THE PROCUREMENT OF IMMIGRANT LABOR: SELECTED DOCUMENTS

BY JOHN E. BODNAR

The pattern of immigrant distribution in industrial America was the result of many factors. Letters from relatives already here attracted many who were still in Europe. Indeed, such correspondence led to chain migration, a process by which large segments of a European village settled in one American town or region. The Italian settlement in Steelton, Pennsylvania, for instance, came largely from a single village in Italy.

Another fact which accounted for the pattern of immigrant distribution was the activity of the employment agent. American industry long used ingenious techniques to secure a steady supply of inexpensive, unskilled labor. Immigrant workers were often "tagged" as they arrived at American ports of entry and shipped to a steel mill or coal mine that was far removed from where they originally intended to go. By 1880 agents of the H. C. Frick Company were hiring Slovak immigrants as they arrived at Castle Garden and transporting them by rail to the coke regions around Mt. Pleasant and Morewood, Pennsylvania.

The Italian padrone or labor boss system was probably the best known immigrant recruitment method. As one observer noted, newly arrived Italians usually needed a bilingual intermediary, who "understood old-world traditions and new-world business

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*The author is director of the Ethnic Studies Program of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.


3 Joseph Kushner, Slovaci Katolici Pittsburghskeho Biskupstva (Passaic, N. J., 1946), 5-16.
operations,” to get in touch with American employers. While some have argued that the padrone system declined in importance after 1900, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, in a survey of immigrant conditions in the state, still found the system operating in 1913.

Seldom, however, have industrial concerns left a record of their labor recruitment policies. One such collection is to be found in the correspondence of the Robesonia Iron Company of Robesonia near Reading. What is intriguing is not only the detail recorded in the company’s correspondence on labor recruitment but the number of agencies attempting to supply Robesonia with unskilled workers. It is also unusual to see Slavic and Italian labor being channeled through employment agencies simultaneously with southern blacks as late as 1923. The Robesonia Iron Company was especially active with a “Russian lawyer” in Philadelphia, I. Podrubo, who supplied “skilled and unskilled” Slavs. In fact, legend has it that the first Slavs ever brought to Pennsylvania were imported as strikebreakers in the 1870s. Apparently the recruitment of immigrant labor persisted well into the twentieth century.

The Robesonia Iron Company, established in 1885, evolved from the old Reading Furnace, whose owner, George Ege, first produced pig iron in 1793. Ege, known as one of the “largest land owners of his time” in Berks County, began his furnace with charcoal obtained from local timber and ore from the Cornwall ore banks in nearby Lebanon County.

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6 The Robesonia Iron Company correspondence is located in the Coleman Collection, M.G. 182, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg.


During the decades after Ege's death in 1835, the facility passed through a succession of owners. In 1854, for instance, it was known as Robeson, Broake and Company and used anthracite coal to produce over two hundred tons of pig iron a week. In 1885 newcomers, including William White and William Freeman, purchased the property and organized the Robesonia Iron Company, Ltd. The selections that follow indicate some of the labor recruitment activities pursued at Robesonia after 1915. To retain the original flavor of the documents, the editor has not changed the spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

757 South 2nd Street
Philadelphia, Nov. 22, 1915

Mr. Lee
c/o Robesonia Iron Co.
Room 426 Stephen Girard Bldg.
Dear Mr. Lee:—

Enclosed you will find a statement showing all the men sent you, the date of sending, contract numbers, the amount of commission paid, those who did not pay, you will kindly collect $2.00 for me and oblige.

Very truly yours,
The International Emp. Bureau.
I. Podrubo


STATEMENT

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<th>Con. Nos.</th>
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*One-Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of Pig Iron Manufacture, 3-4; Cyrus T. Fox, ed., Reading and Berks County, Pennsylvania (3 vols; New York, 1925), I, 353.
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November 19th, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson  
Supt. The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,  
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

We enclose herewith voucher covering sundry expenses in sending nine men to the mines yesterday, which kindly pass through your accounts in the usual way, and send same to this office for payment.

