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Stories Untold: Immigrant Workers of the Twin Towers

Cover Page Footnote

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Stories Untold: The Immigrant Workers of the Twin Towers

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Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11, there was not only the loss of lives of publicly recognized professionals, but also many less recognized workers. The immigrant workers, working legally and illegally in the twin towers, at the time of the terrorist attack, as well as supporting the nation in the aftermath of these atrocities, are an important part of this story. This paper shares the stories of these workers and the ways they supported in the clean-up efforts in the aftermath, the impacts of their efforts, and the resulting changes in both the view of these workers and in the laws surrounding citizenship. For those who helped in the aftermath, there have been laws put in place to help them achieve citizenship. In a time where there is strong resentment in the nation for immigrant workers, in spite of our nation's reliance on them for the cheap goods and services, this paper helps to shed light on the immigrant workers we relied on then and continue to rely upon today. This paper explores the lives of the workers affected by the twin towers, through the stories of those who lost family in the towers, how the nation treated these immigrant workers in the aftermath of 9/11, and the ripple effect it had.

Keywords: History, Immigrant, September 11 Compensation Fund

Introduction

The attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001 would forever change the course of United States history; for those who lived through the event or who were old enough to witness it in person or view it on television, it is an event which would forever be ingrained into their memory. The confusion people felt when Flight 11 hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center quickly turned to terror when the news captured the moment Flight 175 struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center, confirming the citizen's watching worst fears. This was a planned terrorist attack on American soil, aimed to cripple the nation.

The nation watched as first responders arrived at the scene: the firefighters, emergency responders and law enforcement, who ran into the burning buildings without any hesitation, without regard to their own safety. Many of these responders sacrificed their lives attempting to rescue those who were trapped inside the World Trade Center. When the World Trade Center no longer burned, the nine-month cleanup effort began, and with it, recognition began for the recognition of the heroes and heroines. The ones who had given up their lives, and those who continued their line of work in the aftermath. At the same time, the media failed to cover the lives of the workers who had been greatly impacted, during and following the events of 9/11, due to their societal status. This paper recognizes the immigrants who have Untold Stories.

Creation of Homeland Security, Post 9/11

In the aftermath of 9/11, there were changes made at the government level to prevent future terrorist attempts on American soil. This was, in part, made possible by the passing of the Homeland Security Act in 2002. In March 2003, this Act “[led to what would be one of the] single-largest government organization reorganization[s] since the creation of the Department of Defense” in the history of the nation (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2019). Homeland Security, as we know it today, was created in the wake of 9/11, to “prioritize national

security in border reinforcement” during a time where the nation was fearful towards immigrants (Karaim, 2015).

Before this reorganization, the Department of Homeland Security was “dispersed among more than 100 different government organizations” but became unified under a single department, as a single front, to protect the country against current and future threats which may arise (Bush, 2). A part of the changes made was to create a more organized system, leading to the creation of four divisions within the organization, including the Department of Border and Transportation Security. The role of this Department was to act as a “single government entity to manage entry into the United States [as a way to] ensure that all aspects of border control....are informed by a central information-sharing clearinghouse....and database [which would be used to collect and distribute information]” across the governmental agency (Bush, 3).

The Present Role of Homeland Security

Today, the Department of Homeland Security still serves to protect the United States, but the focus of what it means to protect its people has shifted from the original focus of “national security and....public safety” to another focus, immigration enforcement (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency [ICE], 2019). In recent years, “the focus of DHS [the Department of Homeland Security]has clearly shifted in the direction of immigration enforcement” as seen through the importance of this that has been placed on it by President Trump (Anderson, 2019). This focus on immigration enforcement can be seen in the role it holds in other agencies that were created during the reorganization of the Department of Homeland Security.

Established in 2003, as a “component agency” of the Department of Homeland Security, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, now known as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, or ICE was created (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

[ICE], 2019). During the more recent years, it has been featured in the news, due to the treatment of immigrants, and the controversy that surrounds the government agency. With the shift of focus from border security in the aftermath of 9/11, to immigrant enforcement in more recent years, the role that ICE continues to play shows the distrust that citizens feel towards immigrants. This can be seen through the condition's immigrants continue to endure, even if they have entered the country legally.

Today, immigrants are still being looked down upon, just as they have been in the country's past, where they are treated as second class citizens, seen to be less for the role they hold in society. In the aftermath of 9/11, the public view towards immigrants and refugees was that they were a potential threat towards the "national security and public safety" for the citizens (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2019). For many, this view continues into today, seeing how immigrants are treated as outsiders to be wary of, for their differences, and who are lower-class citizens for the jobs that they fulfill in different industries.

