

# twin cities+region

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## Two jobs, \$9 an hour and an economic downturn



● Tong Lee, like many in the Twin Cities Hmong community, struggles to get by.

By PATRICK LEE • plee@startribune.com

From 10 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. at least five days a week, Tong Lee dons a white smock, hairnet and gloves to clean floors, wash machines and stack crates. For hours at a time, he works mechanically like a well-oiled machine in the cold, refrigerated air of the food facility: sweep, dustpan, garbage, sweep, dustpan, garbage.

Hmong immigrant Tong Lee works a second job late at night at the Holiday Stationer's store in Brooklyn Center. Lee says his little knowledge of English severely limits his job prospects.

MARLIN LEVISON

burden of supporting extended families makes it harder to take time off and train for better-paying jobs.

"Five or six men living in one apartment: I never saw that in my life," said Yao Lo, who has been a job counselor with the Lao Family Community of Minnesota in St. Paul for 27 years. "But now, people are like that, because they lost their jobs, they lost their job. People cry coming to Lao Family almost every week."

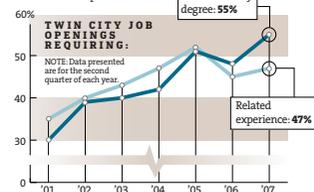
He cited the doubled cost of rice, spiking gas and utilities prices, and losses in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis as major factors behind the Hmong people's current financial struggles. Their continued grappling with cultural and language issues only exacerbates the problems, Lo said.

Although he is always looking for a better-paying job, Tong Lee said he has accepted the basic reality of his situation, which is severely limited by the little English he knows.

Immigrant: Providing for his parents isn't a burden, it's an implicit responsibility in his culture. B7 >

### ROADBLOCKS TO EARNINGS

Immigrant workers don't have the means or the time to go back to school or vocational training. But without it, open job options are increasingly limited, and workers are stuck with low-pay and long hours at assembly lines and warehouses. The trend in the Twin Cities is no different: since 2001, more and more jobs have required post-secondary degrees or related work experience.



NOTE: Data presented are for the second quarter of each year. Source: Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Labor Market Information Office, Job Vacancy Survey

Star Tribune

## Memo touts disrupting transport for the RNC

● An anarchist group claims it has plans that will help it create chaos at the convention.

By JENNA ROSS and LORA PARSBY Star Tribune staff writers

An anarchist group claims it has official transportation plans that will help it immobilize the Republican National Convention, in St. Paul this September.

But police say they're not worried about the leaked document, which maps delegate routes to and from the Xcel Energy Center.

Pete Panos, St. Paul police spokesman, said officials aren't sure the March 5 document is authentic.

"It's not a document we're using," he said. "Anything put out now is going to be a working document."

Moreover, Panos, said the posted document contains mostly "common sense stuff."

"Are we using buses? Yes," he said. "Are we going to let the anarchists block the roads? No."

The self-described anarchist group calls itself the RNC Welcoming Committee.

Disrupt continues: RNC "confident" about a successful convention. B4 >

Spending: Hoping to cash in. A1

## ABOUT AS GOOD AS IT GETS



Photos by M.K. SMITH • mksmith@startribune.com

The Macalester College Pipe Band, above, played in the finale of the Independence Day parade and celebration in St. Paul's St. Anthony Park neighborhood. The event looked almost exactly as it did for the first such gathering 61 years ago — right down to the horseshoe tournament after the reading of the winning entries in the sixth-graders' patriotic essay contest. The youngster at right turned down the sound. "This is the best of what community is all about," St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said. Turn to B3



## Minnetonka man is all abuzz about keeping bees



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Dewey Hassig lifted a frame filled with honey from one of his hives. After taking a class at the U, he has devoted himself to two hives that he keeps in the backyard of his Minnetonka home.

● Beekeepers are fighting to keep bee populations from declining. More than a third of U.S. commercial bee colonies have died this year.

By LAURIE BLAKE • lblake@startribune.com

Intending to sell honey and help Mother Nature in the process by bringing more pollinators into the world, Dewey Hassig was full of optimism when he fenced off a square of his Minnetonka lawn for two bee hives.

