

Immigrants And Unions

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I remember being on a construction site right after a strike by the plumbers. One of the clearest things that stuck out was the hostility between the Hispanics and the white workers. There's always a certain level, but this was worse than normal. I found out why after only a few days. During the strike the boss hired Hispanic plumbers to fill their spots, when the union realized that many of the scabs were undocumented they called the INS on them. Pretty soon the strike was settled, and scabs that had papers were allowed to stay and keep their jobs. They had to join the union because the contract said so, but they hated the union and the white workers for what they did to the undocumented workers. The question that comes is, what would have happened if these scabs were from Germany or Canada? Would the union have called the INS then? And how did the union know that some of the scabs were undocumented or did they at all? Maybe they just assumed that brown skin meant "ILLEGAL?"

This isn't something that's uncommon in America. For many years unions have looked down on foreign workers and in many cases actually worked to keep them out of the country. They believed immigrants would be willing to work cheaper and undercut all that the unions have fought so hard for. Unions helped institute laws that fined employers, but expelled workers for not having the proper documentation and the laws themselves were a sham. The best example, being the I-9 forms we all have to fill out when we get jobs. A boss has to look at the paper work, but if it turns out to be fake, that's the workers fault. If they get busted all they have to do is fire the person and nothing happens to them. But then the worker is either out looking for another job or in jail waiting to go back to their home country.

It's this same sentiment that led unions to back a policy of "America First," or "Buy American." Where workers were asking consumers to pick products based on where the boss was located. All together what it really meant was that unions were trying to protect American workers from what they believed to be the horrors of hard working, subordinate, cheap foreign workers.

This policy was played out in the fact that unions ceased organizing new immigrants. What this meant for all of us was the death of unions and the division of the working class into ethnic groups. And those that spoke English had a chance for good jobs and those that didn't would be stuck working in low paying, unorganized industries.

However, it wasn't bound to stay this way forever. Those industries where workers were highly unionized like steel, auto, textile, and electrical manufacturing, began to be moved completely overseas in the 70's. There isn't a single television made in America anymore. This had

two effects, unions were losing their base and young people had to find new industries to work in. Many of these weren't as high paying or beneficial as the ones that their parents had enjoyed. These jobs are mostly in the service sector, like hotels, retail, food service, and technology.

At the same time new industrial plants are popping up all over Central and South America, as well as Asia. The economy of those regions was changing, just as Northern Europe had done a century before. The rapid industrialization combined with the new world order of trade pacts and massive loans, led to the change in society. Countries like Mexico started doing whatever they could for these companies that were flooding to their shores. Environmental, labor and social laws were relaxed, but not without a fight. Unions, activists, and many others organized and fought the change. However, it seemed that the companies were winning. So in the midst of a changing economy and society many of the best organizers, as well as many everyday people left their homelands in search of a better life. Much like the European immigrants that built the labor movement of nineteenth century in America.

For the most part, the recent immigrants (both with and without papers) work in service sector, agricultural, and hospitality type jobs. Which happens to be the only industries (besides prisons) that are on the up swing. They are also the only industries where unions, that were once dormant, are now focusing heavily on organizing. In the past five years the only unions growing are ones that are in industries that are not highly unionized, have a large amount of immigrants, and are in non-mobile industries. These are just the type of jobs that recent immigrants are likely to be found in.

This means that the labor movement, which was once a bastion of white men, now has a new face. Unions had to learn how to organize and work with people of other nationalities, cultures, languages, and different ideas of what a union is. This meant unions had to change.

This isn't to say that all unions have adapted to the new economy and the new immigrants. Rather, ones that have are growing and are better off for doing so. Obviously unions that will call the INS haven't learned that it's just dividing the working class, when the real goal of a union is to build those bonds. And many unions are now embracing our differences and finding that they actually make us stronger.

Organizing immigrants is a challenge, but really organizing anything is. Circumstances that immigrant workers face when trying to organize in this country are different from other groups. Many had bad experiences with prior unions, either in their old country or in this one. Other times there are language barriers that keep groups of workers from being able to effectively communicate with each other. In most workplaces bosses try to divide the workers by playing favorites with certain groups to keep them from trusting each other. Undocumented workers often fear deportation, and documented workers fear for the loss of their jobs.

However, these are things that can be overcome. In some ways organizing with fellow workers is the only way to fix them on a permanent basis. The biggest threat to undocumented immigrants is the INS. Bosses use this as a threat all the time, and in some cases actually do turn workers over. There's one great example of a boss doing this and the workers fighting back.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota workers at a Holiday Inn Express Hotel were organizing with the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE). For years the bosses had been hiring undocumented workers, believing that way they would never speak up about the bad conditions. However, when it became apparent that the workers were organizing, suddenly the boss realized that the workers did not have legal papers. So he called the leaders of the union into his office for a meeting and had the INS waiting for them. All eight workers were going to be deported.

The union began filing charges with the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) and the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) about retaliation. Both agencies filed suit against the company. The union organized community support from clergy and citizen groups of all nationalities into civil disobedience. In the end the workers won the right to stay in the country, each received thousands of dollars in back pay from the company and they got their union recognized by the bosses.

