

# Mexican Labor moves in

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

*The face of U.S. labor is changing, and American industry must change with it. One of the biggest shifts in the past decade has been the addition of several million additional Hispanic workers to the labor market. They're here to stay. In fact, more are probably coming, in spite of the 1996 law aimed at illegal immigration. The Census Bureau says that by the year 2050, the Hispanic percentage of the U.S. population is expected to double. About one in five Americans will be of Hispanic—mostly Mexican—heritage by then.*

*In this issue, we meet Joe Loyet and find out what Mexican labor means to his Loyet Landscape Services in St. Louis.*

*Next month, you'll meet labor contractor Robert Wingfield, the green industry's Texas pipeline to Mexican labor. You'll also learn about the legal implications of hiring Hispanic labor.*

*Our final report in January will focus on the successes and failures of using Hispanic labor by some of the nation's biggest and brightest landscape contractors.*



*For laborers in the U.S. green industry, employment is often seasonal, hours are long and hot, and the only language they have to speak is 'the language of work.'*

**H**ugo Martinez travels light. He left El Paso late yesterday afternoon with just a small nylon bag containing a change of clothes and a few personal items. He keeps his bag protectively wedged between his Adidas-clad feet beneath the plastic seat in the Greyhound station on South Lamar Street in Dallas.

Hugo is only about 5'4", no more than 120 pounds, and 37 years old. But he does a younger and bigger man's work. He's headed for Ohio where he works for a family-owned nursery/landscape company, usually 10 hours a day for about eight months. Last season, he tended several acres of nursery stock. This season, he says he will be mostly mowing and trimming.

He's catching the 12:45 p.m. bus, and he'll arrive in Cleveland late the following afternoon. Somebody from the landscape com-





Loyet checks every property his company maintains at least once a week. He confers with workers like Josue 'Joe' Sanchez almost daily.

sonal employment, are replacing the industry's traditional labor mainstay—the young, white, male U.S. worker.

A 1996 LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT magazine survey discovered that 20 percent of green industry operations now employ at least some "non-English speaking" people. Fourteen percent of landscape contractors told us that their labor workforces are now predominantly "non-English-speaking." (By contrast, about 12 percent are mostly high school or college-age U.S. youths.)

Increasingly, the green industry is employing Hispanics—mostly Mexicans—as its labor of choice.

Consider St. Louis. Less than a decade ago, a Mexican worker on a landscape crew in St. Louis was rare. Now, some of the top landscape contractors in that marketplace don't feel like they can compete without them. They've been feeling that way since a branch office of the Brickman Company, one of the nation's largest landscape companies, began using Mexican workers on its maintenance crews. That opened competitors' eyes, especially when they saw how these crews produced.

#### Out of necessity

"Our back was against the

pany will drive into the city to meet him and take him to the apartment he'll share with several other Mexican workers.

#### A changing labor market

Need reliable laborers for your mowing crews or to tend your golf courses?

Find yourself a Hugo, and a few others just like him. Get some Hispanic workers who are used to working outside on a farm. On a ranch. In an orchard. Mexicans. Guatemalans. Nicaraguans.

"You get two things with Mexicans," says Robert Wingfield, a Dallas-based labor contractor. "Mexicans show up for work every day. If you just got the increased reliability, you'd be ahead of where you are. But you're also going to get anywhere from 10 to 30 percent more production."

Okay, so that may not be the politically correct way to put it. But what's politically correct about the hot, long hours demanded from a landscape laborer? Hispanics, because of their willingness to work long hours at mostly sea-

## Getting off to a good start

Joe Loyet of Loyet Landscape Maintenance uses the following procedure to welcome each Mexican worker to his St. Louis-based company:

