‘JOBS AMERICANS WON’T DO’ – THE LIE THAT BROKE A NATION

Charlotte, N.C., is making headlines this week because dozens of construction sites have gone silent. ICE swept through the region, and the labor force evaporated almost instantly.

A major American city discovered, in real time, that its building boom was being held together by workers who couldn’t legally be there.

Watching that footage hit me hard, because I’ve seen it before — not on the evening news, but in the slow collapse of my own childhood community.

I grew up forty miles north of Louisville, Ky., in a one-stoplight town held together by tobacco, construction, and the kinds of gritty jobs that built the region’s character.

My dad ran a small construction contracting business and held a small tobacco base, which gives you the legal right to grow a certain weight of tobacco.

My brothers and I worked tobacco as teenagers, starting at twelve or thirteen, and my brothers did construction with Dad as soon as we were old enough to hold a hammer.

Those jobs weren’t easy. Tobacco paid around $10 an hour in the early-to-mid 1980s, the equivalent of $30 today, and you earned every penny.

The work was filthy, exhausting, and dangerous: Sticky sap soaked into your skin, July sun cooked you alive, and harvest season meant hatchets, long metal spikes, and dark, dusty barn lofts where one bad step could break a leg.

But we did it gladly because the pay was good and the work meant something.

Every kid I knew in high school worked tobacco, along with a good share of the adults. It was the backbone of the community.

Then illegal labor arrived, and things began to shift.

The first wave hit the tobacco farms.

Farmers who had paid teenagers and local laborers fair wages realized they could hire adults from Mexico and Central America for far less and house them in the kinds of conditions Americans would never tolerate: eight men to a sagging, leaking trailer with no electricity, no running water, no insulation.

They were paid in cash, they didn’t complain, they worked year-round, and they had no leverage because they knew their employers could always get them deported.

Within a few seasons, American teenagers were no longer hired. Within a few more, the full-time local farmhands, many of whom had been in the area for generations, were gone, too.

My parents saw exactly what was happening when one neighbor proudly moved an entire illegal crew into a run-down trailer on their property on a hillside, right in the center of a dairy cow pasture.

They thought they had found a clever solution to their labor costs.

My parents were disgusted, because they understood what it meant: the beginning of the end for the community’s economic life.

How the Native-Born Labor Market Collapsed, One Job at a Time

The second wave hit construction.

Illegal workers who came for tobacco began taking roofing, concrete, and general contracting jobs.

My father watched his own bids get undercut again and again by contractors who weren't paying insurance, taxes, workers' comp, or legal wages.

He played by the rules. They didn't. His bids were honest. Theirs were impossible.

And the impossible bids kept winning. Small local contractors began collapsing one after another, and with them went the trades that had once provided steady work for generations.

The third wave hit Louisville's meatpacking plants, dangerous but decently paid jobs that could support a family.

After illegal labor penetrated the industry, wages plummeted. Locals stopped applying because they couldn't survive on what those jobs now paid.

The companies didn't care. Illegal crews would fill the shifts at half the cost.

The fourth wave was quieter but devastating: the wives and older kids of the new arrivals began filling fast-food, restaurant, and service jobs.

Those jobs disappeared for American citizens as quickly as the farm and construction work had.

Suddenly, teenagers couldn't get any jobs at all.

The ambitious ones left for the cities; the rest were stranded with no path into adulthood.

That drained the cultural lifeblood from the town. When you lose your youth, you lose your future.

The social collapse followed the economic one.

Welfare, once nearly nonexistent, became a survival mechanism.

A government housing complex went up, something unimaginable a decade earlier.

Property crime increased as people stole scrap metal, tools, and anything they could sell.

When I attended high school, even the worst troublemaking kids mostly drank beer and maybe

smoked a joint around a bonfire at midnight. They were idiots, but they were harmless and generally got over it.

But the flow of foreign labor brought in something new: meth and harder drugs, carried in through the same illicit channels that brought the new labor north.

Families began to fracture. Kids were raised by grandparents. Churches thinned. Schools struggled.

The town didn't implode all at once. It simply withered, season by season, job by job, until it became a pale version of what it had been.

Politicians Blame the Workers

And through all of this, politicians, pundits, and corporate lobbyists kept repeating the same line: "Americans just won't do these jobs."

