

Once potential laborers come forward, smuggling rings tap into the racket for fake birth certificates and Social Security cards, furnishing workers with the documentation they need to land a slaughterhouse job. "This is not a situation of workers sitting on the other side of the border looking to come and take American jobs," Denier says. "These workers are lured here with false promises and high hopes."

Because of their history as migrant farmworkers, advocates say, Mexicans and Central Americans have been targeted to fill jobs that suffer from high turnover rates. "Very few human beings want to pull chicken guts or hack cow carcasses for minimum wage," says Leone Jose Bicchieri, an organizer for the Chicago-based National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.

But the Nebraska Beef case didn't end up helping workers. The case stemmed from a December 2000 INS raid on the company's Omaha factory, in which the agency arrested more than 200 immigrants and then deported them, mostly to Mexico. In a strange twist for union and immigration

activists, a federal judge threw out the case on grounds the deportation made it impossible for the company to call workers who might have testified that Nebraska Beef officials did not recruit them or provide them with false documents.

But while the mass arrest initially troubled area workers, it also helped galvanize a coalition of 53 local organizations, called Omaha Together One Community, into organizing at Nebraska's giant meatpacking plants. Says Lourdes Gouveia, director of Chicano/Latino Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, "It took a community-based group to inject new life into local organizing and to dispel the stereotype, even within the union itself, that immigrant workers were unorganizable."

In early May, the UFCW won its largest area victory to date, signing up workers at the Northern States Beef plant in Omaha, owned by ConAgra. Next up is forcing Nebraska Beef to hold a similar election. Earlier this year, the National Labor Relations Board upheld UFCW's charge that it lost an election at Nebraska

Beef in August 2001 because the company trucked in workers from other plants, telling them to vote against the union or risk being fired.

As Tyson undergoes investigation, advocates say meatpackers have become more careful about their hiring practices. Still, Gouveia says all of the slaughterhouses have strategies in place to assess their needs. "They have a certain profile in mind," she says, "and they go after it."

Not surprisingly, labor shortages routinely occur after immigrants begin to shun these jobs, fed up with the nasty and painful work. "What's been missing in all of this is a discussion of what has led to the creation of an economy that has such a need for an undocumented work force," says Joe Berra, a staff attorney for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund. "What really needs to be addressed is our immigration policy on one hand, and workers rights on the other." ■

Leon Lazaroff writes about labor and immigration issues from Brooklyn.

APPALL-O-METER

BY DAVE MULCAHEY

Using Your Noggin 2.0

Two heartland geniuses have been sticking to home for the past year or so, since they ill-advisedly tattooed the logo of a local radio station on their foreheads. The *Quad City Times* reports that David Winkelman of Davenport, Iowa, and his pal Richard Goddard Jr. of Rock Island, Illinois, believe they are victims of a malicious prank. They are suing Cumulus Broadcasting, owner of 93.5 KORB, and disc jockey Benjamin Stomberg for breach of contract, fraud and negligence.

In November 2000, Stomberg announced on the air that the station would pay \$30,000 a year for five years to anyone who permanently emblazoned his forehead with "93 Rock." Winkelman and Goddard claim to have met with radio station officials, who confirmed the deal. A KORB flunkie then took them to the Scorpion's

Den, a local skin arts purveyor, and paid for the suckers' tattoos.

They claim that was the last thing they got from the station. Winkelman was fired from his job, and both men argue they have been unemployable ever since.

A Splendid Little Armageddon 9.7

Some Indians seem to think their country's nuclear arsenal, at 60 weapons, will give them the winning edge in an all-out war with Pakistan, which has a mere 25 nukes. While Pakistani officials have been telling their countrymen that death in a nuclear attack is martyrdom (natch), Indians are putting their faith in demographics. As one colonel told London's *Telegraph*: "India could afford to lose, say, 25 million people. The question is, could Pakistan?"

An Oversight 4.2

Reynaldo Tovar-Valdivia is being a good sport—in fact, downright pleasant—about his request to a federal judge to finally let him out of jail—two years after his conviction was overturned. According to The Associated Press, Tovar-Valdivia was convicted in 1999 for drug trafficking and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He appealed on grounds he was illegally searched before his arrest, and won—and should have been released in January 2000.

