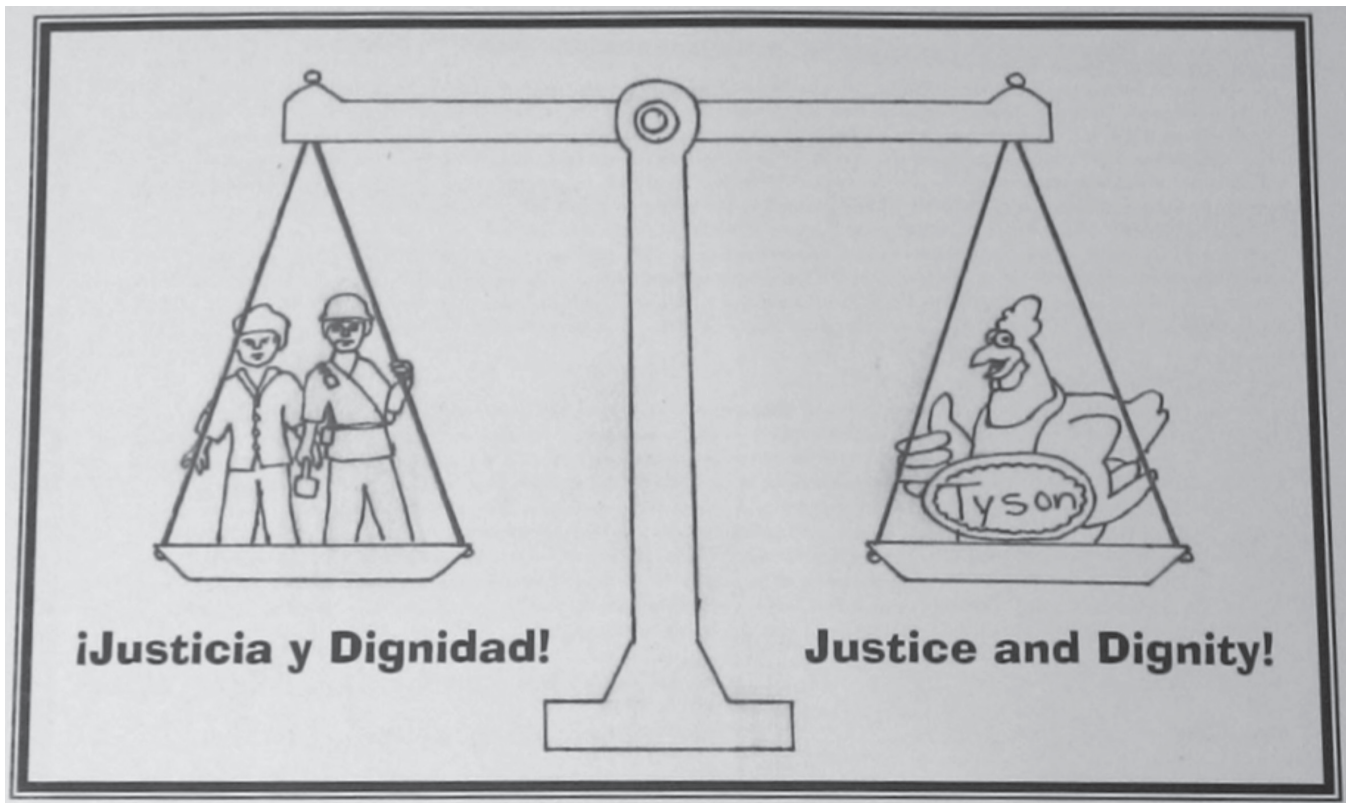
My name is Odilio. ...I haven't received the letter yet. They haven't said anything to me. I don't know.

My name is Manuel. I haven't received the letter, but everyone else has, so I'm just waiting to see when they are going to call me to the office. ...We'll see what happens.

What seemed to most upset workers was their realization that Tyson was planning to eliminate them gradually. Tyson was actively recruiting U.S.-born workers, and in their 30-day grace period, immigrants with years of experience were personally training their replacements. "They are getting rid of us little by little, and [it] makes me so angry! It's like they are not recognizing our value to the company," one meeting participant protested. "They know it's not in their best interest to lose us," another added, "but they're doing it anyway! But they're doing it in the way that will hurt Tyson the least."

