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Occasional Paper Series
Department of Rural Sociology
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Globalization and Latino Labor: Labor Advocates' Accounts of Meatpacking in Rural Missouri

Latinos in Missouri **Occasional Paper Series, No. 1**
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia

John J. Green and Elizabeth Barham
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia

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The *Latinos in Missouri* occasional paper series grew out of the writing experiences of graduate students in Rural Sociology 406: The Sociology of Globalization. Students in the class were required to write term papers on issues related to the growth of the Latino population in the state as an aspect of globalization. Typically, the papers were developed over the semester by making contact with Latino immigrants for in-depth interviews, although some papers make use of secondary data such as the U.S. Census. Each of these papers was reviewed by two of the student editors listed above. Student editors then returned the papers to the author with their suggestions. After these revisions were incorporated, I edited each paper one more time, returning it to the author with my final editorial comments. When these changes were made, the papers were posted to our website for downloading.

While these are graduate student class papers and limited in length and scope, they do represent a substantial amount of work on the part of the authors that generally goes well beyond a typical class requirement. They were written in the hope that they will be read and used by policy makers, agency personnel and service providers, teachers, community leaders, and anyone concerned with the well-being of Latino immigrants in the state, and indeed in the nation.

Many thanks to the student authors and editors who worked on these papers, and particularly to those individuals who shared generously of their time to provide the information gathered here.

Dr. Elizabeth Barham (BarhamE@missouri.edu)

Globalization and Latino Labor: Labor Advocates' Accounts of Meatpacking in Rural Missouri[*]

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ABSTRACT This paper presents labor advocates' accounts of the common problems faced by Latino/a workers employed in the Missouri meatpacking industry and the potential strategies they identify for addressing them. Information is drawn from participatory observation, document analysis and qualitative interviews. Placed in the context of globalization of the agri-food system and the increasingly problematic position of wage laborers, these accounts are discussed using a theoretical framework based on Karl Polanyi's concept of fictitious commodities.

In the closing months of the twentieth century, the Missouri General Assembly held a series of public hearings across the state to address the topic of immigration. The hearings were primarily used as a forum to discuss the effects of the growing Latino/a population on Missouri communities and to examine the needs of this population group.[1] Presentations and discussions focused on issues including the language barrier between English and non-English speakers, education systems that are ill-prepared to respond to populations in transition, challenges to accessing public health agencies, and problems faced by law enforcement officials when communicating and enforcing local laws.

Although mentioned by a few speakers, the employment situation of Latino workers appeared to be of secondary concern to those who participated in the meetings. This was an unfortunate omission, as much of the rise in the Latino population in rural Missouri is arguably due to the arrival of individuals and families seeking employment. Furthermore, many of the problems this group faces derive from the globalization of the labor force. Missouri policymakers could therefore gain a clearer understanding of the Latino experience in the state by approaching the

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[1] There was a 92.2 percent increase in the Latino/Hispanic population in Missouri from 61,702 persons in 1990 to 118,592 persons in 2000, as counted by the U.S. Census Bureau (Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis 2001). These data demonstrate the increased presence of Latinos in Missouri over the last decade. However, this number does not reflect all Latinos in the state, especially immigrants – the primary focus of this paper.

question from this perspective. As an attorney who recognized this gap said at a public hearing, "This is not an immigration problem. It is an industry and fair labor problem and should be dealt with as such" (O'Gorman 1999). The significance and timeliness of this issue was recently witnessed in the federal indictments brought against Tyson Foods for smuggling illegally documented immigrants to work in its meatpacking plants (Barboza 2001).

As a means of addressing this deficiency, in this study we investigate what labor advocates have to say about the situation faced by Latino workers employed in Missouri meatpacking plants. In the next section, we present an overview of the global agri-food system with specific attention to the meatpacking industry. This is followed by a discussion of Karl Polanyi's (1944) concept of "fictitious commodities," which we use here as a theoretical framework to provide insight into the situation faced by Latino workers in meatpacking. We then examine, in two sections, the problems expressed by labor advocates in Missouri and the proposals for changes they suggest. To conclude, we return to Polanyi's fictitious commodity framework as a way of understanding these issues more fully. Specifically, this theoretical framework supports the argument we make that Latino labor must be able to organize and unionize to correct unfair labor practices that currently exist in the state and the industry as a whole.