The same year in Minneapolis the union organized a citywide strike of over 1,000 people. In the city over 30% of hotel workers are immigrants from all over the world. During the strike everything had to be translated into twelve different languages. The workers struck over common things, such as, wages, hours, benefits, working conditions, etc. But the thing that made this strike different was that working class people in this country, no matter whether they have lived here a week or their entire lives, acted together. The negotiating committee for the union had people that spoke all these languages and were many different races, but what overcame all that was their class solidarity.

Both of these were great instances where the working class, both immigrants and Americans, organized together and fought for the benefit of each other, creating a true union culture. In many union contracts workers win rights where the employer won't hand over information to the INS unless forced to do so. Many times there are free English classes, and in some cases where the majority of the work speaks a language other than English, the managers are required to be bilingual. Together all of this really shows us one thing; the working class in America is changing. It's been happening over the course of decades, but like anything else it takes time to come together. For the first half of this century, the established unions in the country had forgotten that they were not the entire working class and that they couldn't pick and choose who was going to be in it. But now unions and the American working class are starting to look the same, with women, minorities and recent immigrants are becoming the driving force behind the recent upsurge in union organizing.

But this change in what unions look like also has had a change in how unions act. Part of this is due to the fact that employers in the service sector have been used to treating their workers like crap. When you combine that with a determined and fighting union, you get a militant struggle. Instead of being content to fight out the organizing drive behind closed doors or through the Labor Board election process, the workers are taking their union struggle to the streets. Unions like 1199, SEIU, HERE, UNITE and UE are doing more direct action. This means standing up to the boss and in some cases to the government. A typical 1199 drive at a nursing home means, rallies, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and recognition strike.

This change wasn't just brought about because the union leadership realized that it was the right way to do things, but rather it was due to a change in who was being organized and what they were bringing to the process. On HERE picket lines it's typical to hear chants in Spanish or Creole. During the nursing home strike in Connecticut last month, I heard chants to a reggae beat. The cultures of the unions are changing to reflect the changes that are going on within our class as a whole.

But beyond how the unions are organized, how they fight and what they look like, there are other things changing, like their stance on broad social topics, such as, globalization, governmental regulations, sweatshops, and US foreign policy in general.

When it comes to globalization for years unions in the US tried to stop jobs from leaving, putting most of the blame on the foreign nations and workers for the process. However, recently,

most unions have shifted their focus away from attack on foreign nations and instead focusing on attacking the economic policy and institutions that allow for a system whereby the working class the world over is being attacked. Instead of fighting to boycott foreign made goods, unions are putting political and economic pressure on companies and politicians to create global worker rights standards. They are also trying to find new ways of working together to forge a global workers movement.

For years unions had been trying to put pressure on the federal government to raise the minimum wage, but they haven't been very successful. Picking up where community activists left off in the 1990's the labor movement has put a lot of money, time and resources into fighting for and winning, local living wage laws. This is done not just by the unions, but also by building coalitions of students, progressives, church groups and the active involvement of the workers themselves. This accomplishes two things, it does something good by bringing up the standard of living for workers, but more importantly it makes people begin to fight together. It lets working class people know that their churches and community are behind them. This is especially important in immigrant communities.

Finally and one of the best changes is the US Labor Movement's change in its stance on US foreign policy. For many years the labor movement in this country has really done all it possibly could do to destroy international solidarity, stop the growth of independent and militant foreign unions and keep any sort of anti-capitalist agenda out of unions and working class organizations the world over. The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center (the unions foreign relations arm) is taking steps to bring radical, communist, anarchist, and reformist unions together in a working relationship. Not to mention individual unions are reaching across boards and finding ways to help or in some cases even organize with each other. For example, The United Electrical Workers (UE) and the FAT (an independent union) are working on a cross-board organizing project of the factories along the Mexican-American Border. Another great example is the United Auto Workers, who routinely send members from one automakers factory to a plant in another country to build bonds within the rank and file. They are also trying to find ways to work together on collective bargaining and collective action.

The truth is that all of these changes didn't just happen because they were the right things to do. It would be nice to think that people operated that way, but the changes occurred because the working class of the country was changing. Most the people that work in inner city laundries don't have connections to Germany or England anymore, the working class in this country is not the steel-working broad-shouldered white guy of the 1930's. Our class is quickly becoming the international working class, in hotel strikes where workers speak 12 different languages, in laundries where the entire workforce is Black and Hispanic, in clothing sweatshops where everyone is Cantonese or Laotian. Our class is changing and that means that the unions we organize have to be different, fight differently, and act differently.

It doesn't work anymore for old white guys to work out deals with the boss behind closed doors, that's not what we need or want. What we need is to build militant cross culture unions. And we can't stop at the oceans or the borders. The economic system that we live in has become globalized. It's not enough to organize with the folks who work with you in the Hilton, because Hilton has thousands of hotels all across the world. If we want to make our lives better it's got to be done with our coworkers and the rest of our class all across this globe.

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