

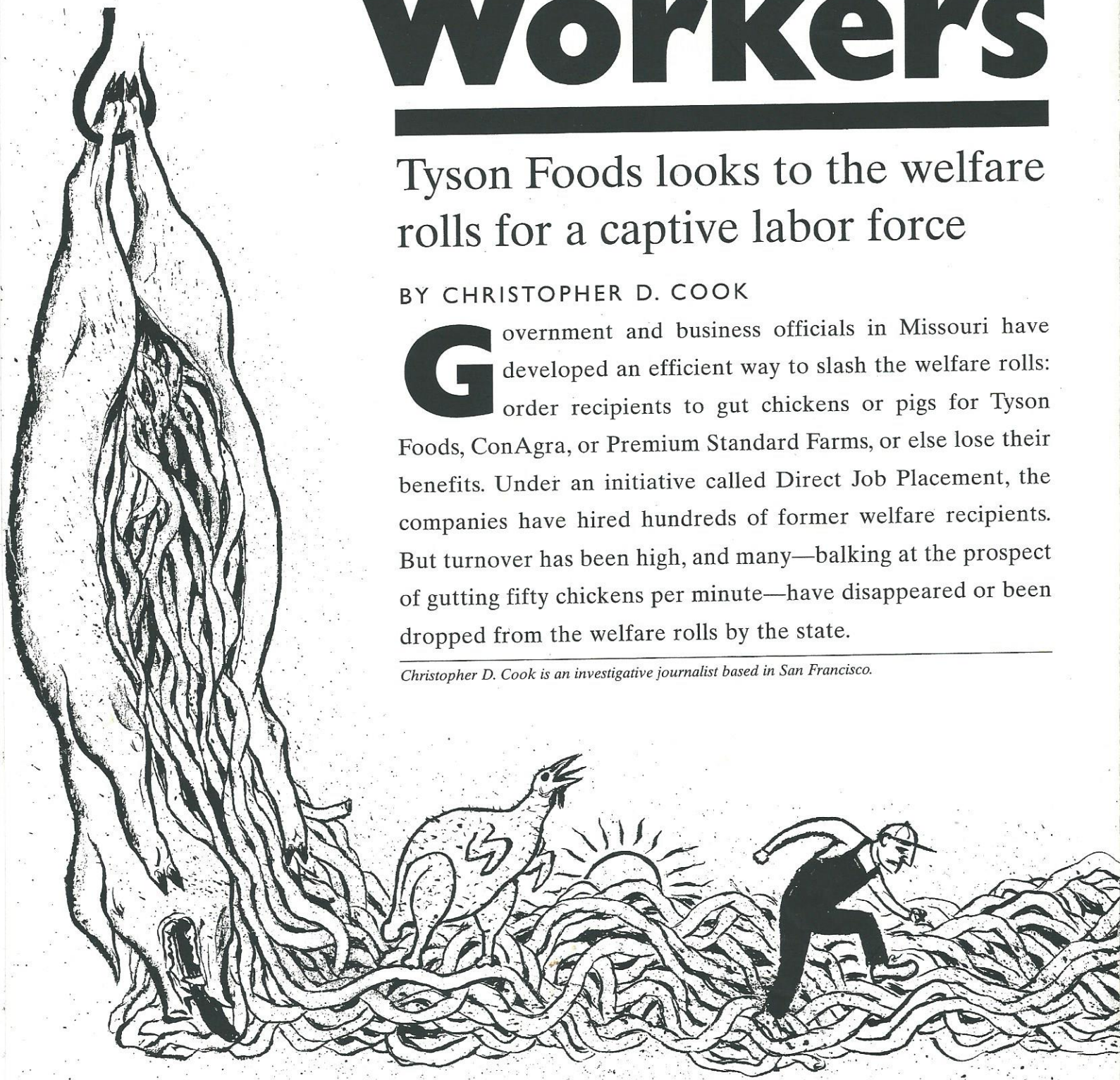
# Plucking Workers

Tyson Foods looks to the welfare rolls for a captive labor force

BY CHRISTOPHER D. COOK

**G**overnment and business officials in Missouri have developed an efficient way to slash the welfare rolls: order recipients to gut chickens or pigs for Tyson Foods, ConAgra, or Premium Standard Farms, or else lose their benefits. Under an initiative called Direct Job Placement, the companies have hired hundreds of former welfare recipients. But turnover has been high, and many—balking at the prospect of gutting fifty chickens per minute—have disappeared or been dropped from the welfare rolls by the state.