The Global Agri-Food System and Meatpacking

The term globalization refers to an interrelated set of economic, political, cultural and social phenomena. Here, we use it primarily to indicate the "increased interconnectedness of markets in different countries" which is apparent through increased international trade, foreign investment and the rise of international financial flows (Heilbroner and Milberg 1998:151; Strange 1998). Globalization has resulted in a dramatic increase in capital mobility to the extent that financial markets are now highly interdependent, despite attempts to protect national control over various currency forms (Strange 1998). McMichael refers to this situation as "virtual capitalism" (1999:3). One result of this situation is what can be referred to as a "virtual labor base." That is, producers in such integrated financial markets tend increasingly to draw needed labor from least-cost labor pools, regardless of country of origin. Labor, like capital, is expected to be "freed" to cross national boundaries as markets themselves become more "free" or integrated.

International trade policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) strongly influence the terms of economic and political interaction both domestically and internationally. Although they privilege capital, neither of these agreements afford strong protection to an increasingly internationalized labor force. Labor conditions have been considered "side issues" in trade negotiations. This is, in fact, one of the root causes of protests against global bodies which administer the new terms of trade, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Neo-liberal economic policies have increased corporate control over workers, especially in terms of their ability to relocate plants to states or countries with weaker labor regulations. By increasing the mobility of companies, these policies also have increased corporate bargaining power by making their threats to relocate more realistic. Corporations have even made direct attempts to keep some countries from having higher labor standards than others (i.e., leveling down) through WTO rulings relating to non-tariff trade barriers. These trade policies also

negatively impact countries other than the U.S., effectively forcing workers to migrate in order to survive.

As a sector of the global economy, food production has been highly industrialized and is in some ways emblematic of the market-based integration reflected in the term globalization. This change is due, in part, to a combination of technological developments and corporate concentration resulting from both vertical and horizontal integration of the food industry.[2] Capital's involvement in agriculture was primarily national in character in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s, but it became increasingly international as the twentieth century unfolded (Heffernan 2000). Today, the largest corporations are characterized as transnational or global, and as mergers of these firms continue, fewer corporations come to dominate food production internationally (Heffernan, Hendrickson and Gronski 1999). These changes have allowed for the formation of what researchers refer to as "food chain clusters" where a small number of firms and their associated partnerships and joint ventures control entire segments of the food system from the "gene to the store shelf" (Hendrickson, Heffernan, Howard and Heffernan 2001). Corporate concentration has been especially problematic in the livestock industry (Heffernan 2000). This sector involves a high level of out-sourcing of production inputs and the integration of industrial sub sectors across regions (Gouveia 1994). In terms of labor in the United States, one impact of these changes has been a massive shift from family farming, where labor is primarily provided by family members, to the use of hired wage laborers by agri-food corporations.

Meatpacking in the United States has concentrated in the Midwest and South over the last thirty years, and many of the new plants are located in rural areas (Cantú 1995).[3] Livestock production shifted to remote areas as larger, more concentrated, corporate-controlled production units supplanted family farm production (Cooper 1997; Drabenstott, Henry and Mitchell 1999; Griffith 1995). Meatpacking companies followed these moves to be near production sites and in search of lower wages and a non-unionized workforce. In the state of Missouri, packing plants are owned and operated by corporations that include Premium Standard Farms (PSF), Tyson Foods and ConAgra which are located near large-scale poultry and pork production facilities.