Last March, Tovar-Valdivia sent a letter to the Kansas City judge who'd convicted him, wondering if it was OK to let him out

yet. "I would like to humbly request that this court makes an order invalidating my conviction," Tovar-Valdivia wrote, signing off, "Thanks for your time, and have a nice day."

"We don't know what happened," says the clerk of federal court in Kansas City. One assumes that Tovar-Valdivia—who, after all, was the one busted in 1998 with nine pounds of methamphetamine taped to his body—is content to let bygones be bygones.



TERRY LABAN

Free Market Misery

Can Ukraine save its miners—
or its economy?

By Benjamin Smith

DONETSK, UKRAINE—The international coal mining industry has an unusual measure of safety: dead miners per million tons. When the Soviet Union ruled this flat, fertile country of 49 million people, about one miner died for every million tons extracted. The United States suffers 0.02 fatalities per million tons. In Ukraine today, four miners die for the same amount of coal.

These miners aren't paid much for doing what is probably Europe's most dangerous job; in fact, sometimes they aren't paid for months on end. The question, for a foreign visitor, is why they work at all. The answer, according to a blackened 26-year veteran of one mine near Donetsk, is simple: With no other jobs in town, Leonid Volvotch says, "we have no choice. We can only hope that the situation will change."

The plight of Ukrainian miners demonstrates, among other things, the limitations and failings of international aid. Ukraine is one of the world's five largest recipients of U.S. assistance, and the World Bank has lent the country \$300 million for the mining sector alone. "The mines are the most visible sites of crisis in a whole situation of crisis," says Guy Standing, an economist at the International Labor Organization (ILO). "For 10 years [living standards] have been chipping away right across industry, across farms, and across the whole economy."

The country's official unemployment rate is now 12 percent, but outside economists estimate it at more than 20 percent. And Ukrainians have little hope that the situation will improve: Four out of five expect to die in poverty, according to a report released last summer by the ILO. Ukraine's problem is a common one in the former Soviet Union—its post-Soviet leaders knew how to destroy the old system, but not how to replace it with anything resembling the free market they hear so much about from Western advisers.



OLEG NIKSHIN / NEWSMAKERS

Miners in Ukraine are dying at some of the highest rates in the world.

Nowhere are those half-finished "reforms" deadlier than in the mines. Most of the country's roughly 200 mines are trapped halfway between central planning and the market. Structurally, they remain Soviet-style enterprises, running schools and medical clinics for the benefit of their workers, selling their coal to state-run power plants at a fixed price, and prohibited from firing most workers under Ukrainian law.

But the state no longer meets the mines' costs. Power plants often don't pay their bills. State subsidies—which already compose 5 percent of the Ukrainian budget—amount to less than half of the \$5 billion the industry has requested. And there are widespread allegations that many mine managers are in league with local businessmen, selling them coal at a discount and buying supplies for inflated prices.

And so Ukrainian miners continue to die, in accidents small and large, at a rate of about one a day. The accident on May 21, when the roof of the Glubokaya mine collapsed on a miner, was practically routine. Last August 19, a methane gas explosion in the Zasaydko mine, more than a kilometer beneath Donetsk, ignited the coal dust floating in the air. Flames from the explosion burned 55 men to death.

Yet the miners keep working, even though the Independent Union of Coal Miners estimates that miners across the country are owed \$377 million in unpaid wages. In April, a miner died on a hunger strike for unpaid disability benefits. In

early June, a few hundred miners set out on a march to Kiev to demand back wages.

The World Bank has offered a straightforward solution to the mines' troubles: euthanasia. "Ukraine must close a significant number of mines," says Yury Miroschnichenko, World Bank operations officer for the Ukrainian energy sector. "Otherwise, the vicious circle will never break. The budget just does not have enough funds to support 100 percent of the coal sector."

Until a change of government in April, the bank's program had managed to begin closing procedures on about 90 of the country's original 280 mines. Thirty-five have been fully closed. Last year, however, a new closure plan was sidelined by fear of the massive unemployment and discontent that comes with mine closures. And the remaining mines are getting more dangerous: The death toll has remained steady, at between 300 and 400 deaths a year, according to figures from the Ministry of Energy.

