

Latino Workers in the US — or 'Chico and the Man'

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Mon, 2015-10-26 10:58

(With apologies to younger readers unaware of the late US comedy star Freddie Prinze (or the hippy term for what Jarvis Cocker calls the not so nice people who are still running the world)

I presented at the US National Safety Council recently and was struck, as I listened to talks there, that America itself is, in many respects an international example of the “just culture” principle I’d gone to talk about. (In essence, that it’s not the people it’s the environment that counts). Thirty years ago the US was a decade ahead of the UK in behavioral safety — but it isn’t now and I’d argue that stagnation is a reflection in part of the country’s socioeconomic structures. These haven’t changed much and safety standards are arguably an illustration of the “unacceptable face of capitalism”.

In particular I was most struck by the figures for Latino workers which illustrate the sort of problems we could regress towards here in the UK if we don’t fight a strong rearguard action. (Our recovery will also be driven — *is* being driven — by an influx of foreign labour in construction boots.)

The facts are that Latino workers are about 33% more likely to be killed at work — and that’s skewed towards those recently arrived in the country. (Overall work fatalities were 4585 in 2013 — in a population only around five times that of the UK, a much higher death toll even allowing for the fact the US figures, unlike ours, include work-related road deaths.) And things are getting worse.

The reasons behind these figures are that Latinos are over-represented in high risk activities like construction, especially as the economy begins to recover. Often severe communication problems are not helped by poor enforcement of regulations with formal visits statistically unlikely as there aren’t anywhere near enough officers to check that basics like training and monitoring are being undertaken. Worse, there’s a culture in which if you are asked to sign



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that you have been trained (when you haven't) and you decline, you may well find yourself fired without any recourse. Not surprisingly, the writer Kyle Morrison suggested there is also a massive underreporting of everyday injuries in this underground economy.

Musing on these issues I took a walk to visit the national civil rights museum which was just a half mile from the conference centre in downtown Atlanta. Outside the museum I was accosted by a homeless man who insisted (quite convincingly) that he'd been made too ill to work by a failure to protect him from diesel fumes over the years and had been summarily "turfed onto the street".

The conference centre is the other side of a park from the museum. The park in question is the location of the 1996 bombing where a religious fundamentalist hoped to encourage a return to Christian values by killing lots of people and causing the Olympics to be stopped.



As Don King would say: only in America...

Challenge: *Just because business friendly governments bent on deregulation aren't actively out to get you it doesn't mean you won't end up got! [The last blog](#) [1] was an exhortation to proactively tackle the win-win that is wellness. With the safety hierarchy in mind, even more basic than that is the need to fight to keep protections that we have.*

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