

## 1 billion chickens sold: Alabama's massive chicken industry, immigrants and Obama's plan

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Javier Garcia cuts chicken.

Five days a week, the undocumented Honduran immigrant hunches over his workspace in an Albertville processing plant and slices about 840 pounds of raw poultry into chicken strips.

He wears goggles to protect his eyes from chicken fat and oil, winter gloves to keep his fingers warm in bone-chilling factory temperatures, rubber boots to keep his feet dry, and a clear blue rain slicker to shield his body from the chicken fluids.

All told, it's a good job. Garcia puts in 40-hour workweeks, makes \$8.50 per hour, and takes in enough cash to provide for his wife and their two young sons.

It's the kind of work he could only dream about when he made \$5 a day as a child farmhand in Honduras - a country he left when he was 24-years-old in search of opportunity.

"You couldn't even buy shoes for your family because you don't have money to eat," said Garcia, 40. "Here you make a little bit and you buy what you need."

His life may soon take another change due to U.S. President Barack Obama's executive order on immigration.

More than 5 million undocumented immigrants - many of them with children-- are set to be protected from deportation for three years under the order, which has polarized Democrat and Republican ranks.

The order is in stark contrast to an Alabama immigration law passed in 2011, later defanged by the federal courts, that its sponsor said "attacks every aspect of an illegal alien's life."

State Rep. Barry Moore, (R-Enterprise) called Obama's order "one more disaster," that will continue to divide limited resources to a greater number of people.

"We need to secure the borders and document the people who are here," said Moore, whose district includes factories from two of the state's largest poultry producers.

But the White House plan is on hold after a federal judge in Texas made a last-minute ruling in favor of 26 states - including Alabama - that sought to block what some opponents have called unconstitutional executive amnesty.

The issue continues to divide federal lawmakers. On Friday, Congress agreed to fund the Department of Homeland Security for one week after Republicans had threatened to defund the agency unless Democrats agreed to help block the White House orders.

Meanwhile, Obama is pressing ahead and has pledged to challenge the federal ruling in

court. "I think the law is on our side, and history is on our side, and we are going to appeal it," Obama told reporters at the White House on Feb. 17.

In Alabama, immigration advocates estimate the order could benefit up to 25,000 undocumented immigrants. Like Garcia, many of them work in the poultry industry, which offers steady employment and jobs that don't require English literacy.

All told, Latinos and Hispanics make up about 32 percent of the 532,000 workers in American poultry plants, a 2012 report from advocacy group the National Council of La Raza states.

Alabama employs 12,680 chicken cutters and trimmers - the largest number those types of workers in America. And there's no reason to believe, given our national appetite for chicken, that they will be leaving anytime soon.

"More immigrants keep on coming every day," Garcia said.

### **Chicken shapes a city**

In Albertville, the largest city on Sand Mountain, chicken is everywhere.

Signs from major industrial chicken producers such as Tyson, Wayne Farm, and Pilgrim's Pride checker the landscape of the city, and it's not uncommon to see semi-trucks hauling stacks of live caged chickens through the city streets.

About 5,889 Hispanics and Latinos lived in Albertville in 2010 - about double the amount that lived there ten years earlier, census figures show. Whereas Latinos and Hispanics make up about 4 percent of the state, they make up about 28 percent of Albertville.

Leslie McClendon, Albertville City Schools English language coordinator, said Hispanics represented about forty one percent of the student body.

Similarly, students come to the school district speaking Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese.

"We want them to be worldly," McClendon said. "We want them to know there's much more than Albertville, Alabama."

Many of district parents work in the chicken plants, a backbone of the community. School officials say Wayne Farms even allows the district to host parent teacher conference inside the plants; on-the-job parents can keep track of their children's activities through a district billboard in the employee break room.

District Supt. Ric Ayer said they lost upwards of 200 children when the state passed its immigration law, HB 56. But they returned, he said, when they found the enforcement of the law wasn't as tough as rumored.

Meanwhile, the district saw a rise in parents with refugee status and other documentations, Ayer said. Head hunters recruited immigrant workers to Albertville and word-of-mouth offers

lured others to Alabama.

Wayne Farms had hired West Virginia-based employment agency East Coast Labor Solutions to bring documented immigrants to Albertville to work in light of HB 56.

Frank Singleton, company spokesman, said the law had a "cooling effect" on the labor pool.

"It was significant enough that we did some employment recruiting in the community, job fairs to fill the positions that were left," Singleton said. "The market adjusted to that."

East Coast Labor Solutions did not return multiple messages for this story.

