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A worker trims wings as chickens move past. Many poultry workers have no standing in this country and are reluctant to complain about poor working conditions.

# POULTRY SERIES EXPOSES NEW, SILENT SUBCLASS

## Neglect of workers has ugly precedent in Carolinas history

Today we ask you to join us for a six-day series on the plight of Carolinas workers who put America's most popular meat on the table.

These workers – about 28,000 of them in the Carolinas – process chicken and turkey in all its forms. Whole birds, fillets, nuggets, slices, cubes, sausage and even hot dogs.

It may surprise you to learn that most of the workers speak Spanish. Many of them entered the country illegally.

Should that matter as you consider the working conditions you will read about?

I say yes, but maybe not for the most obvious reason.

It should matter because the neglect of these workers exposes an ugly dimension to a new subclass in our society. A disturbing subclass of compliant workers with few, if any, rights.

I say disturbing because North and South Carolina share some regrettable history of building economies on the backs of such workers.

Before the Civil War, slaves and poor sharecroppers powered the region's tobacco and cotton plantations. Early in the 20th century, children as young as 8 were put to work in Carolinas textile mills to help feed their poor families.

Consider the parallel to illegal immigrants. Same as slaves and sharecroppers, same as the cotton mill workers derisively termed "lintheads," this subclass is now a scorned bunch.

And yet they help power our economy. We live in houses they built. We drive on highways they paved. We eat the chicken and turkey they prepared.

Illegal immigrants often take the least desirable jobs, earning low wages, because those jobs lift them and their families from the poverty they left behind in their homelands.

As a group, they are compulsively compliant, ever-conscious that one complaint could lead to their firing or arrest or deportation.

"Some speak out, but most of these workers just wanted to remain in the shadows," said Franco Ordoñez, a reporter who spent months speaking to workers in the Latino communities surrounding the poultry plants. "It's just not worth it, considering how much they've already risked, to draw more attention to themselves – even if they're hurt. They're like the perfect victims."

EDITOR



Rick Thames

And, as you will read today, businesses take advantage of their silence and vulnerability.

Will we allow such conditions to go unchecked again?

That is the broader question raised by an Observer investigation.

It's also all the more reason you should be concerned about the treatment of these workers.

Our team of reporters and editors spent 22 months interviewing more than 200 poultry workers throughout the Southeast and analyzing industry documents. Their investigation soon led them to focus on one of the largest Carolinas-based poultry producers, House of Raeford. Its eight plants have been cited for more serious safety violations than all but two other poultry companies in recent years – and more than some companies several times their size.

Our journalists found evidence that House of Raeford has failed to report serious injuries, including broken bones and carpal tunnel syndrome. They discovered that plant officials often dismissed workers' requests for medical care that would cost the company money.

They also found that House of Raeford has undergone a work force transformation. In the early 1990s, its workers were largely African Americans. Today, between 80 percent and 90 percent of workers at some of its plants are Latinos. Most have no legal standing in this country; most are poor.

They are our newest subclass.

If you look beneath America's entanglements with slavery and child labor, you will find governments that failed famously to balance a free market against the inherent promise of basic human rights.

And today? No question, failed government policies produced our present crisis over illegal immigration. Yet Washington's official approaches to this issue continue to range from half-hearted to demagogic.

We should demand that our leaders repair those policies with realistic solutions. But as citizens and consumers, we should also insist on humane treatment for this new subclass of Latino immigrants who now work to the benefit of many in this country.

We've learned from our history. We are better than that.

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### HOW THE OBSERVER DID THIS INVESTIGATION

Observer reporters interviewed more than 200 poultry workers across the Southeast, along with regulators, workplace safety experts, lawyers and company officials. They reviewed thousands of pages of OSHA documents, academic studies, workers' compensation cases and rarely-examined company injury logs. They analyzed government databases with information about all workplace safety enforcement nationwide, as well as injury rates reported by plants.

They also toured three poultry plants in the Carolinas and Virginia and obtained records of ambulance calls to some plants.

Companies are required to keep records of work-related injuries and illnesses that result in medical treatment beyond first aid, days away from work, loss of consciousness and death.

To analyze underreporting, the newspaper interviewed injured House of Raeford workers and compared their accounts to company injury records from 2003 to early 2007. The Observer counted cases as unreported only if it was able to confirm that the workers received medical attention beyond first aid or had time off work. The newspaper also asked a top OSHA record-keeping expert to assess whether the cases should have been recorded.

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