There was talk of going on strike in order to show Tyson the impact of its actions. Some people wanted to make it "hurt" and force the company to face running the plant without its immigrant workforce. This plan was abandoned once they learned that a work stoppage was a violation of the collective bargaining agreement and would give Tyson grounds for firing them all. In lieu of a strike, the workers decided to carry out a postcard campaign to exert pressure on Tyson. They hoped that public outcry, coupled with the company's concern for its image and desire to stay out of the media spotlight on issues related to its immigrant employees, would encourage executives to reconsider. Workers designed a postcard to be signed by workers and community members and forwarded to Tyson's headquarters. They chose the theme "*¡Justicia y Dignidad!* / Justice and Dignity!" to appeal to

Figure 1. “¡Justicia y Dignidad! / Justice and Dignity!” Worker Postcard Campaign



their employer’s moral groundings, and crafted a logo and a statement for their supporters to sign. “The message that this sends,” the group agreed, “is that we are all equally valued, the workers and the company too.”

The Workers’ Center produced 1,000 postcards, and affected workers and supporters began collecting signatures door to door, at churches, and even in the parking lot at the local Wal-Mart. At meetings, they compared stacks of completed postcards and marveled at their collective progress.

But by late September, immigrant workers were losing their jobs en masse. As before, the firings were not uniform, and workers complained of the arbitrary nature and utter lack of respect they felt. Every week’s meeting included a report on the latest firings and a request for an update from the union regarding the grievance. Each was smaller than that of the previous week, as workers found jobs elsewhere or left Mississippi for good. Nevertheless, they would go on to collect over 800 signed postcards before mailing them to Tyson’s headquarters in November 2005.

This time Tyson did not respond. By the end of the year, over 200 workers had been fired, the vast majority union members. Uncounted others quit their jobs out of fear and in anticipation of what was to come.

### Understanding Tyson’s Actions, Awaiting Resolution

Throughout this crisis, workers, union leaders, and advocates struggled to understand and explain Tyson’s actions. Some speculated that the closing of a unionized plant nearby, and Tyson’s obligation to find displaced workers positions at its remaining facilities, might be driving the new policy, but this was never confirmed. Others questioned if Tyson’s actions might be related to the fact that the plant had only recently come under Tyson management, but workers at another newly-acquired Tyson plant did not face similar attacks, weakening this hypothesis. Some union supporters were convinced that the company felt threatened by the union’s growing Latino membership. Still others believed that the actions formed part of Tyson’s ongoing response to its indictment in federal court. While Tyson’s representatives framed its policy as a straightforward effort to be a socially responsible company, looking closely at this case suggests that a series of broad pressures acted as incentives driving Tyson’s termination of its immigrant workers in one Mississippi plant.

First, it is quite possible that, as some workers believed, Tyson’s policy was fuelled, at least in part, by its desire to weaken the workers’ collective power. One union representative

told me, “I always will believe that when the membership started building in the Latino community, they targeted that group.” Others agreed: “See, we got 800 members now, and we’re steady rising up, and they don’t like that,” asserted one steward. “It won’t affect [us today, because we] got the contract now,” said another, “but...when negotiation time come again, if you don’t have the membership, you can’t ask for much.” I asked how the union would survive if its members were continually forced out. “In the long run,” a worker leader worried, “it won’t. See, that’s what these big companies are doing. They come at every angle to destroy the unions.”

Such suspicions are indeed well founded. Not only do veterans of the labor movement have a depth of experiential knowledge substantiating this fact, but scholars of organized labor have documented an array of corporate anti-union tactics over the years (Brodkin 1988; Brodtkin and Strathmann 2004; Bronfenbrenner 1994; Bronfenbrenner, et al. 1998; Weinbaum 2001). Tyson has been unabashedly fighting unionization for decades, as evidenced by its founder’s pleas to workers at a newly-acquired North Carolina plant in 1989: “Why should you and I, as individuals, have to have somebody work between us? It’s like hiring a lawyer, and both of us paying him, when we could have thrown him out the window. In the last few years, of the companies that came with us, five plants that were union voted them out, where they belong” (Striffler 2005:72). Whether union busting was the intent of Tyson’s reverification campaign in Mississippi is up for discussion, but it was, without a doubt, a somber outcome of the corporation’s actions.