Packing plants are increasingly hiring migrant and immigrant laborers to work in these facilities, many of whom come from Latin American countries, primarily Mexico. The prevalence of immigrant workers in this particular segment of the economy is not a unique situation. There is a general pattern in the United States of over-representation of immigrants in low-wage occupations (Enchautegui 1998), despite the fact that many possess skilled backgrounds. There has been a long history of employment migration between Latin American countries and the United States, especially between Mexico and the U.S. In the past, this migration was primarily for seasonal agricultural work and was typically circular (i.e., immigrants returned to their home country at the end of the harvest season or moved on in search of employment), but over the past twenty years there has been an increasing presence of immigrant workers in manufacturing jobs that offer greater opportunities for year-round work. The food processing industry offers a combination of agriculturally-related work and the

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[2] Horizontal integration occurs with the expansion of a firm within the same stage of the food sector. Vertical integration occurs when a firm increases control over various stages of the food sector (Heffernan 2000).

[3] Some analysts distinguish between poultry processing and meatpacking; but they are both referred to collectively as the "meatpacking industry" in this paper.

potential for year-round work, allowing laborers to stay in areas for longer periods of time and making it more likely that they will bring their families with them (Burke and Goudy 1999).

Corporate actors have made attempts to control these new workers through extended battles against unionization and using workers' lack of U.S. citizenship against them. Guestworker programs, closely resembling the Bracero Program of the 1940s – 1960s (Wells 1996) have also increased management power over workers. The current guestworker law allows "non immigrant aliens" to work in agricultural employment for a specified period of time under certain conditions. There are attempts underway to revise this law in order to open it up to workers beyond what is specified as "farm work." Labor advocates argue that these programs entail laborers coming to the U.S., working, paying taxes and then being systematically sent back to their home countries. Their tenure in the U.S. is based on following certain rules, including not participating in any form of labor activism (Bacon 1999).

As a result of these changes in the meatpacking industry, many rural communities must now address the positive and negative impacts of this dynamic industry in their area (Broadway, Stull and Podraza 1994; Grey 1997; Henness 2000), including labor related issues. Small towns in the Midwest serve as the stage where global corporations and a newly "globalized" workforce interact. The extent to which communities are able to resolve the resulting tensions will reflect their coming to terms with globalization and the fact that a large part of production and distribution in all food sectors occurs beyond the farm-gate.

With the prevalence of meatpacking plants in rural areas and associated increases in the Latino population, labor advocates have expressed concern over the working conditions this group must face. It should be noted, however, that complaints waged against the meatpacking industry regarding the treatment of workers is by no means a new phenomenon or limited to specific ethnic groups. The 1906 publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* heightened awareness and concern among labor advocates about the conditions faced by laborers working in packing plants, and many of the conditions he chronicled have continued to the present time. In fact, contemporary labor advocates frequently refer to *The Jungle* as a means of situating current struggles in a broader historical framework. As shown in this paper, the concerns and proposals for change relating to Latino workers employed in the Missouri meatpacking industry are consistent with Sinclair's portrayal.

Theoretical Framework: Fictitious Commodities

Understanding the similarities and differences in how various population groups are impacted by changes in the agri-food system is important for researchers, policymakers, social service providers and others interested in addressing the unique needs of Latinos working in Missouri. Therefore, a framework for understanding these issues in their historical and global context is warranted. Such an understanding may prove useful to advocates wanting to address the conditions experienced by Latinos employed in packing plants, as well as those experienced by wage laborers in general. A particularly useful analytic framework for this endeavor is Karl Polanyi's (1944) argument concerning the "fictitious commodities" of land and labor.[4]

[4] Polanyi (1944) identifies money as a third "fictitious commodity," but we will not address it here as it is less central to our principle argument.