- ▶ Greet the new hire at the downtown bus station.
- ▶ Drive the new employee to a Denny's for a meal, where Loyet and the new employee get to know each other better.
- ▶ Proceed to Loyet's office/maintenance facility just outside of St. Louis. Here Loyet checks, photocopies, and files the documents that establish the Mexican worker's identity and employment eligibility. Loyet and the worker fill out a Form I-9, the Employment Eligibility Verification that must be completed for each new employee.
- ▶ Provide the new hire with a company work uniform and hat.
- ▶ Drive to a K-Mart store and provide the employee with boots and, if needed, work pants.
- ▶ Take the new hire to one of the three adjacent house trailers that Loyet's company leases just outside of the city. The employee will share the trailer with several other Mexican workers. Allow the employee to rest the remainder of the day. "I tell him, 'Take a siesta, mi amigo, the other workers will be back later.'"
- ▶ After the first day of work, Loyet advances the new employee \$50 cash to tide him over until payday.

wall when we brought in our first Mexicans. We just could not keep a stable labor force on the maintenance end," remembers Joe Munie, founder and president of Munie Outdoor Services in nearby Belleville, Ill. "We had to seek a viable workforce or we were going to have to look at backing out of that."

Joe Loyet, who started Loyet Landscape Maintenance 12 years ago, adds: "It was a problem getting people to come to work every day. I knew we had to do something different." That something, of course, was to find Mexican laborers for his company. Contacting Robert Wingfield, a Dallas labor con-

tractor, he did just that.

At about 5:30 a.m. every day, Loyet's employees begin arriving at the company's office/maintenance building in a rural area just south of St. Louis. The Mexicans come in small groups because most of them share three leased house trailers in a nearby trailer park. Most also don't have U.S. drivers licenses.

Each employee checks and loads his own equipment onto the trucks. Mexicans can be picky about the condition of their mowers, says Loyet. They want their mowers to operate at peak efficiency so that they

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# Superintendents like Hispanic workers, too

Superintendent Bruce Williams has employed Hispanic laborers for more than 20 years at Bob-O-Link in Highland Park, Ill. His dad, Bob, first employed them at the course in the 1960s.

Bruce Williams says their willingness—and in some cases, their preference—to work a short year makes them a good fit for seasonal golf course work.

"We have a seven-month need for labor," explains Williams. "It's difficult to find [local] people to work only seven months of the year. Many [Hispanics] come up from Mexico or Texas, and work from April 1st until October 31st, earning a very livable income. Then they



Hector Carrera mows the Bob O' Link fairways. He is one of a family of four employed at the club, which has employed three generations of the same family.

return to their families." Ten of his 18 crew members are Hispanic.

Williams says that Hispanic workers "love being outdoors, being with the soil. They're good at it, and they don't mind working whatever hours the job requires."

Some of the workers live in housing on the course.

"In the late 1970s, we noticed that it was hard for them to find affordable housing near the golf course," says Williams. "The distance they had to drive to get to the golf course was considerable. We built a four-bedroom dormitory where we house eight of our seasonal workers. They don't have to deal with trying to lease an apartment for seven months, and it makes it easier for the seasonality of the job."

## Family ties strong

Hispanic people "want to work," says Randy Wahler of Knollwood Club in Libertyville, Ill., which employs 12 Hispanics in its 18-person crew. One has worked at the course for 18 years.

"All the management books will tell you not to hire friends and relatives, but we have been successful in dealing with referrals to cousins, nephews and sons of past and present employees," says Wahler.

"It's good to get into a good family," adds Wahler, since the fam-

ilies stick together and support one another. Wahler finds his Hispanic employees by word-of-mouth or through family networks.

"Hispanic people are very close," says Wahler. "They're very good people. They share the same work ethic."

## No language barrier

While some speak good English, many do not. Williams says he's fortunate that one foreman can handle all verbal, one-on-one communications. Williams also knows some Spanish himself.

Wahler does not speak Spanish, so he leaves most communication duties to his Hispanic assistant and foreman, both of whom are bilingual. Only three workers do not know any English.

"We allow anyone the chance to grow within the operation itself," says Williams. His irrigation technician has been with the course for 18 years. Another Hispanic worker became head mechanic.

The Hispanics' work style might be described as more evenly paced than that of their American counterparts.

"Americans will work quickly, take a break, work quickly, take a



Alonso Esquivel top-dresses greens at Bob O'Link Golf Club. An 18-year employee at Bob O' Link, Esquivel is also its irrigation technician.

break," says Williams. "Hispanics work at the same steady pace, all day long. It's harder to get Hispanic workers to speed up the pace."