He ordered his first bees in January 2004, took an inspiring three-day beekeeping class at the University of Minnesota that March and picked up several pounds of bees at a Stillwater supplier in April.

For Hassig, the next three years became a crash course in the many things killing

bees nationwide. After losing three hives, he started over this spring with two new batches of bees by giving them antibiotics — a step he had hoped to avoid.

"Bees are dying; their populations are in decline," said Marla Spivak, a professor and honeybee researcher at the University of Minnesota.

A combination of threats — including farm pesticides; sprawling development that has eliminated clover fields and other flowers and weeds bees feed on; and viruses and parasitic mites — are all contributing to the decline, said Spivak, who teaches classes for back-yard beekeepers like Hassig.

Bees: U professor and researcher to speak on the health of bees Sunday night. B7 >

## DNR is dealt a setback to its mission of conservation

● The agency must use E85 in its vehicles. And, as the ethanol boom grows, grasslands are lost to corn.

By DENNIS ANDERSON danderson@startribune.com

The Department of Natural Resources' expanding fleet of 300 "flex-fuel" vehicles is undercutting the agency's mission to conserve wildlife habitat and clean up the state's lakes and rivers, according to two Minnesota conservation groups.

The DNR's cars, trucks and vans burn "E85," a blend of 85 percent corn-based ethanol and 15 percent gasoline, and can be more expensive to operate than comparable vehicles that use the Minnesota-mandated blend of 90 percent gasoline and 10 percent ethanol.

Tens of thousands of federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres of Minnesota grasslands that support ducks, pheasants, songbirds and other wildlife have been plowed under in part to support the state's ethanol boom.

The irony of having the DNR charged with preserving prairie and grasslands and Conservation Reserve Program acres and at the same time helping to drive demand for corn-based ethanol isn't lost on us, and I don't think it's lost on a lot of people," said Matt Norton, forestry and wildlife advocate with the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA).

DNR Lac qui Parle area wildlife manager Dave Trauba has seen firsthand the effects of the land conversion in western Minnesota. "After watching these conservation lands support so much wildlife for so many years, it really kicks you in the stomach to see them plowed up," Trauba said.

Yet, as directed by state policy, Trauba and his staff still rely on DNR pickups with E85.

More than 1 million of the state's CRP acres might be lost in coming years, with much of the land converted to growing corn, DNR officials estimate.

Money is driving the switch.

DNR continues: Farmers are being paid more money to plant corn. B4 >

# Multiple jobs, low wages face many in Hmong community

## ◀ IMMIGRANT FROM BI

"Yes, of course I would like to change, but everything is complicated," he said through a translator. "The language barrier: I can't go anywhere."

Luckily enough, three of his four coworkers speak Hmong at his current job, and not a word of English is spoken for the entire shift.

But with the percentage of job openings requiring either a post-secondary degree or related work experience on the rise, immigrant workers are finding themselves boxed in from all sides. In the short-run, they need an immediate source of income to pay off mortgage and car payments, credit card debt and day-to-day food costs. But in the long-run, working less and taking additional training and ESL classes would be the smarter investment.

Chupheng Lee, vice president of Lao Family Community — a group that works to empower the Hmong community and other minorities — said the choices open to immigrant workers are few and far between.

"[When] we came here, we were already 20, 30. You cannot go to school for another 10 or 20 years, you're going to have to go to work," he said. "It's really affecting the Hmong community ... they don't have the skills to move job to job. They rely upon the one job they found, and because this situation in the United States right now, most of the manufacturing job is not stable."

Like Tong Lee, many members of the Hmong community struggling financially often work at least two jobs — sometimes three — in manufacturing, shipping and receiving, industrial or warehouse work. He gets home from work in the



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Tong Lee works his second job late at night in a plant that specializes in packaging sandwiches for convenience stores. He carpoos to work at 9:20 p.m. and doesn't leave until 6:30 in the morning.

warehouse by 7 a.m., and after four hours of sleep, wakes up for his second job. Before heading back to the food facility by 10 p.m., he is usually able to take another two-hour nap.

