

Adapted from Chapter 25 of Back of the Hiring Line, by Roy Beck

It took a deadly coronavirus to cause many Americans to pause and notice how important the rest of the workforce was to the nation's daily quality of life. These weren't just people who may not have thrived as well in the academic grading systems of high school; they were people with aptitudes, temperaments, skills and humanity that when applied to their jobs were, yes, *essential* to the functioning of the American society.

Just before the pandemic shutdown in early 2020, economist Elise Gould advised:

“It is important to keep in mind when analyzing the labor market or discussing economic policy that 61.9% of the workforce do not have a four-year college degree. . . . If the economy is going to deliver decent wages for most U.S. workers, it needs to deliver for the six in 10 workers who do *not* have a four-year college degree.”¹

Within a few months, a significant portion of those were the ones being lauded with the honorific of the year, “essential workers.” Most of them were part of the working classes whose interests had been ignored and devalued for decades by the makers of immigration policies -- policies that had steadily depressed their wages and their labor participation rates. And, of course, many of them were immigrants themselves who now found *their* climb up the economic ladder depressed by each annual legal arrival of a million more permanent competitors, not counting the unauthorized foreign workers.

For more than four decades, Americans with college degrees on average had seen their fortunes rise as those without degrees slid backwards, creating wider and wider income disparities throughout our society. Federal immigration policies are a significant contributor to widening the gap in how work is compensated in this country.

That is not to suggest that every form of work should be compensated the same. But it surely makes a case for letting market forces set the value of work without the government putting its thumb on the scales of economic justice against the interests of the less-educated; and that is what government immigration policies have been doing these last four decades.

How can it make any sense for a country to move its own essential *workers* to the sideline while bringing in citizens of other countries to fill the essential *jobs*? While we might lament that so

¹ Elise Gould, “State of Working America Wages 2019: A story of slow, uneven, and unequal wage growth over the last 40 years,” Economic Policy Institute, February 20, 2020.

many American workers are poorly educated, it hardly seemed fitting for Congress to punish those workers by giving away the jobs for which they *are* qualified.²

Millions of young adults who drop out of high school need an opportunity to earn a living now. Unfortunately, jobs for which a high-school drop-out *are* suited are routinely earmarked by leaders of both political parties for foreign workers whose numerical presence would allow employers to also lower the wages for Americans who *do* hold on to their jobs.

However, after the 2008 jobs collapse, neither President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, nor Congress ever considered even the tiniest reduction of annual immigration below a million a year. And during the long ensuing years of the slow jobs recovery, lobbyists never stopped claiming a shortage of American workers or clamoring for an increase in annual foreign labor.

This counterintuitive behavior and indifference to the needs of non-employed and underemployed Americans has been the predictable pattern in Washington since at least the early 1980s.

In 2021, like clockwork, before the pandemic was over and with tens of millions of able-bodied working-age Americans not in a job, the lobbies for more foreign workers were back out in full force and finding major support in Congress and much of the news media for increasing the annual numbers of lifetime and temporary U.S. work permits to citizens of other countries.

The insensitivity to the alarmingly large portion of African Americans without a job should have been glaring. The rush for more visas for foreign workers was happening at a time of much public attention to the disproportionate job losses suffered by African Americans during the pandemic, and it came after a year of one of the country's most intense discussions about systems that disadvantage African Americans (once again triggered by a police incident).

You could be forgiven for judging the insensitivity as yet another outbreak of anti-Black institutional racism at the highest level. But few of the people pushing more immigration at a time like that thought they were harming African Americans. The problem was that they weren't thinking about African Americans at all when advocating immigration expansion.

² Roy Beck, “‘Occupation Collapse’ and Poverty Wages: Consequences of Large Guestworker Programs,” Testimony to U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Claims of the Committee on the Judiciary, 108th Congress, March 24, 2004.

The behavior of indifference raises fundamental questions about what kind of national community we are. What kind of national community do we want to *be*? How should we as a national community fashion our immigration system to show that we truly value the non-college-degree members of our community whom we salute as being “essential workers” -- particularly the ones on the lower rungs of the jobs ladder? Might the pay and esteem of these essential-worker jobs be allowed to rise to a level that Americans outside the labor market would be enticed to take one when it opens up? The answers aren't clear because most of our country's leaders appear to be afraid to grapple with the questions.

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