The threat that immigrants are viewed to hold can be shown through the treatment they receive in holding facilities across the country. At these locations across the United States, adults alongside children face the same treatment, and are threats to the country. The controversy of these locations is due to the treatment and conditions that the people inside of the holding facilities continue to face. The centers are "jails, prisons, tents and other forms of detention" whose reliance on these locations did not start with the Trump Administration, but continues with the administration (Kassie, 2019).

The suffering, in part, was created through changing the use of detention centers. Rather than using these centers to jail people who are considered a threat, they are instead being used for all immigrants and refugees. Larger facilities are now being used to replace smaller county jails

and serve as a place where those seeking asylum have no voice. In these facilities, “thousands have [allegedly experienced] sexual and physical abuse” while continuing to be silenced for the violence against them, which will continue without intervention (Kassie, 2019). Along with the potential of facing physical injury, there is also “no freedom of movement” for those placed in locations such as the Eloy facility in Eloy, Arizona where the conditions lead detainees to be treated as prisoners (Karaim, 2015). At this location, detainees are forced to wear a grey uniform and are behind a fence under constant surveillance.

The most horrific impact that these facilities have had are not in the conditions that the detainees inside face, but rather, the separation of families that occur at these locations. Children are being forcibly separated from their parents and are brought to facilities such as the one found in Tornillo, Texas. Here, both locals and human rights activists are protesting the creation of a tent city, where teenagers were being kept in a camp surrounded by fences. These “detainees” were being treated as prisoners, as a part of Trump’s “zero-tolerance” policy (Carroll, 2018). This policy affects illegal immigrants who are attempting to cross the border into the United States, along with anyone who has been successful. This was a way for the Trump Administration to show their commitment for the “public safety [and] national safety” along with continuing to support the militarization of border patrols (The United States Department of Justice, 2018).

Support in the Aftermath of 9/11

While immigrants continue to face discrimination in the aftermath of 9/11, the negative view towards immigrant workers was not shared by everyone in the United States. There were different forms of support for the immigrant workers impacted by the terrorist attacks in the aftermath. This was done by Americans working to help immigrant workers who were helped

through the creation of different funds and bills aimed to help those affected by the horrific event, through the loss of a loved one or through the impact of their clean-up efforts, exposing themselves to the harsh chemicals that no other workers wished to be exposed too.

The *September 11 Victim Compensation Fund* was one of the funds created in the aftermath, to help those impacted, through the funds that they received. The amount that the victim's families received was based on the "“economic loss [they experienced]”: how much income a person would have [been expected to make]over his or her lifetime” along with helping individuals who received “physical harm” during the terrorist attacks (Rosten, 2019; Justice.gov, 2018). Originally, this fund “operated from 2001-2004” before being renewed on January 2, 2011, when “President Obama signed into law the James Zadruga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010 [reactivating]the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund” which allowed the VCF to operate until 2016 (Justice.gov, 2018). Barack Obama renewed this again in 2015, giving “individuals [the opportunity]to submit their claims until December 18, 2020” along with updating how the claims were given (Justice.gov, 2018). This was based on the new requirements, which changed the “VCF’s policies and procedures for evaluating claims and calculating each claimant’s loss” based on how they were impacted by the attack on the twin towers (Justice.gov, 2018).

In the aftermath of 9/11, illegal immigrants feared what the future held for them. This was especially true for the families of those who had perished in 9/11, in locations such as in the Windows of the World restaurant. This location acted as “a lifeline to hundreds and hundreds of working immigrants, some of which...were undocumented” workers (Rosten, 2019). For many immigrant workers, the opportunity to work at this restaurant was the opportunity to pursue a “dream job” for those lucky enough to have held a position in it (Rosten, 2019). With the loss of

their job at the restaurant or the loss of the income provided by a family member, the families left in the wake of 9/11 would have struggled to provide for themselves. The Victim's Compensation Fund "was meant for all victims of the attack, without questioning nationality or citizenship" offering the same opportunity for them to receive the needed support, despite whether or not they may be citizens at the time of the twin towers attack, but who needed the help they receive all the same (Rosten, 2019).

Without the work done to support the family members of the Windows of the World restaurant in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, not all immigrant workers would have had access to the Victim's Compensation Fund in the aftermath. Due to the testimonies of the restaurant's owner, David Emil, along with its executive chef, Michael Lomonaco, they were able to prove "that their employees indeed had the potential to rise" in the industry (Rosten, 2019). Their work guaranteed that the families of the victims were able to receive the support in the aftermath that they deserved, through making sure that they would not be overlooked.