That phrase infuriated me from the first time I heard it. I knew it was a lie. I had done the tobacco work myself. My brothers had. Every teenager we knew had.

Every adult performed the hard labor that kept the region alive.

Americans didn't suddenly lose their work ethic. The jobs were taken from them — not by immigrants directly, but by American employers who built a business model on illegal labor and by a federal government that looked the other way for forty years.

What Americans "won't do" are jobs that have been made illegal in everything but name — jobs where wages have collapsed to exploit desperation, where safety standards are ignored, where workers are paid off the books, where insurance and taxes are bypassed, and where living conditions violate every regulation on the books.

When the floor is lowered that far, legal workers cannot enter the market at all.

That isn't laziness. That's math.

Kentuckians know this dynamic intimately because our parents and grandparents lived through the

company-store era, when the coal companies controlled the whole lives of their employees and paid in scrip instead of dollars to maintain economic power.

Kentuckians recognize exploitation when they see it.

When elites say “jobs Americans won't do,” we hear the truth hiding underneath: “jobs Americans won't do under company-store conditions.” And no one should.

Besides, it's not the fault of workers, not at all. That rests squarely on the politicians, in the one bill President Ronald Reagan said he regretted signing.

1986: The Amnesty That Changed Everything

In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), a sweeping bill that granted amnesty to *more than 2.7 million illegal immigrants* already living in the United States. It was sold as a grand bargain: a one-time legalization now, paired with strict employer enforcement later. With this combination, lawmakers promised, illegal immigration would finally be solved “once and for all.”

Congress only upheld half of the bargain.

The amnesty happened.

The enforcement never did.

The employer-verification system was toothless from the start — underfunded, weakly enforced, and politically inconvenient.

Businesses quickly discovered that hiring illegal labor remained a low-risk, high-reward strategy.

The message traveled fast: The United States had demonstrated that if you arrived illegally and stayed long enough, Congress might eventually reward you with legal status.

And from the perspective of those considering the journey north, this wasn’t irrational behavior. It was economically logical.

Enforcement was inconsistent. Work was plentiful. Employers preferred illegal labor because it was cheaper and more compliant.

The United States had inadvertently (one hopes) created a massive incentive pipeline: Come illegally, stay quiet, get rewarded.

IRCA didn't reduce illegal immigration. It normalized it, then supercharged it.

The price was paid, not by politicians or lobbyists, but by workers like the men and women and teenagers in my town.

What happened to us in rural Kentucky — tobacco collapsing, construction undercut, meatpacking wages falling, youth jobs disappearing, communities crumbling — was the predictable outcome of a federal policy that left the borders loose, the incentives warped, and American workers unprotected.

A Nation Built on Illegality Cannot Stand

The collapse of my community wasn't unique.

Agriculture, construction, meatpacking, hospitality, and warehousing all followed the same trajectory.

Illegal labor became an unofficial subsidy propping up entire industries, and the political class pretended not to see the consequences; the rewards were just too good.

Charlotte's silent construction sites are just the most recent example of the fallout, demonstrating the depth of the problem.

They aren't evidence that Americans refuse to work.

They're evidence that the economy has been engineered so that many jobs can only exist with illegal labor, and that entire industries collapse the moment anyone enforces the law.

Blue-collar Americans feel besieged because they have been besieged, economically and socially, for forty years.

Their wages collapsed. Their towns emptied. Their kids fled. Their families fractured. And when they tried to explain what was happening, they were dismissed as ignorant, hateful, or delusional.

They weren’t any of those things.

They were the canaries in the coal mines, except no one was paying attention when they began gasping for air.

We cannot build a stable nation on a labor force that evaporates as soon as the law is enforced.

We cannot restore dignity to working-class Americans while preserving the very system that destroyed their livelihoods.

And we cannot keep lying to ourselves about the consequences of a labor model built on illegality, exploitation, and displacement.

Illegal labor isn’t a solution. It’s a dependency — one that corrodes wages, destroys skill pipelines, hollows out communities, and leaves entire sectors vulnerable to collapse.

If we want a strong and resilient country, we must confront that reality now.

The alternative is more Charlottes, more hollowed-out towns, and more lost generations, all sacrificed on the altar of a system that was never sustainable in the first place.

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