Second, other workers and advocates believed that Tyson’s insistence on reverification was part of an ongoing response to its 2001 undocumented recruitment scandal. They argued that, as a damage control strategy, the company was positioning itself as a thoughtful and conscientious employer carefully following federal immigration law to—and even beyond—the letter. In an interview in early 2006, a union representative with this perspective reflected on the events unfolding:

The bottom line is, and I’ll believe it ‘til the day I die, they don’t wanna fire these people. ... But they’re so afraid of what happened to ‘em in [2001]. They’re afraid that the government’s gonna come in and just kill ‘em ‘cause they told ‘em they would. So they’re going *beyond* now. They may lose this arbitration case, ... but then they can go to the federal government and say that “the arbitrator *made* us put these people back to work; it wasn’t our decision.” So they’re protected. It’d be cheaper for them to do that than it would to say, “Okay, we’re not gonna fire ‘em,” and take the federal government on.

Tyson has been intensively building its brand since the late 1970s, spending millions on marketing and advertising each year (Striffler 2005:26). Its indictment in federal court was widely covered in the press and threatened to undo much of this work. At the same time, its acquittal suggested that as long as upper-level executives maintain a clean image,

buttressed by corporate policies, they can distance themselves from actions taken at a local level and, thus, insulate the company from legal and ethical liabilities associated with on-the-ground hiring of undocumented workers. Thus, the court’s decision may have incentivized companies to adopt policies at the national level largely for public relations purposes, regardless of local realities. Indeed, in the years following the scandal, Tyson has crafted an image of corporate social responsibility, evidenced by initiatives such as its “Statement of Core Values,” “Tyson Cares” program, and “Team Member Bill of Rights.” By the logic above, the uneven application of these at its processing facilities across the country becomes irrelevant.

Finally, Tyson may have conducted mass firings of Latino immigrant workers in this location because these were not its only source of low-cost, disposable labor. African American workers entered Mississippi’s chicken plants following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, as industries yielded to black residents’ demands for equal opportunity. Unlike the white women who worked in the plants before them, however, black workers’ possibilities for upward job mobility were more limited when the industry began recruiting immigrants and unemployment rates in rural Mississippi, particularly among rural black youth, remain high.<sup>6</sup> So when Tyson began to purge this plant of immigrant workers, a large pool of African American applicants quickly filled their places, ensuring profits would not suffer. Sophisticated in its understanding of the racialized labor markets in which it operates, Tyson must have considered this reality when implementing its reverification policies.

As the union awaited its “day in court,” it struggled to rebuild. Union members with a longer history at Tyson were frustrated by the fact that, as they perceived it, the new workers were young, disinterested, and “ain’t gonna be there long anyway.” When I asked one steward if this would be a problem for Tyson, he shrugged, “No. They’ll just replace ‘em. That’s what they want.” Indeed, high rates of attrition do more damage to organizing efforts than to company profits, and the industry has adapted production processes to accommodate extreme worker turnover (Griffith 1993; Striffler 2005; Stull, et al. 2003).

As 2006 wore on, the union fought for a collective action arbitration that would consider every affected worker’s grievance as part of the same policy and be decided in one judgment. Meanwhile, Tyson argued for the individual arbitration of each worker’s case, which would be financially unfeasible for the union. In addition to making the arbitration harder for workers to win, these technical maneuverings delayed resolution of the issue and weakened support for the union. As months passed, workers lost faith in their representatives, who had advised them nearly a year earlier that the process could take up to three months. Despite the union’s urging that they “stay and fight,” most couldn’t afford to wait for arbitration in hopes of reinstatement. When a decision finally arrived—ultimately based on the review of just one worker’s grievance—it came down in favor of Tyson.



By summer 2007, I learned there were only about 20 immigrants remaining in the plant. Undocumented individuals who were fortunate enough to get rehired by Tyson were forced even deeper into the shadows. No longer able to work using a false or made-up social security number, some took greater risks, spending upwards of \$1,000 to obtain the identity and social security number of a United States citizen just to make a living. The vast majority of former Tyson workers and union members, however, decided that the risk and cost involved in identity purchase were greater than they were willing to take. This is but the most recent consequence of Tyson's (and other companies') shift in labor practices in the years following its indictment, spurred by the broken immigration and labor laws of the United States.

