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FEDEX GOES DEEP INTO MISSISSIPPI DELTA TO FIND WORKERS

To fill its vast workforce, delivery giant ferries 200 people four hours round trip to work the night shift at its Memphis hub

By Paul Ziobro
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GREENWOOD, Miss. – Inside the nearly barren living room of her apartment, Mary Harris slips into a reflective yellow jacket adorned with the FedEx Corp. logo as the sun begins to set.

It is Monday. She won't be back home until around sunrise on Wednesday.

In between, Ms. Harris will drive an hour northwest to Cleveland, Miss., from where she will make three four-hour round trips curled up on a bus to Memphis, Tenn. In Memphis, she will do two overnight shifts and one day shift – each five hours long – helping to move and sort millions of packages at FedEx's primary air hub.

FedEx has tapped deep into the Mississippi Delta to find workers for the largest facility in its world-wide supply chain. Lured by the chance to work for a global company and earn hourly wages starting at \$13.26, some 200 workers gather in a Walmart parking lot in Cleveland, Miss., five nights a week to board buses bound for Memphis.

"They're important to the daily operation," said Barb Wallander, a senior vice president of human resources at FedEx. "We depend on them."

The connection with Cleveland, a two-hour drive from Memphis, is an unlikely cog in a machine that gets the surge of holiday shipments to homes quickly. FedEx and its rivals are expected to carry more than 2.4 billion global packages between Thanksgiving and the end of the year, or twice as many parcels as they handled in 2013, according to SJ Consulting Group estimates.

The busing program, which runs year-round and is nearing its first anniversary, highlights the lengths delivery giants have to go to staff their operations at a time when unemployment is low, especially around the largest hubs. In Memphis, the unemployment rate is 3.8 percent, just above the 50-year low of 3.5 percent nationwide. In Louisville, Ky., where United Parcel Service Inc. runs its main air hub, the unemployment rate is 3.2 percent.

Ms. Harris said opportunities like the one at FedEx are no longer available in Greenwood, a shrinking rural town that welcomes visitors with a sign that reads "Cotton Capital of the World."

"It is in my blood to work hard for what I need and want," said the 39-year-old, who started working for FedEx last December. She drives an hour to get to Cleveland to start her bus commute.

In Bolivar County, where Cleveland is, the unemployment rate stands at 6.8 percent, according to the Mississippi Department of Employment Security. A drug manufacturer recently closed a factory there, and an auto-parts maker expects to close a plant soon.

The situation drew FedEx to host a job fair in Cleveland in November 2018, just ahead of the busiest period for the shipping industry. The city has a population of 12,000.

Ms. Wallander said FedEx expected not much more than a few dozen attendees. Instead, about 500 people showed up, said Pam Chatman, a retired news director who posted word of the event on her Facebook page. FedEx later staged a hiring center in a church fellowship center, where it did drug screening and orientation.

A major hurdle was how workers would get to Memphis, 115 miles away. Many didn't have cars.

FedEx committed to providing free bus rides for the workers, part of a three-year pilot program. "If the jobs are not coming to the Mississippi Delta, then we have to take the people to the jobs," said Ms. Chatman, who reached out to FedEx volunteering to coordinate the initial job fair.

Workers collect around 7 p.m. in the Walmart parking lot on North Davis Avenue, one of two retail corridors that cross through Cleveland. They are easy to spot in their FedEx-issued jackets entering the big-box retailer or adjacent Murphy's gas station to grab chicken, McDonald's or other snacks before three Delta Bus Lines coaches pull up.

Kinyuna Cannon, 25 years old, has been working for FedEx for the past four months. The starting wage was well above the \$7.85 an hour she earned at her last job at a nursing home. "It is the transportation and the pay," she said of the appeal of the FedEx job, which are part-time positions that provide health and retirement benefits.

She boards the middle bus, settling into the black leather seats for the ride to Memphis. The caravan of headlights cuts through the rural highway on a moonless night.

Two hours later, the buses pull into an employee parking lot across from the Memphis International Airport. The workers disembark, cross a covered overpass and traverse the security checkpoint. They blend in among the 7,000 workers that night, helping to unload 150 cargo planes, sort their packages and reload them to the next destination.

Walter Kirkemide, FedEx senior manager of operations, says turnover among the workers coming from Mississippi is lower than the locals, who have more opportunity to switch jobs if the overnight schedule proves unmanageable. He was skeptical of the staying power and initially thought the bus would last a few weeks. "That would be my limit," he said.

FedEx has since started busing workers for shifts to a sorting facility for its Ground division in Olive Branch, Miss. It has attempted to add buses to other regions with similar demographics to Cleveland. "We haven't had the same response rate," Ms. Wallander said.

The Mississippi Delta has ties to the leaders of both FedEx and UPS. FedEx founder Fred Smith was born in nearby Marks, Miss., the son of a bus-company owner, before starting his overnight delivery company in Memphis. UPS CEO David Abney was born in Cleveland and started working at UPS in the city to pay his way through the local college.

Ms. Harris, who grew up in the Delta, recalls past jobs she had in the area, including in fish-processing plants and driving trucks, and how she spent months moving among friends' houses and for a time in a shelter before she went to the FedEx job fair.

Now, her 21-year-old son, Denzell, also works at FedEx, and she is picking up extra shifts. After the first night, she quickly turns around on the bus to work the day shift in Memphis. Once that is done, she returns back to Cleveland. With not enough time to head home, she makes a brief stop at her son's father's house to freshen up.

She has hopes of progressing at FedEx, perhaps working on the aircraft she helps load. "I thought FedEx was a godsend," she said. "It helped so many people get out of their rut."