Along with Emil and Lomaco defending the window's victims to guaranteed they would not be overlooked, there were also others working towards the same goal. A group of lawyers represented the thirty-seven workers' families, to make sure that they received the financial support they deserved in the aftermath. The lawyers worked to include immigrant workers to make sure their families were included when the fund was "distributed" to those who were impacted, through the support they would be able to receive in the aftermath (Rosten, 2019).

Along with the *September 11 Compensation Fund*, there were other legislative pieces which could have led to a positive change on immigrant workers' lives, had they been passed. H.R. 3250: the *9/11 Immigrant Worker Freedom Act*, was proposed in 2017, with the goal of supporting immigrant workers who worked to lift the nation in the aftermath through their work

to support it. If this bill had passed, it would have recognized the workers who had “performed rescue, recovery, demolition, debris cleanup, or other related services” in the aftermath (H.R. 3250, “Crowley”, 2017). For those who met the time and location requirements, they would be offered to change their residency status to “an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence” through this act (H.R. 3250, “Crowley” 2017). This bill was expected

How Xenophobia Shaped the United States in the Aftermath

In the aftermath of 9/11, some immigrant workers and their families were able to receive support through the *September 11 Victim Compensation Fund*, but not everyone who was impacted was able to receive support from this fund. While this fund was able to offer some support for immigrant workers, there were other groups simultaneously working to help these workers in the aftermath. Instead of working to help these workers receive help for the loss of life or injury, these groups were working to support the immigrant workers impacted post-9/11 and those who would be impacted in the future, through working towards better laws to protect them in their work.

Before the attack on the twin towers, different groups had been working towards securing better rights for immigrant workers. Instead, the terrorist attack halted these efforts in their tracks. This included a planned march to the capital on September 25th, by labor unions and immigrant rights groups, who had been united around “basic principles [dealing with]a process of permanent legalization for undocumented immigrants” which would challenge the status quo of the time (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002). Instead, in the aftermath, xenophobic views led to “[immigrants’] rights organizers [struggle]to regroup and rebuild” in the nation (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002). With President W. Bush’s declaration on the war on terrorism, changes were brought about by 2002, impacting the immigrant workers.

In the aftermath, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) worked to help families who otherwise would not have been represented. This support was achieved through their “Resolution 5” which provides the families of immigrant workers or themselves not only the “same [treatment] as their U.S. citizen counterparts with regard to benefits and services” at local up to the federal level (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002). At the same time, these actions show the importance of immigrant workers to the trade union, through their work that these unions did to secure their workers' rights.

To continue to move forward with different legislation sometimes means that there are compromises made in the writing. This is what made these pieces controversial in their creation. While this legislation worked to help immigrant workers, there were still problems with the resolution itself, in how it supported immigrant workers, while simultaneously supporting the war on terrorism. The fear of the controversy was in how President Bush could turn the work, in the backlash that could have been faced if the focus of the war on terrorism could be turned towards immigrant workers. The work done in the aftermath was made from a “‘legalization’ agenda into an exploitive new guest worker program” where immigrant workers would face conditions seen in the past, such as those in the Bracero program from the 1940’s (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002). The resolution was also controversial in how it left “most other unions silent [which open]the door wide. . . .for [interpretation]” for people in positions of power who could take advantage of the wording of the piece, offering them the opportunity to use it to harm the groups working with the immigration workers instead of helping (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002).

The societal view towards immigrant workers created more barriers to overcome for the organizations to overcome, due to the lack of power that these immigrant workers had, and how they had to face a new challenge, facing the war on terrorism. It was due to this view that many

had the negative belief that “[immigrant workers] should not be here because [they] are not ‘real’ Americans” (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002). With this view, it is easy to see why that immigrant workers are seen to have any right to show their opposition for the war on terrorism, due to “immigrants....not [being] in a position to speak out” against the government in the country they are residing in (Quiroz-Martinez, 2002).

The Human Cost of the Clean Up Efforts

During the aftermath of 9/11, there were many efforts to help with the cleanup process. For those who worked to help in the efforts, there were legal immigrants, along with illegal immigrants among those who helped. Just as these workers faced the dangerous work conditions in the cleanup process, the same conditions are also seen today, through the different sectors whose jobs these workers fulfill, otherwise some of these jobs would not be performed.