Mr. Podrubo, the labor agent, is very confident that this is a particularly good gang of men, and that they will stay on the work. He gave them their choice between our offer at 18c per hour for nine hours from December first, and an offer from a contractor at Parkesburg at $2.00 per nine hour day, and they accepted ours on account of its being steady work. Some of the
men are Austrians and some Russians, but they have been working together elsewhere—in Canada, Mr. Podrubo says, and are apparently on friendly terms, so we trust that the difference in nationality will not cause any friction.

Unless a substantial portion of the Slavic gang now at Cornwall remains with us, the writer feels that any further efforts to obtain labor of this character from this city would be a waste of time and money.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea
Secretary & Treasurer.
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

RCL-C

December 1, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson,
Supt. The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

We enclose herewith letter from Mr. Podrubo of the International Foreign Exchange and Transportation Co., who was the labor agent employed by us to obtain men for the furnace and mines.

Mr. Podrubo desires us to collect for him from such of these men as still remain at the furnace and mines the sums indicated in the list of names enclosed with his letter. The understanding is that half of the amount so collected is to be refunded to us. We also enclose signed orders from five of the men, all of whom we think went to the mines, with the last gang sent there.

There should be no difficulty in collecting for Mr. Podrubo from the men who have signed these orders, but we judge that we can collect from the others on his list only if they are willing to pay.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea
Secretary & Treasurer.
[Robesonia Iron Co.]
Mr. Robert C. Lea, Sec'y-Tres.
Philadelphia, Penna.

Dear Sir:—

This afternoon is the first opportunity I have had to answer yours of 1st and acknowledge receipt in same enclosure of Mr. Podrubo's letter and statement.

As near as we can figure there are seven of his men who worked the last end of November at Cornwall and two at the furnace. They are probably still here.

I do not understand this matter. I thought we paid $3.00 commission per head. Did Mr. Podrubo also charge the men a commission? If so, this is the first I am informed thereof. Some of them said they were to pay nothing—the commission and carfare being paid by us. I have heard no one say to the contrary. I do not think it advisable to collect from those who signed no order.

As for the four orders, we will arrange to take the amount out of the payroll Dec. 1-15 if you think best. The roll for the last half of November is closed. I rather think under conditions that it is best not to stir up the matter at all. However, I will await your instructions.

Respectfully yours,

Supt.

[Robesonia Iron Co.]

December 4th, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson
Supt, The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

Answering yours of the 3rd, you are correct in thinking that we paid Mr. Podrubo three dollars per man. However, in addition to charging us for getting the men, he also charges each man for getting him a job. This we believe is customary in such matters.

If we collect from the men for Mr. Podrubo one-half of the sum so collected is given to us in the form of a rebate on the original charge.

We agree with you in thinking that it is not advisable to en-
force a collection from those who signed no order, but if upon request they are willing that the collection should be made in accordance, save a few dollars and will oblige him.

We note that you will collect from those who signed orders, out of the payroll of Dec. 1-15. It would be unwise, of course, to stir up any trouble about a matter in which we stand to gain so little and we are under no obligations to Mr. Podrubo to make these collections for him, and are doing it merely as a matter of courtesy.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea
Secretary & Treasurer.
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

RCL-C

Dec. 22nd, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson,
Supt. The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

We enclose herewith Mr. Podrubo’s letter of Dec. 21st giving list of ten men sent to the mines from whom please collect $2.00 each, forwarding the collections to this office. We also enclose signed orders from each of the men mentioned in Mr. Podrubo’s list.

Please let us know when you complete the collections already being made for Mr. Podrubo’s account.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea

RCL-C

December 24th, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson,
Supt, The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

We are in receipt of yours of the 23rd enclosing check for $8.00 to cover amount collected from the four men sent to the mines by Mr. Podrubo, as per the list contained in your letter.
May we inquire if any attempt was made to collect from any five or six men whom Mr. Podrubo sent to the furnace?

