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Last update: December 25, 2006 – 11:19 PM

Meatpacking raids illustrate how much industry has changed

Automation and declining wages opened the door to immigrant workers.

By [Matt McKinney](#), Star Tribune

It doesn't seem that long ago to Jack Cagle that he was working in the state's meatpacking plants with folks who were proud of their jobs, able to raise families on their salaries and were not eager, despite the danger, to give up the work to outsiders.

It was only 30 years ago, but it was another era.

When Cagle heard of workers led out of the plant in handcuffs two weeks ago during an immigration raid, he thought, not *his* company. But it was.

"I don't know when it began to change," Cagle said.

Cagle, 76, a retired meat inspector for Swift & Co., stopped punching the clock at the meat plant long before broad changes remade the nation's meatpacking industry.

Swept away in the intervening years were the relatively good-paying jobs of \$15.67 an hour or more in today's dollars; left behind were jobs that pay 30 percent less, according to federal statistics.

Jobs lost to technology

A wave of automation in the 1970s cast off jobs such as skilled meat cutting. That was followed by the crumbling of powerful unions in the 1980s -- not just in meat plants, but at air traffic control towers, auto plants and steel mills. Minnesota was briefly a stage for the union battle: The National Guard descended on the Austin, Minn., Hormel plant for several tense weeks during the worst of the strikes there in 1985 and 1986.

In the decades since, immigrants -- legal and illegal alike -- have filled the void as U.S. workers flocked to better-paying jobs. The meat industry now makes some of the cheapest food on the planet, with Americans spending less of their total incomes on food than those in almost any other country.

But the Dec. 12 immigration raids that nabbed 1,282 workers at six Swift & Co. plants nationwide -- 230 of the workers at the company's pork processing plant in Worthington, Minn. -- have exposed the strains of the system, prompting a fresh round of finger-pointing. Who's to blame? Meat companies? Illegal

workers? Or consumers?

It's today's meatpacking plant, and it's nothing like what Jack Cagle knew.

The changes began in the late 1960s, with two farmers from northern Iowa who thought up a radical departure from the industry's standard behavior: They would butcher the animal at the meat processing plant, sending their product directly to supermarkets as boxed beef or pork rather than as a hanging carcass.

Shipping costs dropped. High-paying butcher jobs dried up. The meat plants were instead run as assembly lines, with one person making the same cut over and over as the animals moved down the line.

The company, Iowa Beef Processors Inc., later known as IBP, began putting its plants in rural areas away from the unionized workforces of the cities.

"They provided meat to the market much more cheaply," said Brian Buhr, a professor of applied economics at the University of Minnesota. The company was eventually bought out by Tyson, the nation's largest meatpacker, and its practices became the industry standard.

The mechanization of meat cutting and the tactics adopted by IBP led to one of the most contentious episodes in Minnesota's labor history, when in August 1985, 1,529 men and women walked off of their jobs at Geo. A. Hormel's plant in Austin. The strike would end in disarray 15 months later -- without the salary hikes the workers had sought.

The struggle of the small Hormel union, Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, drew national support, because it came to represent the larger battle among unions struggling to maintain middle-class wages. The fight was significant for another reason: Meatpackers across the country had once worked under a "master contract" that set wages at every plant for every company.

"That big strike at Hormel at Austin was one of the last big battles over the master contract," said Steve Meyer, a meat industry analyst based in Adel, Iowa.

The workers in Austin wore jackets bearing "P-9 proud" buttons on the fronts and their motto stitched on the backs: "No retreat. No surrender." Their rallies drew supporters including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and actor David Soul, Hutch of the television series "Starsky & Hutch." Soul said he would teach his seven sons about values by telling them to "look to Austin, Minnesota."

Ultimately, the company hired replacement workers at lower wages and resumed operations. The union never recovered: About 46 percent of meatpackers were unionized in 1980; by the end of the decade that had fallen

to 21 percent, where it stands today.

A wage slide, already underway, worsened. Meatpacking wages once ran 14 to 18 percent above the average manufacturing wage, according to research by James Mintert, an agricultural economist at Kansas State University. Today, it's 25 percent below the average manufacturing wage.

"Our packing jobs used to be very sought-after jobs in the Midwest," said Jill Cashen, a spokeswoman for the United Food & Commercial Workers Union. "People stood in line and hoped to get a job at the plant."

Young people fled rural areas

The loss of coveted jobs led to an exodus of young people from rural communities such as Worthington, said Katherine Fennelly, a professor of public affairs at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. Even worse for the meatpacking companies is that the state's 3.6 percent unemployment rate is considered full employment by most economists, so there are few people looking for work.

A study last year by the Pew Research Center estimated that about 27 percent of all butchers and food processing workers are illegal immigrants.

Overall, immigrants make up 50 percent of the workforce today, according to the union.

Recent immigrants, many of whom are Mexicans fleeing a languishing economy at home, have remade places such as Worthington over the past 15 years.

While the state's population remains overwhelmingly white -- about 89 percent, according to the 2000 census -- these newcomers have made their mark on schools and churches and on main streets. At Worthington-area schools, the enrollment of minority students grew by 547, or 189 percent, during the 1990s. One out of three Worthington kindergartners is a minority student.

On Friday, the town's mayor was still grappling with the fallout from the immigration raids.

The meat company has not replaced all of the workers it lost in the raid, and has told Mayor Alan Oberloh that it wants an immigration reform bill to provide guest workers. Oberloh, who met Friday with representatives for Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., and Rep.-elect Tim Walz, D-Minn., said everyone agreed on the need to bring in legal workers. Now they just have to figure out how.

On the future of his town though, he was unequivocal.

"There are people who say Worthington is a defeated community," Oberloh said. "To them I say, 'Look down the street at all the activity. There's not a

parking spot on the street.'

"The people who have jobs here, stay here," he said.

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