Empirically, "commodities" can be defined as those objects that are specifically produced for sale on the market. The contacts between buyers and sellers to exchange commodities constitute markets. Land and labor are essential to the operation of the market system, because they are primary factors of production. Prior to the emergence of an economy dominated by the market as an organizing principle, which has taken place roughly over the past 250 years, market logic was applied only to those goods produced specifically to be sold. Land and labor were not commonly thought of as commodities. Market exchanges were generally embedded in social relationships, meaning that they were governed by social norms that restricted where, when and how they could take place (Polanyi 1968). In contrast, within a market-dominated society, land and labor must be organized in to markets to assure their steady supply for the production of tradable goods. Subjecting land and labor to buying and selling forced the logic of the market mechanism upon them, and they came to be viewed more as "commodities" alongside other goods. Market prices were created for land (i.e., rent) and labor (i.e., wages) (Polanyi 1944), with the idea that these prices would rise and fall according to what economists consider to be the "laws" of supply and demand, thus creating a "self-regulating" market.

The problem with this arrangement is that neither land nor labor are actually commodities in the sense of being produced for sale on the market. In other words, because they are not produced as commodities in accordance with the "rules" of market value, land and labor can only be considered commodities in a "fictitious" sense. In actuality, land is nature or the environment, and labor is another name for human beings (Polanyi 1944). Simply treating them as commodities does not *make* them commodities (Barham 1999). Focusing on labor, we see that it is a necessary and vital part of the supposed self-regulating market, yet its treatment as a commodity is problematic. The primary contradiction is that labor power cannot be subjected to market demands without impacting the human individuals and their families who are actually the bearers of the "commodity" labor. Allowed to follow through to its conclusion, the use of labor in a truly unregulated market economy would eventually exploit workers to the extent that they could no longer reproduce themselves (Block and Somers 1984). By this we mean that overwork in poor and dangerous conditions without regard to the well-being of workers would make it impossible for them to maintain viable personal lives (rest, diet, overall health) and stable families.

The potential of such negative impacts resulting from treatment of labor *only* as a commodity (i.e., market element) provides both the justification and the necessity for workers to resist this definition of their humanity. On the other hand, supporters of the market system tend to adhere to the principle that "no arrangement or behavior should be allowed to exist that might prevent the actual functioning of the market mechanism on the lines of the commodity fiction" (Polanyi 1944:73). This means that people and organizations supporting a market-dominated society strive to control labor, dictating its internal and external relationships in such a way as to make it fit the commodity model as far as possible, despite the contradictions this imposes (Polanyi 1944).

As global markets have become "freer" for the legal movement of capital, this same freedom has not extended to the legal movement of labor in order to seek work, as the laws of supply and demand would dictate (Sassen 1999). Instead, labor's mobility has remained largely contained within the geographic boundaries of nation-states. There are, however, exceptions to this rule, including the movement of white-collar workers for global companies, temporary migrant labor

regimes regulated by the state (e.g., guestworker programs) and illegal immigration (Koc 1994; Sassen 1999). The primary difference between domestic and immigrant workers in this sense is their relation to the state. Immigrants in need of employment can more easily be denied legal, political and civil rights, leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Burawoy 1976).

Although historically there have been ongoing attempts to control labor and make it conform to the commodity fiction, workers and their supporters have resisted total market dominance of their working lives. By unionizing and demanding higher wages, safety regulations and benefits such as health insurance and sick leave, the labor movement has acted to assert the humanity of workers and demand fair treatment. Its gains have removed labor somewhat from the dictates of total market logic (Polanyi 1944). However, as particular groups of workers have succeeded in resisting market dominance, other groups of workers find themselves targeted as "desirable" employees by corporate employers, usually because they have less power to defend their position. The targeted workers are often of a lower socioeconomic status and may be members of a racial or ethnic minority group that is traditionally discriminated against, meaning they will have less bargaining power. When immigrant workers become involved, language and cultural barriers can also make organizing resistance more complicated.

Methods

Application and extension of Polanyi's framework provides insight into the conditions faced by Latino meatpacking workers in rural Missouri. In this study, we apply the framework to accounts of the meatpacking experience shared by labor advocates in Missouri. These activist claims are considered representative of the range of issues affecting Latino workers in meatpacking, and they help us to synthesize a picture of working conditions. Our approach is a praxis-oriented case study where advocates' views of the world are taken seriously and critically analyzed, because of the advocates' experience in the areas of labor organizing, meatpacking and addressing migration/immigration issues.