During the time that ground zero was being cleaned up, the workers were exposed to a “toxic cloud of pulverized cement, glass fibers, asbestos, silica, benzene from the jet fuel and lead” while facing the pressure for the work crews to clean up the area as fast as they were possible (Demick, 2017). This was a job that was appealing to immigrant workers, as it was paid in cash.

For immigrant workers who had entered the United States illegally and were unable to produce paperwork, the same opportunity was available, due to there being “no questions asked about Social Security cards or immigration status” for workers who would be helping to “aid in the cleanup” of ground zero (Demick, 2017).

Immigrant workers “were not told.... of the dangers involved [in the cleanup]and were not given any health protection” against the toxins that they were being exposed to (Ruiz, 2006). They were given the cleanup that no other group wanted anything to deal with, asbestos,

with the proper equipment. This can be seen in the workers who had been hired by “small, ununionized contractors, [who] were given only paper masks” as opposed to the proper safety equipment worn by union workers, their equipment offered little protection towards the toxins they were being exposed too (Demick, 2017). For many workers, they were not only being exposed to these toxins day after day, during their eight hour shifts, but would be “working double or triple shifts, sleeping for a few hours at a church, then going back to work” at the site they were assigned, leading to longer exposure times (Demick, 2017).

Exposure to the toxins at ground zero were not immediately apparent. But as time passed, the long-lasting effects of exposure to the toxins became apparent, through the impact that it would have on the workers' lives.

One of the workers' lives it impacted was Carlos Cardona, an illegal immigrant. For him, there was no question as to whether he would be assisting in the clean-up of ground zero, but the exposure to toxins had a lasting negative impact on his health later in life. Just like Carlos, other immigrant workers who had been exposed to the toxins in the aftermath of 9/11 began to “[suffer] from respiratory and digestive disorders [which became] known as [the] “World Trade Center syndrome”” which has had an impact on many of the workers' health (Demick, 2017).

For the workers who became ill after the cleanup of ground zero, in 2011, the “World Trade Healthcare Program [was created to]provide monitoring and healthcare [to those impacted by 9/11, which includes]67,000 workers” who were deemed eligible for this program (Demick, 2017). Just as when workers were first hired to help in the cleanup efforts, they “are not required to provide Social Security numbers or prove they have legal status” but instead need to prove their connection to September 11, which can be challenging (Demick, 2017). For the workers paid in cash, it is harder to prove that they were involved with the

cleanup process. The problem with this was the willingness of employers to prove that their workers had helped at ground zero. This is due to how “[the employers] are aware that they broke the law by hiring the workers and placing them in dangerous working conditions” which lead to many of them refusing to write letters which would prove that their workers were there, due to the backlash that they would be facing (Ruiz, 2006).

The Trump Administration has worked to remove illegal immigrant workers, while also working towards stopping them from entering the United States. One way this is being achieved is how the administration “issued a memorandum prioritizing the removal of immigrants in the U.S. illegally with criminal records” even those who were a part of the cleanup effort after 9/11 (Demick, 2017). This would not only impact the immigrants lives, by being forced to leave, but also would lead to a change in health for illegal immigrants such as Carlos Caradana, who “[receives free] healthcare...from the federal government...he receives seven medications” which would be unavailable to him if he were to be deported (Demick, 2017). While the deportation of Carlos was stopped, there are many who were deported and were unable to get the proper health care that they need.

Conclusion

After 9/11 the perception of immigrants and refugees changed, due to the view of the nation, which felt threatened by these minorities who were entering the country. It was these negative views towards immigrants which led to the rise of xenophobia and continues into today’s society. This was not only perceptions, but stigmas that lead people to judge strangers based on this and has led to dire conditions that they face in holding facilities. Here, they have no voice, and are unable to speak for themselves, without the fear of being hurt.

For the immigrant workers who worked for the World Trade Center, some of their family members were able to receive support in the aftermath, but this was not available to everyone. There was also a law passed to support those who had helped in the aftermath during the cleanup process, but only if they had proof of it, which employers refused to give, as it would make them guilty of knowingly exposing workers to toxins. During this time, there were also unions who worked to help their workers, but who fell short by declaring war on terrorism while laying down the framework to allow the immigrant workers they represented to be taken advantage of. The history of 9/11 reverberates to today, based on the impact it has at both the federal level, with the creation of Homeland Security, to the local level, where there are detention centers with children who have been separated from their families. 9/11 had an impact which led to a ripple effect in how immigrant workers are treated.

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