

Labor and the South

July 31, 2018



More than a hundred years ago, the muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair worked undercover for several weeks in the cattle slaughterhouses of Chicago. The result was his melodramatic but revelatory novel *The Jungle*, a work Jack London called the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin of wage slavery.” Sinclair’s narrative depicted the brutal working conditions endured by East European immigrants on the killing floor, engaging in back-breaking, dangerous, and tedious labor for subsistence wages.

Evidently, little has changed in the last century for many workers in the American meatpacking industry. Those familiar with Sinclair’s vivid exposé will feel a sense of déjà vu in reading this remarkable documentary study by Vanesa Ribas. Initially entering factory employment to gather material for a doctoral dissertation, Ribas goes far beyond sociological analysis in describing the year and a half she spent on the line at the Swine Packing Company—her pseudonym for a hog processing plant in North Carolina. She combines a graphic portrayal of work and working conditions on the line with an affecting personal memoir of what she came to regard as a “life-defining experience” (xx).

The national media has recently taken at least some notice of those who labor in the national economy. So-called reality shows on television have followed the efforts of deep-water fishermen and women and ice-road truckers, primarily for the drama surrounding their difficult and often hazardous occupations. But there is hardly any curiosity about other members of the working class, the majority employed in mundane, boring, repetitive jobs remain uncelebrated and ignored—invisible to the attentions of mainstream society despite the physical and emotional strain under which so many toil to make their contribution to the Gross National Product.

The operation at the Swine plant consists of the slaughter and processing of more than 10,000 hogs per day, achieved through the efforts of some 1,200 production workers. As Ribas describes it, it is unrelenting labor—physically debilitating and mind-numbing, often performed at an accelerated rate through shifts of double-digit hours. “At times,” she reports, “my body experienced injury and pain to a degree I never felt before and in ways I had not known were possible, ... producing feelings of desperation, hopelessness, and anger” (xiii). Watching a group of new hires being led along the cutting floor, Ribas notes that

if they made it, in the next month of their lives the work schedule would reset their bowel movements and make them uniquely aware of the precious value of time. ... The ... recurring act of clenching their hands as they grabbed hold of a knife or loin or bag would reveal its true viciousness overnight, when the pulpy muscles of the palms become so tender that turning a doorknob was an excruciating feat. If they made it through that first month, they would have come to know what it feels like to wear away with work the very fibers of one’s being. (xviii)

From its founding in the 1950s, the Swine Company has been able to successfully resist unionization of a mostly African American workforce, using means both legal and illegal. The more recent influx

of large numbers of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean into the area has presented the company with what Ribas calls a super exploitable labor pool. With its “right to work” law on the books, North Carolina boasts the lowest unionization rate of any of the fifty states. A worker with a complaint over wages or working conditions would face instant dismissal—a take it or leave it situation for the many Latinos who lack legal status and fear deportation. Some African Americans regard the hiring of undocumented immigrants as a ploy by the company to prevent any possibility of unionization.

Whites occupy the higher executive and superintendent positions at Swine, and few are found on the cutting floor. Most of those who toil on the production lines are Latino, along with a sizable, stable core of African American workers, many in lower-level supervisory jobs. As newcomers both to America and the factory environment itself, with limited English-language skills, Latinos feel themselves disadvantaged relative to native-born black workers. Many call the latter *moyos*, a term with pejorative connotations, and assert that African Americans do not work as hard and are often favored by black supervisors. Nevertheless, this resentment is usually not reciprocated by black workers, some of whom express sympathy for the plight of the undocumented.

Ribas, bilingual and of Puerto Rican descent, was able to embed herself not merely in the routine rhythm and culture of the factory floor, but after working hours enthusiastically joined in the social life of her work mates, Latino and black. Far from a mere sociological study, academically impressive as it is, she has been able at the same time to present a graphic picture of the realities of working-class life and labor, in the participant-observer tradition of Sinclair, George Orwell, and Barbara Ehrenreich.

The author’s subtitle refers to the making of a “New South,” the changing demographic of a wave of Hispanic immigration. It would seem, given her reportage on the contemporary exploitation of human labor, that the “New” South appears to have much in common with the culture of the Old South.