The information for this analysis was acquired through use of three primary methods. They were: 1) participatory observation at public events and activist meetings addressing labor issues generally and those regarding migrant/immigrant labor and meatpacking in particular; 2) analysis of public hearing testimony, newspaper articles, government reports, industry reports and both academic and popular literature dealing with immigration and labor conditions in packing plants; and 3) five in-depth qualitative interviews of labor advocates working to assist Latino workers in Missouri.

Latino Labor in Missouri Meatpacking

In the following two sections, we present the problems of concern faced by Latino workers in Missouri meatpacking plants and proposed solutions to them as identified by labor advocates (see Tables 1 and 2).

Problems of Concern

Labor advocates agree that meatpacking plants initially hire workers from within the regions where they are located. But if workers from the local population begin to question wage levels and working conditions, management often resorts to new mechanisms of control over the workforce. Packing plants will seek more compliant sources of labor, either by moving their operations closer to the desired labor source or by recruiting new labor to the plant. According to

several analysts, some plants with a unionized workforce have declared bankruptcy and shut down, only to reopen for operation under a different label, because labor contracts are often attached to brand name labels. They may even pick up the original label again after the contract period has ended and worker benefits and protections have been substantially ratcheted down (Heffernan 1999). The strategy of bringing in outside workers involves recruitment in areas with high unemployment and the availability of a transient and thus easily manipulated workforce. Labor advocates maintain that packing plants specifically recruit workers in areas with relatively high populations of migrant workers, many of whom do not have legal documentation. As a result, a large percentage of the workers in packing plants come from this pool, and differences in cultural practices and language further facilitate exploitive practices used by corporations.

According to labor advocates, the strategy of replacing potentially pro-union workers as a means of controlling labor was used by a corporation in northern Missouri. Workers at the one-shift packing plant began to question the company on a range of issues including wages, benefits and working conditions. When what had been minimal union activity began to increase in the area, the company started a second shift and brought in workers from outside the local community to fill the new positions. This effectively thwarted union organizing activities as activists faced a workforce that had almost doubled in size. Furthermore, most of the new workers did not speak English, while most of the organizers did not speak Spanish, creating an additional barrier to workforce organizing.

Although meatpacking plants in Missouri and many other places throughout the country pay more than minimum wage to their workers – a fact frequently pointed out by industry officials in their public relations campaigns – advocates maintain that wages are not high enough for workers, let alone their families, to live a decent life (Table 1). Furthermore, companies often deduct expenses for meals, transportation, rent (if housing is provided) and some work equipment directly from workers' paychecks, leaving little of original wages. Job benefit packages are typically not available; when they are, the premiums for benefits such as health insurance are often too high for workers to realistically afford them, given other financial commitments. Because many immigrant workers come to the U.S. to help support their families in their home country, they are also more likely to deny themselves needed protection in favor of sending money home when wages are too low.

Meatpacking plant workers, as a rule, are particularly in need of medical coverage due to the level of injuries associated with the job. Much of this is due to fast line speeds. The companies contend that meat cutting must be kept at high speeds in order to make plants more productive and "efficient." The managerial concept of success is based on moving as much of the particular product through the plant as fast as possible. Fast line speeds result in worker injuries, especially repetitive motion disorders such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis. According to some analysts, the overall focus on speed in packing plants also results in safety measures being sidestepped in the plants, causing numerous other health and safety problems.

Medical attention for work-related injuries is a primary area of concern for labor advocates. If processing plants are to continue fast line speeds, they must keep the lines staffed throughout each production shift and maintain a low level of injuries. People continue to get hurt, however, due to dangerous working conditions. And so at times industry counts on its ability to intimidate workers, forcing them to tolerate and underreport injuries to keep the line moving. Some labor advocates maintain that company doctors and nurses also falsely diagnose workers, denying that

they have illnesses or injuries, as a means of protecting packing plants from expenses and liability. When workers' injuries are severe enough to demand attention, they are sometimes sent to public hospitals with the understanding that they are not to report their medical problems as work-related. In addition, workers and their families are often in need of medical attention for basic health problems, such as respiratory difficulties, due to their poor day-to-day living conditions, but they cannot afford this care.

