

Chinese-run job agencies face scrutiny over work; Raided by feds: Companies lure Hispanics, but some say laborers may find jobs help to be costly.

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Body

The advertisements in the Chinese newspapers get to the point quickly.

"We Provide Quality Hispanics," employment agencies say in Mandarin.

Chinese labor contractors in Chamblee tell Chinese restaurant owners throughout the Southeast they have a big supply of laborers at their fingertips to cut vegetables, cook and wash dishes. They'll deliver the workers, too.

One agency uses the slogan "Mexican Express."

This labor supply system, which sometimes approximates debt-servitude, led to federal indictments against 15 people this month in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia.

Six Chinese immigrants who operated employment agencies at a Chamblee Dunwoody Road site face charges of conspiring to encourage illegal immigrants to live in the United States as well as transport and harbor them for financial gain. Most of the workers are Mexican or Central American.

The raids don't seem to have made a dent, though.

Just a week after the April 11 raid in which FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested 33 people, two employment agencies had reopened in the same space.

A line of workers, including many who spoke indigenous languages from rural southern Mexico, stretched out the door of the agency. Several brought their wheelie luggage with them, ready to hop in a van and travel to another city or state to work.

Inside one agency, a young Hispanic man pondered the job offerings.

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"While You Were Out" phone messages were taped on a wall in an orderly fashion, classified under one of 17 states where the agency sends workers. Jobs were available in Georgia and the Southeast, as well as Arkansas, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and New York. A map of the United States hung on another wall, to show laborers where they were going.

Some jobs said "Deep Fry." Others said "Fried Rice" or "To Go." An illustration on the wall showed someone cutting a vegetable and the word "Cut."

The young man began to understand what the job meant. He was excited. He could do it. The pay seemed good, too. The postings from April 17 said \$1,600 per month.

He waited in line to speak to a man who interviewed applicants in Spanish. At the next desk sat a woman, talking on the phone in Chinese. The office was decorated with one bamboo plant, an aquarium with one gold fish and a TV playing Spanish-language network drama.

Paco Cruz, 34, and his wife, Ana Peralta-Salinas, 32, are illegal immigrants from Oaxaca, Mexico. They say they worked for Chinese employment agencies during the past six years, including those that were raided by federal agents April 11.

One of the agencies placed Cruz and Peralta-Salinas in a restaurant job in Burlington, N.C., two months ago and charged the couple and a third man a total of \$1,350 in commission and transportation fees to be deducted from their first month's pay, Cruz said.

The three slept on the floor of a house near the restaurant and received one meal per day. They worked 14-hour days, with no breaks, six days a week, Cruz said. After 15 days, the three quit and were paid \$800. That comes to about \$1.27 per hour.

Still, after all that, Cruz and Peralta-Salinas were back in Chamblee, hoping for another job.

"We can't find work, that's why," Cruz said in Spanish.

One aspect of the labor contract that stings the most, workers say, is the driver's fee of several hundred dollars.

As part of the bust, the federal government indicted Chinese and Hispanic drivers who transported the workers to restaurants in other states, operators of "safe houses" in Chamblee where immigrants waited for jobs and immigrant smugglers who recruited and drove workers up from Florida.

Most restaurants do not use employment agencies to find hourly line cooks and prep cooks, said Ron Wolf, executive director of the Georgia Restaurant Association.

"It's not cost-effective," Wolf said. "It doesn't even seem right to me. There's a disconnect there."

Anna Hsu, owner of Silk, an upscale Asian restaurant in Midtown, said her restaurant never uses employment agencies for hourly employees. She gets her workers for free off Craigslist and pays \$8 per hour for dishwashers and between \$10 to \$14 per hour for prep cooks.

Hsu listened to the claims of worker exploitation in other restaurants. She didn't buy the part about 12- to 14-hour days with no breaks. Restaurants are busy at lunch and dinner, with lulls in between, she said. Free housing, even if it's sleeping on the floor, is a plus in the eyes of some workers, Hsu said. In many cases, the owner of the Chinese restaurant works alongside the kitchen staff and lives in the same housing, Hsu said.

Owners of Chinese restaurants who used the employment agencies did so to maximize profits, the federal indictment says.

Workers say that many times restaurant owners found a pretext to fire them after a few weeks or a month --- after they had paid off the hefty agency commission.

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Chinese-run employment **agencies** have operated in Chamblee for years. Three years ago, **federal** agents busted the owners of the Sin Sin Employment **Agency** in Chamblee. The couple who ran the **agency** were sentenced to eight years and five years in prison on charges of conspiracy and fraud related to immigrant smuggling. They fled the country before going to jail.

New entrepreneurs have already moved in to take the place of **agency** owners who were arrested recently.

Last week, down the street from the Chamblee Commercial Plaza, site of this month's **raid**, Jenny Wang sat in a small **agency**, talking on the phone. Wang hadn't started operating yet. She was waiting for her occupational tax license from the city of Chamblee.

"I am new," Wang **said**. "I come here just seven days ago from New York." She hadn't heard of the **raids** at the other employment **agencies**.

Chamblee City Manager Kathy Brannon **said** she's powerless to stop the **agencies** as long as they file the appropriate paper **work**.

"We don't want anybody who's doing illegal things operating in Chamblee," Brannon **said**. "But we can't regulate it. ... It has to be addressed by somebody higher up the chain than we are," she **said**.

Luis Lutin, 39, an immigrant from Guatemala, **says** he has bad memories of his days **working** in family-owned Chinese restaurants. He was placed by the now-defunct Sin Sin **agency** when he first arrived in the United States more than a decade ago.

"You think they are going to treat you humanely," the Norcross resident **said**. But experience taught him a lesson. Now he has a **work** permit and does construction. He **says** he won't **work** for a **Chinese-run** employment **agency** again. "They put a price on me and sold me like a slave."

Graphic

Photo: HYOSUB SHIN / StaffSome **Chinese-run** employment **agencies** in Chamblee were **raided** by **federal** authorities this month on charges of conspiring to encourage illegal immigrants to live in the United States./ImageData* ImageData*

Photo: HYOSUB SHIN / StaffEmployment **agencies** to supply **help** to Chinese restaurants have flourished in Chamblee, often attracting illegal immigrants./ImageData*

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