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Illegal Immigrants: Implications for the American middle class in general and the American middle class in the Republican Party in particular

This essay is not about whether illegal immigrants and-or their kin should get amnesty and stay in the United States.

This essay is about two ideas: the American middle class has no real political representation, and the fact that they don't is mostly their fault. They have been willing dupes of both major parties. I doubt they will wake up soon. I don't know the end results. I use the situation with illegal Hispanic workers to show these points. Most of the essay is background material on illegal workers.

To avoid lawsuits, I have to be careful with language. Being careful cramps the writing. I apologize. I do not delete incorrect terms such as "nigger"; and I do not indulge in them.

(1) This scenario shows up in this essay and in other essays:

Here is an image from television: I think the scene was the late 1960s, after the passage of Civil Rights legislation and the victories of both strong left wing Democrats and strong right wing Republicans. A White man, about 35 years old, from Louisiana, was interviewed. Likely he was a working man with a steady job from the "blue collar" middle class. He said something like: "Now the rich people have their party (Republicans) and the niggers have theirs (Democrats). So who is going to stand up for us?" Not much has changed.

(2) In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Alabama, with Arizona and a few other states, began pushing laws aimed at getting rid of illegal Hispanic immigrants.

About 2009, a large shopping mall called "Tiger Town" was built in Opelika, Alabama, near the city of Auburn, Alabama, serving the region between Montgomery, AL; Columbus, GA; La Grange, GA; and Dothan, AL. Of the construction crews, at least 75% of the workers, often closer to 90%, were Hispanic. The Tiger Town project was sponsored by the councils of both Opelika and Auburn, and supervised by engineers from Auburn – I don't know about engineers from Opelika. ("Oh peh like kuh").

From about 2008 to 2015, despite saying it has no money to give their regular employees a raise, and despite pushing increases in employee contributions to insurance and retirement, Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama embarked on a massive construction and beautification program, with a new giant dorm complex, student union, central walkway, indoor sports stadium, athletic building with special

athletic dorm and food program, another athletic building, kinesiology building, fisheries lab complex with two buildings, and at least one new big science building.

Suppose a typical working crew on one of these projects AU was composed of 20 men (few women). Of the 20 men, there would be 1 supervisor, 2 skilled workers, 3 semi-skilled workers, and 14 “unskilled” or “common” workers. Usually the supervisor and the skilled workers were White (maybe one Black), the semi-skilled workers were Black (or 1 White or 1 Hispanic) and all the common workers were Hispanic. Few of the Hispanics spoke any more English than was needed to get by on the job and to tell students and others to “move away”. Keep in mind that this was publicly funded, publicly bid, construction work on a state-owned site.

About 2012, the apartment complex in which I live completely renovated the outside of its 11 buildings, including new ceramic siding and new roofs. All the workers were Hispanic, employed by a company with its offices in Texas. At a given time, about 15 to 20 workers were on site. Only 1 of all the workers on site at any time spoke much English at all.

Similar comments apply to dozens or hundreds of construction sites around the state.

All the time all this construction was going on, police drove by, state troopers drove by, state inspectors visited sites, local inspectors visited sites, local politicians visited, professors walked by, students walked by, and Auburn University administrators visited sites.

Alabama and Georgia could not harvest crops without illegal Hispanic workers, hundreds or thousands of whom come here seasonally. I am fairly sure the same is true of Texas and California, and likely true even in states such as Michigan, Indiana, Oregon, and Washington. Find out about your state.

It is dimly possible that all the Hispanic workers in Alabama and other states were here legally as the result of some kind of work visa program (such programs exist), but not likely.

Even if ALL the Hispanic workers were here legally, this point is still valid: Hispanic workers are doing jobs that American-born workers and legal American residents could do. Hispanic workers are doing fairly well paid jobs that American workers could do. Simply put, Hispanics are taking jobs away good jobs from Americans – that way of putting the issue is too simplistic and too misleading but will do here. American workers scream about this situation but nothing gets done. What is going on? Why aren't the political parties doing something?

(3) We need to get rid of a few misconceptions about American workers. I go into the ideas more in other essays so I only state the ideas here, and I ask you to take them on faith.

I don't know for sure how much the Hispanic construction workers got paid because they wouldn't tell me and they seemed uncomfortable about the question. I don't blame them. It is more than minimum wage but less than union wage in a state such as California or New York.

American workers will not compete against Hispanic workers to take the jobs for similar wages even when the wages are fairly high compared to alternatives such as fast-food service. American workers feel that they should get paid a lot of money (see below) and so will not compete to get good paying jobs that they feel should be very well paid, even if the amount they could get is pretty good.

Especially in states like Alabama with “right to work” laws that make it hard to unionize, Americans feel they cannot compete with Hispanics because Hispanics come in groups in which every Hispanic makes a low wage while Americans come as individuals. One American individual cannot guarantee a group of low-paid workers, and cannot guarantee he-she will fit in with Hispanic workers if hired at their wages. American workers feel that American bosses can better control Hispanic workers. So American workers don’t even try to compete for the jobs.