We will hold your present check for a few days, probably until Monday or Tuesday of next week, at which time we expect to have further occasion to see Mr. Podrubo, when we will hand him his share of the proceeds of your check.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea
Secretary & Treasurer.
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

RCL-C

Dec. 27-1915

Mr. Robert C. Lea, Sec'y-Treas.
Philadelphia, Penn.
Dear Sir:—

Replying to yours of 24th and answering your inquiry whether any attempt was made to collect Mr. Podrubo's charges against the five or six men who came to the furnace, I beg to say that two of the men did not work a half day, in fact, not long enough to get their names, and that those who did remain declared positively that they had made no agreement to pay anything whatever. As there were no orders to cover the amount we did not collect anything. If Mr. Podrubo wishes us to make such collections he should have the men sign orders before they leave, or better yet collect the money from them directly before starting.

Respectfully yours,
Supt.
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

Laborers Supplied
    In Any Number
    Anywhere
    With Complete
    Labor Camps


Robesonia Iron Co.,
Robesonia, Pa.
Gentlemen:—
Should you need any additional help, we will be glad to hire
under your orders any number of competent and good working-
men.

Our aim to give an honest help, both to the employer and to
the employee has given to us the efficiency that enables us to
fulfill any order for men on a short notice.

Trusting to receive your kind consideration, we beg to remain.

Yours very truly,
THE INDUSTRIAL LABOR AGENCY.

Thomas Armato

M/J

Dec. 17-1915

The Industrial Labor Agency
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Gentlemen:—

Yours of 15th was received yesterday.

We employ about 175 men at this plant and 85 at our quarry
at Cornwall, Penn. 20 miles distant. We expect to extend our
operations soon, and will likely want more men. At our quarry
we have mostly Italians and here nearly one half foreigners, of
whom about one half are Italians and one half Slavonians.

Please let me know what you charge per head, who pays the
carfare here and your terms and conditions generally.

Yours truly,
Superintendent
[Robesonia Iron Co.]
Robesonia, Pa.

Brooklyn, N. Y. Dec. 18th 1915

The Robesonia Iron Co, Limited.
Robesonia, Penna.,

Gentlemen,

In reply to your favor of the 17th inst. we beg to advise, that
we are in a position to meet your demand for labor.

Our charges to supply you with the kind of help asked for will
be of $2.00 per head to be paid to us if the man remain in your
employ for 15 days or more.

The carfare from New York to your operations will be paid
by the laborers, but you will have to advance the necessary
amount and later deduct same from the laborer's earnings.
We will take care to deliver these men on your works and our agent will start them on the job if so desired.

In giving us an order please state wages offered per hour, how many hours will constitute a regular day's work and when pay day, also what facilities can be found for boarding these men.

Trusting to be favored with your orders, we beg to remain,

Yours very truly,
THE INDUSTRIAL LABOR AGENCY
By T. Armato

December 22nd, 1915.

Mr. S. B. Patterson,
Supt. The Robesonia Iron Co., Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

We obtained 14 men through a labor agency here to relieve the situation at the mines. About the only men we can get here are those who speak Russian and we have reached the limit of our accommodations for them around Cornwall, so there is no use in our endeavoring to do anything further through this local agency.

Mr. Pass tells me that he ought to have a least 90 men on the payroll in order to keep the furnaces fully supplied with ore at the present rate of consumption, and this leaves ten men, and perhaps more, who are yet to be supplied.

He tells me that you have heard from the labor agency in New York about which you spoke to me the other day, and that you are informed by them that they can furnish you with Italians for the mines. This would be just the thing, as Mr. Pass tells me that he can get accommodations for as many Italians as may be necessary.

I have therefore asked him to take the matter up with you and to get you to endeavor to secure as many Italians as he needs for his operations. You will, of course, inform the labor agency as to the rates we pay, and also let them know that on the first of February we expect to go on a ten hour day, whereas we are now working nine hours a day.