## Sad reality

Without Hispanic workers, Williams says he would have to try to recruit from among high school students who live in affluent neighborhoods surrounding the course. Unfortunately, his experience there has not been encouraging.

Wahler on American youth: "They want easy jobs, making big money. Parents today have spoiled their kids. I don't think they've prepared them for the future."

—Terry McIver





Ignacio Galvan is one of the Mexican workers that Joe Loyet is grooming to be a foreman. Co-worker and crew chief Mark Richardson is in the background.

can put in a full day's work, and earn a full day's pay.

By any standard, Joe Loyet would be considered a progressive employer. He helps pay the cost of housing and, occasionally, buys meals for his workers or hands out phone cards so they can call their families in Texas or Mexico.

"Some of the guys who try to bring Mexicans up here think they can work them like mules; that's not right," he says. "They're human beings, just like me and you. You have to respect them."

#### **Business is business**

Even so, Loyet, a normally cheerful and outgoing person, can get serious about business which, for him, means going to bed by 9 p.m. most nights, getting up by 4 a.m. and getting to the office by 5 a.m. "I don't believe in threats or in hollering," he says, "but I tell my guys, 'This is a business and this is the way it's going to be.' A guy who doesn't come to work every day is no good to us. We have to take care of our customers."

While Loyet seems to genuinely respect his Mexican employees, not all of them work out. "I'll go right out to a job site and pick them up, call our

accountant and find out how much we owe the guy to that point, pay him and get him out of the system right there," he says. "I'll take him right to the bus station. I'll make sure he gets on it to go home."

His motto is: "Keep them busy, busy, busy; keep them out of trouble."

Says Loyet, "They want hours, 50-plus hours. They're here to work and make money. Most of them send their money home."

#### **They're everywhere**

The St. Louis labor marketplace is not unique. Hispanic landscape laborers, long commonplace in California and the rest of the Southwest, are now accepted by the green industry in the nation's heartland too. In fact, just about everywhere in the United States.

Laflamme Services of Bridgeport, Conn., has employed Mexican workers for the past eight years. The company started with four, but now employs about 35, says president Ed Laflamme.

**'Some other company will offer them more money and then they're gone,' says Jeff Sanders of Raleigh Turf & Irrigation.**

Even though many don't speak English (or, at least, not very well), they "understand the language of work," says Laflamme.

Laflamme, like Loyet, says he can give many of them employment year-round, but most leave early each winter. To get them to return in spring, and to bring other capable workers, some landscapers offer cash bonuses. "I don't know if I could be in business without them," admits Laflamme.

The Brintzer Design Group of Arlington, Va., employs Guatemalans. Most were displaced by the civil war that raged in their country in the 1980s.

"We employed one Guatemalan as a day laborer. He worked very hard, so when we needed to hire more help, we started hiring his brothers, cousins or friends," says Carroll LeTellier. Now, all but four of Brintzer's crew are Guatemalan.

"We've been in business for 10 years. For the first six or seven years, we were hiring

people who were born and raised in the U.S. It was harder to keep them on year after year," he adds.

#### **Money is #1**

What motivates Hispanic workers? Money. If they feel like they're not getting enough hours, or if they're offered more money by another company, they can leave in a blink, says Laflamme. "The only thing that keeps them is the money."

Adds Jeff Sanders of Raleigh (N.C.) Turf & Irrigation: "We have one worker, Salvador, who will go home and get me a number of laborers if we need them, but the loyalty isn't there."

That's why Sanders doesn't, as a rule, try to employ them over the winter. "Some other company will offer them more money, and then they're gone," he says.

Money is, indeed, the only reason Hugo says he's leaving his home in El Paso, which he shares with his mother and two sisters, and travels to Ohio to work for nine months.

Waiting for a bus that's already about 10 minutes late, Hugo says he'll be making \$7 an hour with the landscape company, about \$1.50 an hour more than he can make in El Paso. Even so, he says he wouldn't leave, except that the hours are steadier in the north, and the man who owns the company is fair.

—Additional reporting by Jerry Roche and Terry McIver.