Were the story to end here, one might conclude that this ethnography points to a sea change in United States employers' preference for "hard working," docile undocumented immigrants, standing in dramatic contrast to much of the established literature on immigrant recruitment. After all, Tyson's corporate policy regarding the SSA No-Match letter in the mid-2000s resulted in its purging one Mississippi plant of its immigrant workforce almost in its entirety, and replacing it with local African American workers. I do not believe, however, that this case represents a dramatic shift in employer preference or labor relations, nor is it indicative of a broader move away from the employment of immigrant workers. Rather, like most employers across time and place, Tyson was responding to a set of social, economic, and political pressures that shaped its employment decisions. Though we cannot be sure which of these were most salient in the minds of corporate policymakers and those carrying it out locally, it appears that some combination of a growing union membership, a preoccupation with the ramifications of current laws governing the employment of immigrant workers, heightened concern for corporate image, the abundant availability of disenfranchised African American workers, and perhaps other business concerns at the national, regional, or local levels all created conditions that led to events that unfolded in Mississippi.

### **Aftermath: The No-Match Debate Goes National**

The arbitration decision in this case set a precedent that went against the SSA's stated procedures, and others followed suit. Advocacy groups across the country were inundated with reports of No-Match-induced firings, and they worked to produce materials to educate employers, advocates, and workers alike (Low-Wage Immigrant Worker Coalition 2009; National Employment Law Project 2009; National Immigration Law Center 2008b). Then, by summer 2007, the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) unveiled new rules *requiring* employers to fire workers whose names appeared on the SSA's No-Match list.

In the days following the announcement, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union issued

a scathing press release, accusing the Bush Administration of promoting immigration reform policy "that essentially mandates federal racial discrimination" (United Food and Commercial Workers 2007). Before the new rules could go into effect, DHS faced a lawsuit charging that its rules violated workers' rights, imposed "burdensome obligations" on employers, and would illegally threaten the jobs of United States citizens and work authorized individuals because the SSA's database is marred by human error (AFL-CIO v. Chertoff 2007). The complaint's content was supported by a report by the SSA itself, citing that "of the 17.8 million discrepancies in the SSA database that could result in a no-match letter, 12.7 million (or over 70%) belong to native-born United States Citizens," (MPOWER 2007:1).

Two days later, a federal judge issued an order temporarily blocking DHS from implementing the new regulations. In the judge's opinion, the plaintiffs "raised serious questions as to whether the new [rule is]...beyond the statutory authority of the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration" (National Immigration Law Center 2007).

In response to both the legal challenge and mounting pressure from other community and independent groups, by the close of 2007 the Department of Homeland Security had abandoned the proposed rule. Despite a 2008 "revised" rule (criticized by opponents for making no substantive changes), in late 2009 DHS rescinded the regulation altogether, reflecting the change in presidential administrations (National Immigration Law Center 2008a; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2009). DHS announced that upon abandoning the No-Match rule, its new policy would focus on "increased compliance through improved verification," (n.a. 2009).

At the time of this article's publication, it is unclear whether the SSA will continue to issue No-Match letters, but the push to use them as the basis for a wrong-headed national immigration enforcement policy appears to be behind us. Today Immigration and Customs Enforcement is heavily promoting its new internet-based employment eligibility system "E-Verify." Prominently placed billboards tout E-Verify's speed and simplicity, stating, "Employment Verification. Done," and DHS has developed a special logo—"I E-Verify"—that companies participating in the program can use on their products and advertising (Lewis 2009). Despite this recent onslaught of promotions and the system's apparent ease of use, there remains a serious flaw with E-Verify: Its implementation relies on the database of the Social Security Administration, the same one responsible for producing the No-Match letters.

### **Conclusion**

The case of Tyson Foods' reverifications illustrates one of the key problems in United States immigration and employment policy in the neoliberal era. Employer sanctions, which criminalized the hiring of an undocumented worker, encourage



underground illicit activity by both workers and employers and give corporations yet another handle through which to wield unequal power over a vulnerable low-wage workforce. My research in Mississippi poultry communities illustrates the far-reaching effects this policy has had on transnational corporations, on workers of different backgrounds, and on strategies used to advocate for worker rights. It demonstrates how corporations maneuver to unjustly regulate the lives and livelihoods of low-wage workforces, as well as how they are finding new ways to shift the risk of undocumented employment onto immigrant workers themselves. It further illustrates how exploitation of the most vulnerable of workers has been legitimated by both the actions and inactions of the neoliberal state. Finally, it highlights the limitations inherent to localized, grassroots struggle and the obstacles to labor organizing in the face of corporate greed and state indifference.