Back in Brooklyn Center, the only hint of color in the whitewashed, fluorescent-lit building is the bright yellow of the Rubbermaid garbage bin he rolls along behind him everywhere he cleans. As he swept up discarded ends of meat amid the wafing smells of salami, ham and turkey, Lee thought about his future.

It was simple: "I just keep working," he said.

### Bigger burdens

For Tong Lee, the oldest of nine children, providing for his parents is not an extra burden, but an implicit duty in the Hmong culture. For him, working two jobs is about maximizing his productivity with the skills he has and the opportunities he can reach.

"It's hard to work like that, but then imagine that you're just wasting half of your day doing nothing," he said.

Even so, his two jobs provide a pre-tax monthly income of about \$1,800.

He lives with and supports his 22-year-old brother — who

will finish his school by next June — and when his parents' Social Security or public assistance funds run short, which seems to happen fairly regularly, he helps them out. Of his eight siblings, only the youngest, a 2-year-old, was born in the United States.

"If I didn't work, they would be hungry," he said.

Sean Watkins, assistant employment manager at the Centre for Asians and Pacific Islanders in Minneapolis, said the bar has been raised even in jobs with minimal requirements. His agency works with 3,500 immigrants and refugees

### HMONG FESTIVAL IN ST. PAUL

What: Hmong Freedom celebration & 28th annual International Sports Tournament

When: Saturday and Sunday

Where: McK Murray Field

Cost: Free in St. Paul.

More info: Go to [www.laofamily.org](http://www.laofamily.org) or contact Kahoua Yang at 651-214-6800.

each year, almost 60 percent of whom are Hmong.

"You have more employers who are doing online applications, so now we're moving past the refugee and immigrant who is learning the English language by reading and writing; now you're adding the technology piece of it," he said. "If they want 10 people to open up a box, they're going to make sure they get the best 10 people."

Said Watkins: "Again, who's on the outside looking in?"

### A Catch-22

But changing times and higher prices result in broken hopes and dreams regardless of employment status. A \$4-a-gallon gas poses a real trade-off between fuel in the car and food on the table, especially when hourly pay is less than \$10.

Tong Lee carpoos to work with a relative in a scuffed-up black Honda Civic, leaving him St. Paul apartment at 9:20 p.m. each night. The small amount of disposable income he used to have left after paying for car insurance, phone bills, utilities and rent, as well as supporting his family, now continues to shrink as gas prices rise.

In the Hmong community, most families hunkered

down for tougher times and kept up with debt payments and the cost of living by pulling on their bank savings, Chupheng Lee said. But the irony of Tong Lee's Catch-22 is that, even when the economy rolls around to an expansion, the roadblocks to empowerment facing him and other immigrants will still remain. Even if more jobs are created in the near future, immigrant workers will be at the mercy of the same low-paying industries and ever-changing business cycles.

Despite the cultural and economic hurdles facing the Hmong people seeking work in a shrinking job market, celebration and community are still a strong part of their lives. The Hmong Freedom Celebration and 28th Annual International Sports Tournament, one of two major events sponsored by Lao Family Community, starts Saturday. For two days, thousands of Hmong families from Minnesota and nearby states will convene to compete in sports and celebrate their heritage. The event also features booths with information on local nonprofits geared toward helping individuals find jobs, take ESL classes and obtain medical insurance and healthcare.

Although he used to go regularly with his family, Tong Lee said he will go to the games this year only if he cannot log some weekend hours at the Holiday Stationeries warehouse. And besides, his late-shift job dictates his sleep schedule: On Saturday and Sunday when the festival takes place, he will be catching up on some well-deserved sleep before his workweek starts again on Monday night.

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« [WHEN] WE CAME HERE, WE WERE ALREADY 20, 30: YOU CANNOT GO TO SCHOOL FOR ANOTHER 10 OR 20 YEARS, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO GO TO WORK. IT'S REALLY AFFECTING THE HMONG COMMUNITY ... THEY DON'T HAVE THE SKILLS TO MOVE JOB TO JOB. THEY RELY UPON THE ONE JOB THEY FOUND ... » Chupheng Lee, vice president of Lao Family Community — a group that works to empower the Hmong community and other minorities.