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As one woman on welfare discovered, even having a newborn baby and no means of transportation is no excuse. When the thirty-year-old mother, whose name was withheld for confidentiality, informed her case managers of these extenuating circumstances, they were not sympathetic.

"They told her she had to work at Tyson's even if she had to walk to get there [a six-mile trek]," says Helen Chewning, a former family advocate with the Missouri Valley Human Resource Center in Sedalia. "They sanctioned her while she was pregnant" and then ordered her to work at Tyson when her baby was just eleven days old, Chewning recalls. "She hasn't had any income for six months. How are they supposed to live?"

The single mother is one of more than 110,000 Missourians who have left welfare since January 1993, a stunning 43 percent decline in caseload. Under Direct Job Placement, since May 1995, the state has placed more than 5,400 people in jobs, if temporarily.

But in Missouri and nationwide, these plummeting caseloads are deceptive. According to *The Washington Post*, nearly 40 percent of those who left welfare during a three-month period last year were cut off for breaking the rules—not because they landed jobs.

In the cold calculus of welfare reform, a closed case means success, regardless of what happens to the recipient. As President Clinton celebrates the nation's lowest welfare count since 1969, evidence is piling up across the country that thousands are being coerced into hazardous, short-term jobs or simply kicked off welfare.

Missouri has cut caseloads with such zeal that Clinton used the state as a backdrop last August to announce that 1.4 million people have left welfare since 1996. "We now know that welfare reform works," he proclaimed in a speech to business executives in St. Louis. Clinton touted Missouri's Direct Job Placement approach as a national model. "Thirty-five other states have allowed Missouri to show them

that this is a good reform, and they are also doing it," he said.

But state records tell a different story. Missouri is on a sanctioning binge of astounding proportions, pushing thousands off welfare without getting them into jobs. "Since January 1993, the monthly number of welfare recipients who have had their TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] grant reduced for not looking for work or accepting a job has increased from twenty-seven to 7,345—saving taxpayers over \$3 million," according to the state Department of Social Services. The records show soaring numbers of people are being sanctioned by the state: They've been cut off welfare for refusing a job or missing an interview. The caseload has plummeted from 5,228 per month in 1993 to just 265 this May, but much of the caseload decline is simply due to sanctions.

One impetus behind the sanctions, critics assert and state officials acknowledge, is the threat of working in poultry plants or in hog slaughterhouses, where assembly-line jobs involve processing animal parts at a feverish pace in a dirty and dangerous environment.

"It's the same as slavery," says Jerry Helmick, business agent for the United Food and Commercial Workers in Kansas City. "The government sends you there for an interview. If you can stand up and walk, Tyson is going to offer you a job, and you either take it or you're out of the system altogether."

**T**yson and other meat-processing companies with high rates of injury and constant employee turnover are corraling the new captive labor force created by welfare reform. In a welfare-to-work program begun by the state in 1995, Missouri welfare agencies send recipients directly to labor-starved, low-wage employers. State documents describe the Direct Job Placement program as "a cooperative effort between local employers and the Division of Family Services," in which "employers experiencing labor-market

shortages fill vacancies with recipients."

It's the ultimate public-private partnership, supplying business with a steady reserve of cheap labor while enabling social-service agencies to meet intense caseload-reduction targets set by federal and state officials.

The program includes several Tyson plants, ConAgra chicken processors, Premium Standard's hog-raising and processing plants, and numerous temp agencies and nursing homes. In rural areas with tight labor markets, large companies have near-monopoly control over job placement—and they have transformed county welfare offices into their own private hiring halls.

In the north-central Missouri town of Milan near the Iowa border, a Premium Standard pork-processing plant and a ConAgra chicken-processing factory are the main beneficiaries of the new welfare-to-work regime.

"We have been lucky in Milan because Premium Standard Farms opened up here," says Karen Fay, the Division of Family Services caseload manager for the area. "If we have a person that applies for food stamps who is eligible to work, we send them to Premium Standard Farms. Their job is to cut apart whatever part they get. At Premium Standard Farms, the pigs are fastened on a belt, and they cut the same part of each pig."