The term “undocumented worker” took on new meaning after the passage of IRCA in the mid-1980s, and corporations, migrants, their advocates, and unions have been incentivized to find new ways to operate within the system. For corporations, this has often meant “unknowingly” accepting applicants’ falsified documents and devising policies meant to convince the state (and the general public) that employers are in compliance with the law. More importantly, it has given them undue power, enabling them to “turn a blind eye” to their own disregard of labor and employment laws when it behooves them, and then suddenly “regain their senses” in times of worker organizing, workplace injury, corporate restructuring, or other moments of convenience.

For migrants seeking employment, the passage of IRCA made it illegal to be hired without “papers,” bolstering ever-growing black markets in the realms of document falsification, identity theft, and under-the-table third party labor contracting. Undocumented migrants in the United States are more vulnerable today than ever before: paying hundreds of dollars for jobs, promotions, and sick leave so that management will continue choosing to look the other way; enduring low wages and poor working conditions due to the uncertainty of being hired elsewhere; and suffering crippling workplace injuries without adequate medical care or compensation because employers refuse to report the injuries to appropriate agencies and their insurance carriers, just to name a few. These vulnerabilities are summarized in one United States-born union steward’s succinct analysis:

Because if [you] was here illegal, [you] would look at this right here and go, “Well, I don’t have no choice but to put up with it.” If you was here illegal, you would just say, “...If I make a fuss they probably gone send me back. So I’m gone be quiet and just take it and let them treat me like this.”

As she acknowledges, under current legislation, undocumented workers’ hands are tied.

Worker advocates, for their part, have been forced to come up with inventive ways to continue supporting the rights of immigrants within the confines of dysfunctional

state policy, including instructing them never to discuss their legal status with anyone, lest they provide their employers with “constructive knowledge” that they or their co-workers are undocumented. This broken system spurs advocates to argue for all the reasons the No-Match letters are unjust *except* the ways in which they unjustly target undocumented workers, and to reason with employers about why it is in their best interest not to take actions that might provide them with constructive knowledge as to their employees’ legal status.

Like other advocates, unions are seeking creative strategies for representing and protecting the rights of new immigrant members. Community-based partnerships and collaborations with workers’ centers are two approaches burgeoning in the neoliberal era (Fine 2006; Fink 2003; Stuesse 2009). Localized struggles for workers’ rights have minimal impact, however, at a time when multinational corporations are rapidly globalizing, whether by moving operations abroad or by effortlessly recruiting an expendable pool of labor from across the world. Industry-wide campaigns and organizing efforts at the national and transnational levels offer glimmers of hope for reforming state and corporate practices toward a more just world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Between 2002 and 2008, I worked with the Mississippi Poultry Worker’s Center (renamed MPOWER in 2007) in the capacities of volunteer, staff member, and independent consultant. For more on the theory and method of politically engaged research, see (Gordon 1991; Gordon and Hale 1997; Hale 2001; Hale 2008; Harrison 1991; Holland, et al. 2009; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; Speed 2008; Stuesse 2008).

<sup>2</sup>I use the term “neoliberal globalization” to refer to the current world order in which technology has given rise to a hypermobility of money and people that provides new opportunities for exploitation and regulation of low-income communities and individuals (Gilmore 2002; Persaud and Lusane 2000).

<sup>3</sup>I use the term “Hispanic” when referencing the United States Census category.

<sup>4</sup>For more on the racial dynamics of new immigration to Mississippi and its effects on worker organizing, see (Helton 2003; Stuesse 2008; Stuesse 2009).

<sup>5</sup>The federal Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, for which Southern business interests lobbied intensively, empowered states to determine if employees at unionized workplaces would be required to join the union. Under “Right to Work” legislation, currently enacted in 22 states in the South and West, each individual worker can choose whether or not to pay union dues and become a member. In such “open shops,” while all workers are protected by the collective bargaining agreement and unions are required to represent all workers equally, often only a fraction of these are dues-paying members. As a result, unions in “Right to Work” states typically have fewer resources, crippling their ability to sustainably organize and represent workers (Leachman 2000).

<sup>6</sup>The 2005 American Community Survey calculated the unemployment rate of Mississippi’s Black residents at 9.8 percent, over 70 percent greater than that of the total population (5.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

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