

National Public Radio's *This American Life* promotes anti-immigrant propaganda

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On December 8, National Public Radio (NPR) ran an episode of *This American Life* titled “Our Town,” which legitimized workplace raids against immigrants and justified tougher sanctions for employing undocumented workers.

The program’s host, Ira Glass, is not a far-right talk show host, but a favorite of affluent Democrats. His show has 2.2 million listeners.

The episode titled “Our Town” could very well have been aired on *Breitbart Radio*. Couched in the language of nationalist populism, the episode advanced an anti-immigrant agenda by blaming corporations for giving jobs to immigrants instead of US citizens.

In the episode, Glass describes Albertville, Alabama, a small town that is home to poultry processing plants, as having been overrun by immigrants. It “got a flood of outsiders,” Glass says, using the language of nativists to describe the influx of Latino workers seeking employment in the poultry plants as “immigrants pouring in,” “a ton of immigrants” and “tons of Mexican workers.”

Toward the beginning of the episode, Glass gives airspace to Roy Beck, the founder of NumbersUSA, which the Southern Poverty Law Center has denounced as part of the “nativist lobby.” Beck has spoken before the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens and is the protégé of the fascist anti-immigrant advocate John Tanton. Glass uncritically quotes Beck while introducing him simply as “the founder of a group called NumbersUSA.”

Glass then references the massive “SouthPAW” workplace immigration raids during which hundreds of agents descended on small southern towns in 1995 and deported 4,000 workers. PAW stands for “Protecting American Workers.” During the raids, immigration police dragged people out of their workplaces, split them from their families and summarily deported them to violent, war-torn Central American countries.

“The goal was to create job openings for American workers by arresting lots of people at work sites,” Glass says. “At the Gold Kist plant outside of town, workers cheered when [immigration agents] arrived.”

This reactionary effort to present deportations as “pro-worker” echoes the line of Bernie Sanders and the trade union bureaucracy. During the Democratic primary election

campaign, in an interview with *Vox*’s Ezra Klein, Sanders attacked open borders and free migration as “a right-wing proposal, which says essentially there is no United States.” He added, “It would make everybody in America poorer.”

This American Life’s producer, Miki Meek, then interviews the immigration agent responsible for leading the SouthPAW raids, Bart Szafnicki. *This American Life* uncritically repeats his claim that the raids did not go far enough.

Meek says: “Bart pointed out, there’s never been a serious crackdown on employers. These raids were short-lived. The fines were low. The chances of getting caught were small. Bart found it frustrating. Congress never had the political will to go after the companies that hire undocumented workers. There are congressmen who talk tough on immigration, but when INS went after worksites in their districts, they told them to back off.”

Meek and Glass criticize the corporations for being insufficiently tough on hiring immigrants, citing a 1986 immigration reform law that prohibited companies from interrogating their employees to discover their nationality.

Glass says these laws were too lax on employers who hire immigrants: “In 1995, Congress, in a very practical, bipartisan way that we almost never see any more, decided that it had to fix the problem and come up with a simple way for employers to tell who is legal to work in the United States and who isn’t, to figure out who they could hire... Senator Dianne Feinstein warned, at the time, they had to solve this crisis now—of immigrants coming in illegally and getting these jobs.”

But these efforts, Glass says, did not go far enough. “Obviously, they didn’t solve it. And here we are today. A bipartisan commission called the Jordan commission considered a bunch of solutions. One of the things they ended up proposing was a national computerized system to check people’s IDs, and make sure they were valid, and their social security numbers are real. This is the system we’ve come to know as E-Verify.”

The reference to the Jordan Commission, led by Texas Democratic Representative Barbara Jordan, is significant. The commission’s findings are well known among immigrant rights advocates as the wish list of the extreme right. *Breitbart* praised Jordan in an August 2017 article as “one of the few Democratic

politicians that believed in a pro-American legal immigration system that ceased on inundating working class neighborhoods with low-skilled immigrants.” The same article noted that the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant program, including calls for expanding E-Verify, “has the same tenets as Jordan’s recommendations.”