### **'We need a steady workforce'**

Organized poultry labor has a plan.

On a balmy Thursday afternoon last month, workers with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union stood outside a non-union processing plant in Albertville and handed out flyers to poultry workers leaving work.

"A victory for Gem Stone Poultry employees," stated the flyer, in English and Spanish.

The flyer outlined the basics of Obama's immigration order and listed the requirements to qualify it, including a \$465 application fee. There's also a promise by the union to assist workers in filling out the paperwork for free.

Jose Aguilar, a union representative for the RWDSU South Council, is the point man on the project.

Originally from Honduras, Aguilar has lived in the United States for 15 years. A native of San Pedro Sula, Aguilar is working in the U.S. as a documented refugee after Hurricane Mitch smashed his home in 1998.

He had nowhere to go so he stayed here and began working in the chicken plants. Aguilar speaks English and Spanish and is an invaluable resource for the union.

Undocumented immigrants, he says, are in a tough position in the non-union poultry factories. They need the work, but lack the collective voice to argue for better conditions.

"They know they're illegal and they can't work anywhere else," Aguilar said. "A company says 'you have two choices: do you want to bring your union here, or do you want to keep your job?'"

Randy Hadley, RWDSU South Council organizing director, said the union - which represents more than 10,000 poultry workers nationwide - said that unionized plants agreed to help enroll eligible undocumented workers under Obama's immigration law.

"We have said we have a concern that there might be some undocumented workers that came through the cracks," Hadley said. "If so, once these people come out of the shadows,

we don't want them to be terminated."

Employers have told the union that if undocumented workers "come up from the shadows" to apply for work permits, they will not be fired, Hadley said.

After all, the chicken industry needs labor to keep its plants online. And poultry is big business in Alabama, accounting for \$3.6 billion in revenue each year as Alabama, Arkansas and Georgia combine to produce 40 percent of the nation's chicken.

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A spokesman for the National Chicken Council, a Washington D.C. based lobbying group, was hopeful that Obama's order would lead to greater immigration reform.

"One of the challenges we face is that employer needs in our industry are

permanent in nature, not seasonal or temporary," said Tom Super, the group's vice president of communications. "Our plants operate year round so we need a steady workforce. "

Moreover, the plants need workers that are willing to withstand grueling, monotonous labor.

Luciana Ortiz, of Guerrero, Mexico, has cut chicken inside an Alabama plants for seven years.

"When I come home, I'm very tired," she said, adding that she earns \$7.25 an hour. "My hands hurt, my back hurts, and it continues day after day."

When Alabama passed a set of laws in 2011 targeting undocumented immigrants, tomato farmers tried to replace immigrant laborers with the unemployed. The experiment was a failure. Most quit on the first day.

### **One immigrant's dream**

Juliza Torres has her dream on the rural outskirts of Albertville, past the downtown district and far from the poultry factories that have shaped her life in the United States.

Torres, 43, bought her own home nine years ago for \$35,000. She has since added a kitchen and living room to the home and paid down her mortgage in full.

She lives there with her boyfriend, her two daughters, 17 and 9, and her two grandchildren from a third daughter that died.

Torres made the money to buy the home working as an inspector inside a plant in Guntersville, where she makes \$12.75 an hour.

When she was a 24-year-old single mother of two, Torres fled Honduras. She placed her daughters in the care of a family member and traveled to the border, where she used a coyote to cross into Texas.

At first, good work was hard to find. Hard work, on the other hand, was plentiful. In 85-90 degree weather, she picked blueberries in New York for .50 a box, or about \$30 a day. In Florida, she worked in the fields, picking potatoes and bok choy.

The government granted her refugee status following Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and she brought her two daughters to the states in 2003.

"I couldn't believe it," Torres said. "I never wanted to separate from them again."

Her youngest daughter welcomed Torres' return to her life while the older one was "rebellious and resentful." She thought her mother had abandoned her.

"Now they know I wanted to give them a better life," Torres said.

Government papers allowed her to get a driver's license and seek a higher paying job. Torres got a job in a milk packing factory for \$6 an hour and moved to Albertville to be with the father of her two daughters, who has since been deported.

She went from deboning chickens to inspecting them. The work is demanding, but less than before.

Both her children and grandchildren speak English. Torres says that she follows American customs and enjoys taking her children to the beach in South Alabama in the summertime.

"In this this country, I feel safe," Torres said. "I feel a little bit of both, American and Honduran."

*Note: Names of the immigrants (but not the union employee) were changed to ensure safety and anonymity*