The Ukrainian government, like its economy, has fallen into the cracks between communism and American-style democracy, and has shown little will to improve the miners' lot. Below the black earth in Eastern Ukraine, change is little more than a joke. On a mine visit one day last fall, 30-year-old Alexander Cherednichenko was resting, his face barely visible beneath a head lamp. He has always worried about safety, he said, but he wasn't about to go looking for other work. "This is the most permanent job you can find." ■

BY SARA BERNDT

Politics of Fear

For Gloria Mendez, the precarious reality of war in Colombia seems to be entirely divorced from the political news that dominates coverage of the conflict. For countless Colombians like her, the war simply exists, and they must try to cope with it.

Mendez, 31, lives and works near the Pacific coast of Colombia as a midwife and as an organizer with the National Process of Black Communities, a group that advocates for the estimated 8.5 million Colombians who claim some African heritage. She helps civilian victims of the conflict recover from the devastating physical and psychological effects of life in a war zone. (Her work is so dangerous that her name and the names of towns in this story have been changed.)

In April, Mendez visited Chicago, hoping to draw attention to the problems in Colombia. "I really want people to know the reality of the situation that many of us Colombians are living," she says.

She describes how the war has progressed in a community near hers. "First, the guerrillas moved in, and they killed people and took control of the zone. And once they had left, the paramilitaries came in and did the very same thing. They killed people both for having 'collaborated with the guerrillas,' and also to take control."

Most analysts date the current Colombian civil war from 1964, when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) began operating out of the jungles east of the Andes. The Colombian military, accused by its critics of corruption and widespread human rights abuses, battles both left-wing groups, which make their money primarily from extortion, drug smuggling and kidnappings.

Since the mid-'90s, the largest right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), has worked closely with the military, doing its dirty work in rural areas with brutal counterinsurgency techniques. As a result of the war, more than 2 million citizens have been driven from their homes and towns.

But it's not necessary to understand the politics to understand the problems for average Colombians, whose lives are controlled by the fighting. In April 2001, paramilitaries massacred dozens of people, some with chain-

saws, and displaced thousands in a days-long operation along a river near Mendez's hometown of Santa Elena.

Soon after, a man arrived warning of a paramilitary incursion into the neighboring town of Boyacá. "This, of course, caused panic," Mendez says. "We began to think, who was killed? Who was able to run up into the hillsides around the river? And then we found out that there were seven who had been killed in the worst way possible, not with a chainsaw, but with an axe."

The people of Santa Elena barely had time to process this news before those fleeing from Boyacá began to arrive en masse.

"When they arrived they had no place to stay," Mendez says. "There would be five or six families in one house." To help the refugees, she says, "We put into place a food-gathering campaign, ask[ing] that people in the region provide for the people who had just gotten there until assistance arrived."

Mendez says that displaced people usually receive humanitarian aid from both the Colombian government's social services and the Catholic Church. But the harsh reality of living in the midst of war means that what aid the Boyacá residents did get "wasn't really enough."

Soon after the killings, government agencies tried to get the townspeople to return to Boyacá. But Mendez says they "refuse to go back, because of the fear. So everybody that lived in Boyacá basically created a new neighborhood in [another] community upriver." With her group's help, she says, the refugees were able to stay in their region rather than move to a city, where they would have known no one and

been less likely to find long-term assistance.

The situation on the coast is still tense. Few massacres have occurred in the last year, Mendez says, "but now they're killing people individually, when they leave the region." The people of Santa Elena are still anxious about their most basic needs. "What we're really concerned about right now is food security, since we know that [armed] groups control the supply of food to the region."

Mendez knows the United States has sent nearly \$2 billion in aid, the majority of which has gone to the military, to Colombia since 2000. "The type of aid that the United States



Two women stand over massacre victims killed in February 2001 by the FARC. Witnesses say the civilians were accused of sympathizing with paramilitary forces.

is giving is not the kind we want," she says. "If in fact the United States really wants to help the people [of Colombia], they should be doing it [by] addressing where the problem of violence really comes from: the social inequality."

It doesn't seem to matter to her which armed group is responsible—she just wants the war to stop. "Maybe it isn't something that I'll ever see," she says, "but I would hope that the people in my community would be able to live in peace, in good conditions. What I'm doing, somebody has to do." ■