Fay recognizes that people in the welfare-to-work program have few other options. "All we have is PSF [Premium Standard Farms] and ConAgra," she says.

Lisa Garison, human-resources director for Premium Standard's plant in Milan, says the welfare pool has aided the company's expansion. "We continue to try to grow, and any resource that is here in this area, our goal is to tap it." The welfare supply, she says, "has been a key in helping us staff. . . . We hire as many of them as we can. They [case managers at the Division of Family Services] give us as many as they can."

Garison says recipients' work experiences have been mixed: "Some people



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we've had wonderful success with, and then others find it's a real challenge to enter the work world at the pace that we work at."

Roger Allison, executive director of the Missouri Rural Crisis Center, says Premium Standard's vast hog-raising houses spew noxious methane and hydrogen sulfite gases that reek from fifteen miles away. "These are people who are captive in a workplace that is abusive and environmentally unhealthy," he says. But since the pig farms are classified as agricultural operations, they are not subject to inspections or regulation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (Premium Standard's processing plants do fall under OSHA jurisdiction.)

Garison rejects the charge that it's captive labor. "I don't see those folks as only having one way out of that situation," she says. "There should be plenty of opportunity for people to find the kind of work they want to do; they may have to do something they don't like for a while."

**P**eople who accept a Tyson job are in for a rude awakening. "The first job they get is the puller job—pulling the internal organs out," says Tim Barchak, Missouri political director for the Service Employees International Union. "A lot of these workers will lose their fingernails in two or three weeks from the bacteria and chicken fat." Nearly one-third of Missouri's 103,000 poultry workers suffered an injury or illness in 1995, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Former Tyson worker Jason Wolfe, twenty-three, toiled for a year and a half on the "thighing line," hanging dead birds on metal shackles for \$6.75 an hour. "They want you to hang forty or fifty of these birds in a minute for four to six hours straight, without a break," he says. "If you miss any, they threaten to fire you." The work is so stressful, Wolfe says, that at times, "I'd wake up in the middle of the night and catch my arms rehandling chickens."

Adding insult to injury, Tyson fires peo-

ple who have too many "occurrences," the company's term for sick days. According to Wolfe, Tyson terminates workers who miss more than five days in a year for any reason. "I was fired because of an occurrence problem because I had to go to the doctor a couple of times," Wolfe says.

"Tyson is very bad about firing people if they are sick or their children are sick," says Chewning. "It's happening all the time. I have people coming in who can't pay their rent because of that. If you have a sick child, you have to take them to the doctor. If you don't, social services will come after you for neglect."

Ed Nicholson, a top spokesman at Tyson headquarters in Springdale, Arkansas, confirms this policy. "If there are six occurrences, a person can be terminated," he says. "If a person is out for three days with an ailment and they have a doctor's note, that would be one occurrence." But each time an employee misses work due to a new ailment, according to Nicholson, it counts as another occurrence.

The grueling and hazardous work means an annual turnover rate of roughly 75 percent, according to Greg Denier of the United Food and Commercial Workers in Washington, D.C. Many stay on the job for just a few months before succumbing to injury or sheer exhaustion. The harsh conditions and high turnover create a constant need for new workers. And as unemployment rates dipped well below 5 percent across the Midwest in the mid-1990s, the industry saw its supply of available workers begin to dry up.

Rather than improve conditions to attract employees, the pig and poultry industries have resorted to importing workers from Mexico and housing them in temporary mobile-home facilities. At Premium Standard, "they're actually having to ship Mexicans into and out of housing to fill these jobs, because they can't get enough people to work there," says Brenda Proctor, a consumer economist with the University of Missouri.

According to numerous union officials

and former Tyson worker Jason Wolfe, Tyson advertises for Mexican workers to come to its Midwestern plants and even transports them to Missouri. "Sometimes [Tyson's recruiters] get a freezer truck and load them up and take them up here," says Wolfe, who talked with Mexican workers at the plant.