I trust that you may be fortunate enough to secure these men for him, as I feel that it will not do for us to raise wages at the mines at the present time, on account of the complications with
which we would almost surely be involved with our neighbors, the Cornwall Ore Bank Co.

Yours truly,

William G. Freeman
Chairman
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

WCF-C

December 23-1915

The Industrial Labor Agency
146 Stagg St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Gentlemen:—

Yours of 18th at hand and contents noted.

We can take ten more Italians at our quarring operations, Cornwall, Lebanon Co. Penn. We have no more vacant houses but these men can obtain board with their countrymen now in our employ. We will probably put up a few houses in Spring but at present can only take men who will board.

We pay 18 cents an hour for 9 hours until Feb. 1-'16 when we will go on 10 hours continuing at that until next Dec.

Living here is much cheaper than in New York or in fact any other City. Rents to our employees run from 2.00 to $6.00 for an entire house. This is a fine farming country and produce is very cheap. The work is steady from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, and not like contractors' jobs which close down during the Winter. We pay twice a month; about the 3rd or 4th of the ensuing month for the second half. We have no store and pay our men their wages cash infall.

I think the best way to do is for us to send an Italian who has worked for us for a number of years to N. Y. to bring the men out. He can tell them all about the place and the work as he speaks English and Italian. He will also be able to bring them out to the job so that there will be no danger of the men getting lost. Lastly he will be provided with transportation.

Please do not send any men until you reply and you get further advices from me.

Yours truly,

Superintendant,
[Robesonia Iron Co.]

Mr. I. Podrubo,
Phila., Pa.

Dear Sir:—

We confirm having authorized you to obtain for us a boarding-house keeper and 12 or 15 negro workmen to serve as bottom fillers at our Pig Iron blast furnace plant, Robesonia, Pa.

The work consists of shovelling Ore, Coke and Limestone into barrows, and wheeling the barrows.

Wage rate is 44c per twelve hour day. Tonnage and attendance bonuses bring the rate up to about 49c Work is seven days per week, alternate day and night shift.

The men will be housed in a flour-mill building which has been changed into a lodging house. There is a kitchen, with stove, a large eating room and four or five sleeping rooms with four bunks in each room. The boarding-house keeper and his wife can occupy one of the rooms and the men the others. Bedding is provided. We will make arrangements for the keeper to obtain supplies from the store, and will deduct from payroll the board to be paid to him by the men. Food for the mens' first meal is already on hand.

We will advance money for tickets, deducting from the mens' pay for same, but will refund to any man who works for one month.

You are to send escort with the men, we to pay for his time and return ticket.

Directions for reaching Robesonia are as follows:—

Take 4:35 p.m. train from Reading Terminal. Change cars at Reading. Take local train on Harrisburg Division to Robesonia. There is an express train leaving at the same time which does not stop at Robesonia, so be sure to take the local. Get off at Robesonia, which is the third or fourth stop. Your men will be met at the station, by our Superintendent, Mr. J. W. Gocher, or his representative Mr. Altenderfer, who is our chief labor foremen. The train is due at Robesonia about 6:30 Arrangements will be made to feed the men as soon as they arrive.

Yours truly,
Robert C. Lea
Sec. & Treas.
Robesonia Iron Co. Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

February 7, 1923.

Gentlemen:

We beg to call your attention to our exceptional facilities for furnishing you with any number of good able bodied Foreign Laborers or skilled Mechanics (not of the floating type, but good foreign workingmen) consisting of such nationalities as Russians, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, Swedes, Danes, Spaniards, Italians or any other preferred nationality on very short notice.

Our office in this city is the headquarters for this class of help, and inasmuch as we have many years experience recruiting and transporting Foreign Labor, particularly for your line of work, we believe that our service would be well worthy of your investigation.