Table 1: Issues of Concern Identified by Labor Advocates

Wages and benefits
- Low wages
- Lack of benefits
- Benefits not affordable

Workplace safety
- Overall fast pace/fast line speeds
- Safety steps dropped from packing processes
- Repetitive motion disorders

Medical attention
- Misdiagnosis to hide work-related injuries
- Pressure on workers not to report work-related injuries

Housing
- Lack of availability
- Lack of affordability
- Substandard conditions
- Forced overcrowding

Corporate control of labor
- Opposition to labor unions
- Purposeful efforts to divide workers
- Intimidation of workers who file complaints

Labor advocates report that packing plant workers often live in substandard housing conditions. In many cases, the host communities simply do not have enough housing to accommodate the rapid influx in the population. When housing is available, it is often overpriced or of substandard quality, often consisting of trailers or garages with no insulation or approved heating devices. Meat-processing companies have, in some instances, purchased property for housing and then charged high rents, forcing overcrowding.

Based on this discussion, it is clear that meatpacking workers, whether from the U.S. or immigrants, are in a difficult position. They desperately need employment, yet their job security rests on them not questioning the effects of their labor being treated as a commodity. In a market-dominated economy, these can include substandard housing, precarious access to food and other basic necessities, increased medical risk without clear avenues for medical attention, and the constant stress and social isolation that comes with fear of arrest.

Proposed Solutions

Labor advocates insist that action must be taken to correct these labor abuses. It is important to note that these activists are sensitive to the fact that people, including immigrants, need jobs.

They are not attempting to shut plants down or force them to relocate. Rather, they want the jobs provided to be safe and rewarding. Advocates argue that corporations should be held responsible to workers and to the communities in which plants are located (Table 2).

Table 2: Proposals for Addressing Problems Identified by Labor Advocates

Guiding principle
- Make work safe and rewarding

Union Organizing
- Protect and expand workers' right to organize
- Multicultural and multilingual efforts
- Cultural sensitivity

Coalitions
- Bring together various actors impacted by the same industry
- Form cross-border coalitions

Fight policies that have a negative impact on workers, such as:
- International trade agreements without labor stipulations
- Policies giving corporations greater mobility
- Policies that force people to migrate in order to survive

Support and promote policies that have a positive impact on workers
- Increase minimum wage
- Strengthen and enforce worker safety laws
- Greater access to government social programs (e.g., medical care)
- Make corporations pay their fair share (e.g., no corporate tax breaks)
- On-the-job language training in English

In theory, there are several avenues through which workers may seek redress for their grievances against employers. At the federal level, these include the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) for health and safety violations, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for cases of discrimination and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for issues regarding union elections and unfair labor practices. Most complaints at the state level begin with the Missouri Department of Labor and Industrial Relations. Despite the existence of these official channels, a common perception among labor advocates is that company management has strategies for detecting who files complaints with government regulators. One union contract negotiator reported that workers who file complaints are eventually fired.

Thus, advocates maintain that the best way to help Latino workers is to protect and expand their right to organize unions. As one union member stated when discussing the avenues open to workers who wish to file a grievance, "You know, the only real avenue you have is to organize, is to have a contract, so that you a have a voice within your plant – you have a voice on your working conditions, you have a voice on your rates of pay and you have a voice on your profits."

Some labor advocates have focused considerable attention on the need to build coalitions with labor and human rights advocacy groups in other countries, especially in Mexico. Ironically, this approach has succeeded to the extent that the U.S. labor advocates most willing to embrace the Latino population as partners in solidarity have more interaction with Mexican workers in

maquiladoras across the border than with Latino immigrant workers in the U.S. This may be partially due to the difficulty that advocates face in obtaining entrance into the immigrants' world, given the need that many of these workers have to avoid detection by the government.

