

Horseracing

March 9, 2009

Letter from: Desnee Flakes

[Note: The first two letters below appear in *New Politics* no. 45. Further correspondence is available on the web only. Additional comments are welcome; please submit to the editors.]

I just finished reading the article by Martin Oppenheimer in Vol XI No.4, and was fascinated. I have read many articles on this subject including the ones by Stephen Steinberg. As an African-American woman who spent 30 years in the horseracing industry, I have to say that Mr. Steinberg appears to have a much better grasp of the situation than Mr. Oppenheimer. I find it insulting when writers rely solely on researchers to form opinions, because neither has any first hand knowledge of the subject matter.

Horseracing began in this country during slavery; therefore the majority of workers were Black. During the last immigration wave Irish, English, Italians, and Jews replaced Blacks primarily as trainers and jockeys. They also began to work in larger numbers as grooms and hotwalkers. During the latest (1977 to present) migration, which I bore witness to, Hispanics work the majority of backstretch jobs with the exception of trainer and assistant trainer, which are still the domain of whites. I was there when illegal immigrants came to Hollywood Park, Santa Anita, and Delmar, and asked how much the boss was paying his American help, then offered to work for much less. I have gone to barns for a job, been told the job was filled, then heard from someone on the job that they wanted someone Hispanic. The reasons for this vary from the tried and true, "Mexicans work harder" to the more honest "they would rather work with their own kind." How do you justify hiring someone with little or no skill set over someone with years on the job? You don't. There is no way to justify hiring someone who needs to be trained to care for a living thing (that often costs more than that person will make in a lifetime) over someone who has done the work for a lifetime.

Another thing I have witnessed first hand is the slave master mentality of many trainers. This mentality is best served by those who have little or no rights. Most grooms, hotwalkers, and exercise riders work seven days a week, and many workers don't get vacations. Large numbers of illegal immigrants often leave the country for months at a time to tend their farms and homes, most often in Mexico. For years it would amaze me to see trainers during the winter in New York begging the Americans to work for them, because that is the time of year many illegals go home. During this time of year you might hear trainers complaining about their immigrant help, but come spring they gladly rehire them. Researchers wouldn't draw conclusions based on history, and they don't know enough about various industries to ask the right questions. Nor do they seem to ask those who have been affected by wholesale shifts in policy; they tend to ask those who have shifted the policy. Even the most unsophisticated people tend not to incriminate themselves.

Desnee Flakes Aiken, SC

Martin Oppenheimer replies to Flakes

The horseracing industry isn't much different from other capitalist enterprises. It's one of many in which African-Americans have been displaced over the years, first, as Ms. Flakes reminds us, by European immigrants after slavery, and more recently by Latinos. Racetrack owners want cheap "backstretch labor," complain U.S.-born workers aren't available, hire immigrants, and pretty soon their networks enable them to take over most of the jobs. There is no doubt that African-Americans

are trapped between the demand for cheap labor, the supply of available immigrant cheap labor, the process of network hiring, and discrimination based on stereotypes (“Mexicans work harder” among others) and old-fashioned racism. Researchers from different perspectives, as I said in my article, agree that employers have a “hierarchy of preferences” with African-Americans on the bottom.

A step in the direction of trying to overcome this hierarchy would be to emulate janitors and other service workers and move towards organizing, a process that is already well underway in the “gaming industry” and even in some parts of racing. It’s really the only way to cure slave master mentalities.

Desnee Flakes’ response to M. Oppenheimer

Let me give Mr. Oppenheimer some additional information: all potential back stretch personnel (in New York) used to line up at the front gate, and wait to be ushered in by whichever trainer needed help. Though Americans were lining up at 5:00 am everyday, the trainers began to cherry pick the Hispanic help out of the line. After awhile the Americans stopped coming, and the network hiring became the norm. As for organizing, Americans tried that in New York, the first time we started voting barn by barn. The first barn to vote was that of a trainer who would later be jailed under the RICCO ACT. His barn voted for the union but, since a member of his crew was absent another vote was called for. In the second vote his barn voted against the union. Because each barn would be a shop unto itself, this killed the movement. The next time we tried to organize there were so many illegals we couldn’t get any traction. And contrary to anything you may have read or heard the illegal immigrants weren’t interested in coalition building. Today there is a day care center at Belmont, and the wages are higher than those Americans used to worked for. In large part that’s due to the limited labor pool, since Americans have been told this work isn’t for them, trainers are dependent on Hispanic labor. Now the racing industry has to pander to illegal immigrants in order to survive. In my opinion these decisions have affected the sport’s popularity, Americans tend to support sports they identify with. As fewer American jockeys, trainers, grooms, and hotwalkers appear on tv screens across the country, the fan support has dwindled as well. Many markets have incorporated slot machines in order to maintain a racing program. Because this is a 12 billion dollar business (including farmers, breeders, blacksmiths, vets, etc.) few states can afford to lose the income associated with the racing industry. That is probably why there are so few ICE raids of this industry. Mr. Oppenheimer failed to mention the most effective way to “cure” a slave master mentality is through sanctions.