The Jordan commission called for militarizing the border, massively increasing the size of the border patrol, and blocking immigrants from receiving benefits and work permits in the US. It is frequently cited by NumbersUSA and white supremacy groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform and the Center for Immigration Studies as a model for mass deportation.

This American Life criticizes E-Verify as insufficiently strict in stopping undocumented people from seeking employment. Miki Meek says, “A study commissioned by the government in 2009 found that over half of undocumented workers with fake papers—people E-Verify should have caught—got a clean bill of health... So by the early 2000s, you have all these undocumented workers not getting caught by E-Verify working in the Albertville plants, which raises the central question you come to when we talk about immigration—did Americans end up out of work because of it?”

NPR then gives space to bureaucrats from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union to air their dirty xenophobic laundry. One shop steward, Martha, denounces immigrants for poisoning the atmosphere at the plant:

“[A]fter they’d [the immigrant workers] been there a while, they kind of thought they owned it. And there was more of them. You know, they kind of stay with their group, the family, you know, like aunts and cousins. And just about all of them’s kin somehow, you know? They started changing their attitude... You know, and it started causing problems. We had quite a few fights in the break rooms. Then we had them carried out to the parking lot, you know.”

NPR also interviews the UFCW local president at the time, Joe Ellis. Ellis blames the immigrant workers for reducing the bargaining power of the union because of their unwillingness to pay union dues:

“And then when the Latinos come in, that changed. And when that changed, then the bargaining unit changed. Because we didn’t have any bargaining power.”

Though NPR presents this as legitimate, in actual fact the unions’ bargaining power was reduced not because of immigrants, but because the unions are rotten, corrupt institutions that police the workforce in collusion with the corporations. A 2004 press release from Kroger supermarkets cites Ellis as praising a deal that the company boasted “will provide wages and benefits that will allow Kroger to compete with other retailers in the market.” Ellis praised the sellout as the product of the union and the company “working together.”

Glass says there are many factors behind the decline of wages for US-born workers, including shareholder wealth,

automation, lower unionization rates and trade with China. While Glass concludes that immigration is not the biggest factor overall, he claims that immigration is to blame for declining wages for undereducated workers in the region. He cites an economist who “found that after 20 years of immigrants pouring into the area around Albertville,” wages dropped “up to \$1,200 per year, per worker. So it’s real money.”

Meek then confronts a white worker with these figures, telling her that she would be thousands of dollars richer if it weren’t for the immigrants.

This American Life concludes the show by referencing Trump Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who, Glass says, is “always talking about working people” when he “explains what he’s trying to achieve by limitation.”

Implicitly backing the fascistic propaganda portraying attacks on immigrants as a struggle against the corporations in defense of American workers, Glass adds, “He barely sounds like a Republican... says our system’s too biased toward corporations.” He includes a sound bite of Sessions defending his mass deportation plans with arguments about benefiting native-born workers.

On this final note, Glass previews part two:

“Next week on our show, we go into town to see what 6,000 newcomers cost taxpayers, and what it was like to have all these immigrants who’d never driven cars before suddenly on the roads not understanding what a stop sign is, and why a Latino business owner told his friend to run for mayor on the platform of kicking out all the immigrants.”

This American Life’s presentation is an attempt to put a liberal spin on the brutal antidemocratic and anti-working-class assault on immigrants. It is broadcast at a time when the Democratic Party, with NPR at its side, is engaged in an attack on Trump as a Russian agent and sexual predator, while ignoring Trump’s anti-immigrant round-ups and anti-Muslim travel ban.

Last week, the Democratic Party voted by a margin of two-to-one against articles of impeachment that cited both Trump’s ties to neo-Nazis and his anti-immigrant attacks as cause for his removal from office. There is no constituency in the ruling class for the defense of the democratic rights of immigrants, and National Public Radio is no exception.



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