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Exploiting Borders

10.26.2011 | Culture and Society, Faculty Recent 'tough-on-immigration' laws such as Alabama's HB56 and the inevitable legal challenges only intensify America's divide over immigration because they don't address the underlying causes: economic crisis and exploitation, a University of Dayton professor says.

"Immigrant workers are exploited for their labor and then scapegoated as the source of increased economic uncertainty that is, in fact, the result of expanded corporate welfare," said Jamie Longazel, an assistant sociology professor.

But the immigration debate too often focuses on border security, enforcement, and jurisdiction instead of the economic policies that created the demand for cheap labor, Longazel said.

"Until we take seriously the fact that our consumer economy runs on inexpensive labor and take steps to end exploitation, anti-immigrant passions will likely continue."

In a new law review article, Longazel draws on U.S. history and a 2006 Hazleton, Pa., immigration law to demonstrate that U.S. immigration law has long been firmly rooted in economic realities and economic exploitation. The *Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review* published the article, "Exploiting Borders: The Political Economy of Local Backlash Against Undocumented Immigrants" in its November 2011 issue. Benjamin Fleury-Steiner, a sociology and criminal justice professor at University of Delaware, Newark, is a co-author.

Globalization and increased competition have led to national and local economic policies in recent decades that rely on tax abatements and deregulation to attract industry, Longazel said. These policies enable corporations to focus almost exclusively on profit maximization over workers' rights — increasing the demand for immigrant workers and increasing economic uncertainty for Americans who are finding fewer viable jobs.

This pattern is not a new development in the United States. Since the start of the industrial revolution, the U.S. has brought Mexican laborers in during wartime labor shortages and domestic worker strikes but forced them out as politics or economics dictated, he said.

The economic woes of the Great Depression led to the deportation of as many as 500,000 immigrants in the Mexican Repatriation. When the demand for labor increased during World War II, the U.S. welcomed Mexican workers through the Bracero Program only to deport more than one million immigrants in the 1954 "Operation Wetback."

"The pillar of U.S. immigration law, especially with regard to migrants from south of the U.S. border, has been a reliance on a temporary and expendable workforce," Longazel said.

In the article, Longazel places the beginning of the present controversy with the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Since then, Congress has passed a number of laws that place extreme restrictions on both undocumented and legal immigrants while doing nothing to deter employers from exploiting immigrant labor.

More recently, he said, states and even local governments have taken immigration policy into their own hands. The small coal town of Hazleton, Pa., in 2006 enacted one of the nation's first local immigration laws aimed at keeping undocumented immigrants out of the community.

The policy exploited anti-immigrant sentiment and racial fears while ignoring the economic policies that had attracted a growing Latino population to Hazleton in the first place, Longazel said. In an effort to revitalize the local economy, the city attracted a meatpacking plant to Hazleton in 2001, which hired 1,300 workers — 90 percent of whom were Latino.

He said the city landed the plant using a Pennsylvania incentive program known as an enterprise zone, which became popular across the U.S. in the 1990s as an economic cure-all because of its powerful market-based incentive — no taxes.

But these enterprise zones and similar corporate-welfare economic policies are rarely addressed in debates and media coverage of the so-called "immigration problem," Longazel said. The emphasis is on the total number of jobs created with an utter neglect of how many of those jobs are low-paying, non-union jobs.

"This allows officials in Hazleton and in states like Alabama and Arizona to represent themselves as being both job creators and tough on immigration," he said.

In the article, Longazel advocates for a new approach to economic development that benefits both immigrants and long-time residents:

- Challenge economic development that promotes corporate-welfare and tax-incentives; insist on more direct involvement by community members.
- Focus on local investment, which pumps money into the local economy rather than extracts it to corporate headquarters outside of the community.
- Embrace immigrant entrepreneurs who already are revitalizing empty downtowns and depressed areas.

Communities that embrace immigrants and support this alternative approach still must be careful to avoid a more subtle form of exploitation, Longazel said.

"Diversity should not be used as an economic redevelopment ploy," he said. "Believing they are our ticket out of this economic mess is just as misguided as blaming them for it. Immigration policies should be inclusive and have meaningful benefits for both the local population and its new residents."

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