Even if agricultural work paid much more than minimum wage (it doesn’t now), paid more than wages at fast-food places, and paid more than welfare, American workers will not work in agriculture. Blacks, and some poor Whites, in the South, and poor Whites on the West Coast, only stopped being low-paid agricultural workers (stereotypical cotton pickers) a few decades ago. That kind of work is still highly stigmatized. So they won’t do it. They would rather go on welfare or into crime. As long as Americans won’t do agricultural work, it can never be organized and made to pay fairly. As long as it is never made to pay fairly by lofty American standards, Americans won’t do it.

American workers have a false bad sense of entitlement. They feel that every job at which Americans work should pay well. They believe an American job should pay enough so two workers can: buy two cars, buy a house, raise at least three children, buy a boat, have some land, have medical insurance, and have a good retirement program on top of Social Security. They feel their children should be able to go to school on public funds, and, when they graduate, get even better jobs with even more wages and benefits. These expectations are completely unrealistic. They were made after World War Two when American temporarily dominated the world economy. They have been massively reinforced by both political parties, perhaps especially Republicans, as part of world propaganda and as part of an ideology to guide (control) American workers.

I do not explain what Americans should expect. I can say that not everybody can expect to get a job, even if he-she is not stupid, not lazy, and has some skill. Not everybody can expect to get a job that pays more than minimum wage. Minimum wage should not allow one person (single parent) to raise a family. Even two workers together now probably cannot reliably earn enough for the above “American Dream”.

The false sense of entitlement leads to bad results. Americans who “have stuff” (jobs, house, cars, toys, an education fund) fear those people who have not, and American “haves” build economic and political fences around “have nots”. When the economy does not deliver the American Dream automatically, workers expect both political parties, Democrat and Republican, to step in and force the economy to deliver the Dream. American workers will not take jobs that do not deliver the wage and benefit levels

of the Dream. American workers will not compete for jobs with workers who do take jobs at levels that do not deliver the Dream right away. American workers will not organize to create a working livable employment situation for groups of workers.

Americans in general, in particular the middle class, and especially laborers, believe there is only so much wealth to go around at a particular time. In the short run, they are largely correct. The long run is not relevant here, and, besides, the idea that there-is-more-than-enough-for-everybody-in-the-long-run has been abused so much that it is not true. Despite propaganda about economic growth solving all problems, a rising tide floating all boats, Americans don't believe it enough to bet the welfare of their families on it. They want a secure job with benefits, and they want it now. They want to make sure their children have solid opportunities for good education. If they have a good job, they will do almost anything to keep it. They will do almost anything to insure the future of their children, especially through education. They are willing to put down other people to keep their economic advantage. This is only human. It is sad, but only human.

It seems, then, that Americans should be willing to take any job and work their way up. That is what the right wing propaganda tells them to do. In fact, Americans know better about this too. They know that a low paying job is a dead end for yourself and your children. You don't work yourself up in that way except in propaganda fantasies. Once you start working at a fast food joint, you stay there. Once you start working as an agricultural laborer or low-paid unskilled menial construction worker, you stay there. Americans want to hold out for the middle class job that keeps them and their children in the middle class. It is better to go on welfare and unemployment than to accept a bad job with no hope of getting ahead. If bad jobs have to be filled, it is better that illegal workers fill them, and that we hold out for better middle class positions.

(4) Now we can get back to illegal immigrants.

The usual easy half-right explanation for the problem of illegal immigrants is that the Democratic Party is protecting them because they vote Democratic. The Democratic Party gives them protection and they give the Democratic Party power. The Democratic Party blocks all attempts at controlling illegal workers that would also erode its power, so, in effect, it blocks all attempts. This explanation is largely true but it does not go far enough. If the mass of Americans, and the Republican Party, really wanted to control illegal workers, they could. The Democratic Party by itself could not stop them.

Think back to the situation in Alabama, a state that tries to pass laws to stop illegal workers but is full of them, the authorities know exactly where they are, and the illegal workers make business cheaper and more profitable. There is a very simple completely effective solution to the problem of illegal workers. My wife, Nitaya, is happy to point it out every time a story about illegal workers is on TV. The solution was tried half-ass in the Reagan years as part of a bargain then over immigration, but soon dropped for reasons to be told shortly. The solution: put in jail people who hire illegal workers. Make employers check the citizenship and-or immigration status of all workers. Make employers check Social Security status. Fingerprint, take the picture of, and, if needed, record the DNA of, all workers and employers.

Prohibit payment in cash; allow payment only by check. Check the immigration status of all children. Put in jail the fore-persons of any work crew with an illegal worker. Put in jail the fore-person's boss. Put in jail the contractor. Put in jail the head of the company that hired the contractor. Put in jail the person who hired the company to do the building.

The first time a rich White person, especially a rich White man, goes to jail, all our problems with illegal workers would end overnight. If a rich White person goes to jail on Tuesday, by Wednesday the issue of illegal immigration will be over.

This is not a hard solution. It is easily doable, even without the DNA provision.