Solidarity between domestic workers and migrants/immigrants is often tenuous, and this leaves labor advocates in a complex and difficult situation. Beyond the apparent ethnic and language barriers that are often present, historically there have been conflictual relationships concerning competition for jobs. This difficulty is often compounded by labor advocates' membership in the community where they work and having the tendency to be sympathetic to local concerns over the cultural impacts that new population groups are having. It is evident that there are many barriers yet to be broken before a unified movement can take place among workers in the meatpacking industry.

This points to the clear need for bilingual organizers and better recruitment of Latino labor activists for interacting with the new workforce. Many unions already have bilingual or multilingual organizers in their locals, but there is a definite need for more, especially in rural areas. Labor organizing efforts have also tried to incorporate more culturally sensitive and appropriate projects and programs. Attempts have been made to bring people together to fight against companies exploiting different groups. An example of this exists in Delmarva where the Poultry Justice Alliance, based in Maryland, is uniting workers and contract growers in the fight against unfair practices in the poultry industry. In the Midwest, the Missouri Rural Crisis Center, an organization primarily concerned with preserving the family farm, has long fought against unfair labor practices in the pork industry and has formed a food cooperative in conjunction with packing plant workers in Sedalia, Missouri.

While critical of the interaction between corporations and the government, labor advocates do not dismiss the importance of public policy aimed at helping workers. They demand that greater attention be given to raising wages and enforcing workplace safety laws as well as creating greater access to government programs for health care. There has also been union activity in support of the U.S. government declaring amnesty for illegal immigrants already in the country (Greenhouse 2000). Some activists see promise in a federal court ruling that many packing plant workers may be covered under farmworker protection laws; however, these standards are well below those of other industrial sectors. Labor advocates also tend to be sympathetic to the problems that community institutions face in providing services to new workers and their families. They call on government to make companies help pay for the services that workers need, and for companies to provide adequate wages and benefits so that workers can help provide these things for themselves.

Conclusion: Meatpacking and Labor as a Fictitious Commodity

In this paper, we have attempted to bring together and voice the concerns expressed by labor advocates concerning Latinos employed in the meatpacking industry in rural Missouri, while placing these concerns within a global context. These accounts are similar to those found in previously published academic and popular literature (e.g., Andreas 1994; Bacon 1999; Cook 1999; Cooper 1997; Grey 1997; Griffith 1995; Griffith, Broadway and Stull 1995). While the definition of Latino workers as simply "labor" rather than as full human beings may be fictitious, as Polanyi (1944) said, the effects on these workers are very real.

To counter these effects, Latinos working in U.S. meatpacking plants need help in meeting potential allies with diverse backgrounds, especially those with Spanish language skills who are experienced in labor advocacy. Furthermore, Latino immigrants need assistance in battling the policies and institutions that drive them to seek work in the U.S. Alternative immigration policies and programs that treat workers with dignity and take into account their important role in the U.S. agricultural economy must be approved and implemented. Their home countries can help assure this by negotiating with the U.S. government on an open basis regarding the status of their citizens when working abroad. International agreements in particular must begin to fully incorporate protections for labor on an international basis (Barry 1995). In sum, we must recognize that emancipation of Latino immigrant laborers, like all workers, will require solidarity among diverse groups if they are to negotiate with capital and put an end to exploitation.

In closing, it should be emphasized once again that this paper presents accounts expressed by labor advocates of the challenges faced by Latinos working in Missouri's meatpacking industry. It compliments the report produced by the Immigration Committee of the Missouri General Assembly (Motley and Bauer 1999) by addressing the lack of information available on meatpacking labor and providing a forum through which labor advocates could voice their concerns. The next step in this effort must involve listening to the voices of Latino workers themselves. We urge policymakers in the state to devise ways of hearing more directly from this often invisible population so that the quality of work and life in Missouri can be made one that we can all be proud of.

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