We are listing below a few of our many clients whom we have served in the past to their entire satisfaction, and to whom we respectfully beg to refer you as to our reliability, etc.

Assuring you of our utmost attention at all times, and hoping this offer will have your early consideration, we beg to remain, Very truly yours,

INTERSTATE EMPLOYMENT AGENCY.
Edward Kirfhaber
Ass’t. to manager

References: United States Steel Corp. New York City
Pittsburgh Steel Co. Pittsburgh, Pa.
American Smelting & Refining Co. Maurer, N. J.
Aluminum Co. of America, Massena, N. Y.
Lehigh & Wilkesbarre Coal Co. Wilkesbarre, Pa.
Atlantic Utilities Corp. New York City.

Strike Orders Accepted

February 8, 1923.

Interstate Employment Agency,
73 West Street,
New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

We are in receipt of your favor by your Mr. Kiefhaber, relative to laborers.
This Company is a comparatively small one and we do not employ labor in any quantity.

We do have places at the present time for about six (6) Italian laborers (Northern Italians preferred) for whom we can provide boarding places. We also have a vacant house in which we should like to install a married Slav who would take care of three or four boarders.

We should like to have you advise as to the terms on which you supply labor and any other details which may be of interest to us.

Very Truly yours,
Supt.
Robesonia Iron Co.

Johnson City, Tenn.

Supt—

ROBESONIA FURNACE,
ROBESONIA PA.,

Dear sir
If you should want any good steady Blast Furnace Men now or in the near future I would be glad to supply your needs as I have some Al men Stockhouse Men also some good casthouse, Helpers, as well as general Furnace Laborers, can supply Keepers & stove Tenders General Repair Men Will be glad to take care of any Labor Shortage you may have Am an experienced Furnace Man, Myself and know the kind of men required to do the work trusting I may hear from you in the near future

I am yours very truly
A F Woodward

1407 east Watauga Ave.
Johnson City, Tenn.

March 24, 1923.

Mr. A. F. Woodward,
1407 East Watauga Avenue,
Johnson City, Tenn.

Dear Sir:
I am in receipt of your note saying that you are in position to supply blast furnace help.
We can use eight or ten blast furnace laborers.

I assume that the men you will furnish will all be colored men and would advise that we have a boarding house in which we can place about ten men, provided one of them will undertake to run the boarding house and handle the crew.

We are paying 35c an hour for common labor.

Kindly advise what your terms are and whether you can send men under the conditions outlined.

Very truly yours,

John Gocher, Superintendent
Robesonia Iron Co.

Johnson City, Tenn.,

Mr. John W. Goucher, Supt.
Robesonia Iron, Co., Lmtd,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir,

Replying to your favor of March the 24, I wish to advise, that the Men I had reference to were about equal numbers, of Negro, and white, but if you would rather have the Colored Men of course I can get them. As to a man to board them. I have several men that will make suitable Men I have in mind a Negro man at Dunbar, Penna., A fine boarding house man he is a good keeper has a son that is a good casthouse man. I can bring a Man from here, that will do for the present and get in touch with this Man at Dunbar, and arrainge for you to get him later on, As to my terms I will, personally deliver the men to you at $2.50 per head, plus my traveling expenses, here and return, that is 50 cts less than I chg. others but I want your Order I allways accompany my men as then I am sure that they will arrive on the job as there is Men out looking for laborers and if I ship them out alone someone else may pick them up then you an I are both looser, Now in regard to the transportation, you can arrainge tickets, at Bristol, Virginia, via Norfolk & Western Ry, And connecting lines to your place, & then Mail me Ry, Script Book. for $15.00 to take the Parth to Bristol, from here as this State has very stringent labor laws and won’t issue a license, only on certain rigid conditions OR if its less trouble to you send Script or Check for amt nescessary to pay RY, fare you can get rate from
your RY, ACT, I will have an agreement with the men that they are to repay this RY, chgs, From their first earnings at the rate of at least $5.00 per pay untill ful amt is repaid, As to whether I would be safe to send Money to to enny business dealings I refer You to MR C.N BUSH Gen TICKET ACT, Southern & N.&W, RYS, Bristol Va, Allso MR Ew,d Rumbley, Ticket Agt Sou, RY Johnson City Tenn As well as MR, REGINALD PAL-MER Tres, American Manganese Mfg co, Dunbar, Pa, Who has been mailing me checks for Transportation in amts $250.00 to $500.00 for the past 6 yrs I will get my Men Lined up and be ready to leave at once after I hear from you please state if you would rather have all colored, pardon the lengthy letter, await-ing your reply I am Respt, Yours