We don't need a giant fence-with-moat across the border at Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. We don't need an army of border agents. All we need is to put in jail a few employers. If we also want the fence, moat, and army, that is another issue.

(5) So why isn't it done? Not mostly because of Democrats.

The power in the Republican Party does not come mostly from semi-skilled and skilled White and Asian working people and small professionals, from the middle class. The power comes from business owners at all levels, but mostly at the level of middle sized business firms and large sized business firms. They want to use illegal workers. They make a lot of money off the illegal workers. They don't want to stop illegal workers. They don't want to hire Americans. They don't want to give benefits (medical insurance and retirement) to workers, American or otherwise. They want cheap semi-skilled labor.

Republicans are happy when action against illegal workers can't pass Congress. They are happy to make legislation so harsh and so stupid that it cannot pass. They want the illegal workers here and they want to be able always to blame Democrats and Hispanics. They are happy to bicker over fences, moats, and an army of border guards, in public, and so not argue about a simpler better solution. They are happy to support programs for "work visas" based on the idea that America needs to import some skilled workers that we do not yet have enough of, such as computer programmers, while really the work visa programs let business owners hire an army of illegal unskilled and semi-skilled workers under a legal cover. The Republican business owners are happy to have their cake and eat it too.

The Republican Party is happy when it can have illegal cheap workers but also can blame Democrats and Hispanics because then it can tell American workers and small professionals, the American middle class, that it is "on their side". Republicans can have both illegal workers and the support of the American middle class, including American workers. It can blame Democrats and so block most American middle class people and American workers from going over to the Democrats.

Remember the man in Louisiana. This situation began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The unhappy White people and middle class people could not form a third party. They had to align with one of the two major parties. Seeing an opportunity, the Republican Party recruited a mass of workers, the "blue

collar Republicans”, and a mass of middle class people who had previously been progressives in the Democratic Party. The Republican Party has been able to keep these Americans through tactics such as its policies on immigration.

(6) Why can't the American middle class see through the situation and see through the Republicans and the Democrats? Why can't the American middle class see, and get, something better? Is the American middle class stupid? Not really. When people are in a situation with only bad choices or no real choices, they do what they must, and rationalize. They protect what they have by any way they can, including self-delusion. They make themselves blind so as to get by. That is what happened with the American middle class, especially workers and small professionals.

Americans that have jobs want to keep their jobs and want to make sure their children have jobs that are about as good or better. Beginning in the 1970s, the Democratic Party did not offer this security to enough middle class people. The Republican Party seemed to offer hope; at the very least, it offered hope through the “back door” by offering to remove benefits from minorities and to suppress minorities when it could. The working middle class didn't really believe this promise fully but it went along with the only option it had then and the only option it still has now.

This arrangement worked well enough as long as the competing minorities were all domestic and the business owners in the Republican Party had little to gain by offering much to domestic minorities. The arrangement changed when American workers got too expensive in the 1960s and 1970s, and it became easier for business owners to import large numbers of illegal Hispanics – a side effect of safe roads and generally safer political conditions all over Latin America. Then the rulers of the Republican Party began to use the Hispanic workers although the rulers of the Republican Party still promised White and Asian middle class people that they could have good jobs and their children could too. The Republican promise held some water until the 1990s when the flood of Hispanics became too large.

Then, the White and Asian middle class was caught between the Republican need to keep them in the Party and the need of Republican business people to have cheap labor. The White and Asian middle class had exactly no (zero) option other than the Republican Party, so it has stuck with the Party despite the fact that the Republican Party really does not want to do anything about Hispanics. The White and Asian middle class tried to pressure the Republican Party through the Tea Party, through immigration laws, and through annoying programs on cable TV; but none of that can work as long as Hispanic labor is still useful and Hispanics do not cause too many problems.

(7) I could offer a lot of suggestions but I doubt anybody wants to hear. Likely, people will only be able to do anything about all of this when they face the realities of capitalism (which is mostly good but not all good), the reality that not everybody can get a job in the modern world economy, and the reality of how much jobs can pay in the modern world economy. That will not likely happen soon.

In the meantime, most people will continue to delude themselves. They will continue to connive under the blanket of delusion to get as much security as they can for themselves and their children. All this is

only natural. They will continue to support the Republican Party and immigration reform even while they know the two are not compatible.

The biggest tragedy, to me, is not the plight of Hispanics or the plight of the White and Asian working middle class. The drama of the Republican Party crying out against illegal labor all the while it benefits vastly from illegal labor is amusing. The biggest tragedy is that we erode honest government and honest citizenship. The working middle class of the Republican Party is in a bind. To survive, it has to deceive itself. Honest citizenship and good government are the first casualties of self-deception.

Of course, people in the Democratic Party are caught in self-deceptions that erode citizenship and good government. They have their own cramps. The ideas that the Democratic Party somehow represents the people in general and that the Party serves the people in general when it caters to minorities are delusions on the same order as the delusions of the working middle class in the Republican Party. They can't think straight about the modern world economy, capitalism, jobs, pay, and the cost of living either. But all that is another essay.

Whoo-eee. This stuff makes me sad sometimes.