Ed Nicholson denies that the firm recruits or imports Mexican workers. "We have not transported anyone across the border," he says. Instead, Tyson offers bonuses for employees who bring in new workers, he says. "Some of that literature got passed along to people down there [in Mexico], and it gave the impression that we were advertising down there. The word gets out that jobs are available and people show up from Mexico, Texas, or Guatemala."

**I**f low-wage, immigrant workers are good for Tyson and other companies, the idea of a captive labor force provided directly by the state is even more appealing. In 1995, as welfare reform swept the nation, Tyson lobbied to gain easy access to the abundance of cheap workers thrust onto the labor market.

The Direct Job Placement program "was born out of Tyson's need for additional workers," says Linda Messenger, welfare director for Pettis County, where the program began.

When Tyson opened shop six miles west of Sedalia, "It couldn't find enough folks to fill these jobs because the work is messy, and there's lots of carpal tunnel," says Proctor. The company, lured there by Sedalia's powerful state senator, James Mathewson, spent six months advertising in area newspapers and job centers, with little success. "Tyson had trouble with the labor supply and was getting upset."

So Tyson "began doing some informal visiting with Senator Mathewson about their need for more workers," recalls Messenger. According to Proctor, "Mathewson sponsored a bill after this erupted and got D.F.S. [the Division of Family Services] to



try a pilot where, if somebody applied for benefits, they were sent directly to Tyson. If they declined, they were refused benefits for sixty days."

Tyson personnel manager Jennifer Cave says Senator Mathewson was "the driving force" helping the company link up with the welfare department, but she doesn't recall who initiated the discussions.

The program is tailor-made for Tyson. "They have pretty much a constant need for employees because there's a high turnover there. So our offices keep in touch with their employment needs," says Deb Hendricks, information officer for the Missouri Division of Family Services.

Before the Direct Job Placement program, adds welfare director Messenger, "we had clients who were job-ready, who for one reason or another had not responded to Tyson's job advertisements on their own. They have a reputation. It's hard work, sometimes cold and dirty. It's not a glamorous job, and some people were turned off by that."

But once the program was in place, the agency—and Tyson—had leverage. Members of Messenger's staff visited the Tyson plant and "were able to get [clients] to the point of agreeing to an interview," she says. "We would set them up with an appointment, and if they failed to keep the interview we sanctioned them, and that meant they lost their food stamps. Actually, some of them did choose to lose their benefits instead of going to Tyson's."

In fact, the program has driven far more people off welfare than into jobs. Of the 195 recipients sent to one Tyson plant in Pettis County this year for mandatory interviews, just twenty-two accepted entry-level, assembly-line jobs paying \$6.70 an hour. Meanwhile, thirty-nine were sanctioned. Local welfare administrators concede they have no idea what happened to the other 134 recipients, who have disappeared from the county rolls.

While the state regards these disappearances as success stories, officials acknowledge that it's a case of out of sight, out of

mind. "If they just generally leave welfare, we don't know what they are doing," says Division of Family Services spokeswoman Christine Grobe. Caseload manager Karen Fay acknowledges that she doesn't have data on how many recipients are still working at the jobs where the state placed them. "We have not had to collect those, so we don't have them," she says.

Federal law doesn't require states to ensure that the people who are cut off welfare get jobs, says Mark Greenberg of the Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington, D.C. Instead, the government offers "caseload-reduction credits" to states that trim their rolls sufficiently. It's possible, says Greenberg, for a state to "fully satisfy federal participation rates without getting anybody a single job."

Job retention is virtually nonexistent. Since 1995, the Tyson plant in Pettis County has hired seventy-five people from the welfare offices in Sedalia and neighboring Johnson and Henry counties, according to plant personnel manager Jennifer Cave. But, she says, just "five or less" are still working at the plant, which employs a total of 1,360.

"The processing industry just has high turnover," Cave says breezily. "It's repetitive-motion, unskilled labor."

Union officials say that's precisely the problem. "These are not jobs that give people a career," says Barchak of the Service Employees union. "Jobs in poultry-processing plants are temporary because people burn out quickly. Nobody who burns out in six months is taking with them any skill they can apply to the rest of the American work force."

Crystal Wolfe, Jason's brother, a nineteen-year-old former Tyson lineworker with two children, puts it more bluntly: "If you're just coming off welfare and you haven't worked in a while, that place will make you never want to work again." ■

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