A F Woodard

Johnson City Tenn.

April 2, 1923.

Mr. A. F. Woodward,
1407 East Watauga Ave.
Johnson City, Tenn.

Dear Sir:
The terms in your letter are satisfactory, but before closing the matter I wish to be sure that you fully understand the conditions.

We have quarters for ten men, including the boarding house keeper. We will furnish the boarding house with bunks and bedding and a cooking outfit, but the boarding house keeper will be expected to provide all provisions and collect the board from the men himself. This collection, of course, can probably be arranged through the office.

The ten men that you bring here will be expected to do any labor work that may turn up as we may not have room for all of them at our cast house; in fact, most of them will probably have to work at our ore roasters, situated here at the furnace.

We would, of course, prefer to have a boarding house keeper who would be a permanent man come here with the outfit in the first place, if you can arrange it in this way.

If these conditions are according to your understanding in the
matter, wire me, collect, to that effect on receipt of this letter and I will arrange for your transportation.

Very truly yours,
John Cocher, Superintendent
Robesonia Iron Co.

New York, N. Y.
Aug. 13, 1923

Robosonia Iron Co Ltd.,
Robesonia, Pa.

Dear Sir:

With the coming of fall we assume, that by reason of increase in orders, you will require a larger number of men than you are employing at the present time.

We beg to call your attention to the fact that the officials whose names appear hereon have employed men for upward of thirty years, and have within that period furnished close on to three million men to the largest interests in this country; we are in a position therefore to take care of your requirements in both skilled and unskilled labor in a very efficient manner within a very reasonable space of time.

The help we propose to furnish are men who are up to the standard in every respect, and, whether they are Americans, Russians, Poles, Slavs, Lithuanians, Spaniards, Italians or any other nationally requested, are carefully selected by us and are guaranteed to be the highest type obtainable in the line asked for.

All orders, regardless of size, whether they are for two men or twenty thousand, will receive our utmost attention, and will be filled in as economical a manner as possible. We are attaching herewith partial list of our references to whom you may refer as to our ability and integrity.

Soliciting your kind patronage and awaiting your valued commands, we are,

Very truly yours,
MANUFACTURER'S INTERNATIONAL AGENCY
By H.H. Bowen
 Strikes Handled On Cost Plus Basis
Philadelphia, Aug. 27th 1923

The Robesonia Iron Co.
Robesonia, Pa.

Gentlemen:

We wish to advise you that we are in a good position to supply you with good FOREIGN LABORERS such as Russians, Polish, Slavish, Germans, Hungarians and of other nationalities, skilled and unskilled.

Should you be in need of any, kindly let us hear from you at your earliest convenience, stating the kind of work, living conditions there, rate of wages etc.

Trusting that we may have a favorable reply, we remain

Very truly yours

THE INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

New York, September 7th 1923

Robesonia Iron Co. Ltd.
21 S. 12th St

Gentlemen:

We beg to call your attention to the fact that we are now in a position to supply you for immediate shipment, fifty good laborers as Scandinavians, Danish, Hollanders, Germans, Russian and Polish.

If you are interested, we will send you all the particulars ny return of mail. We guarantee you 100% service.

Very truely yours,

THE EGLE EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
GENERAL MANAGER

B. Ritt

BR/ML