

Rising from Below: Immigrant Workers Open New Organizing Fronts

Text and photo essay
by David Bacon

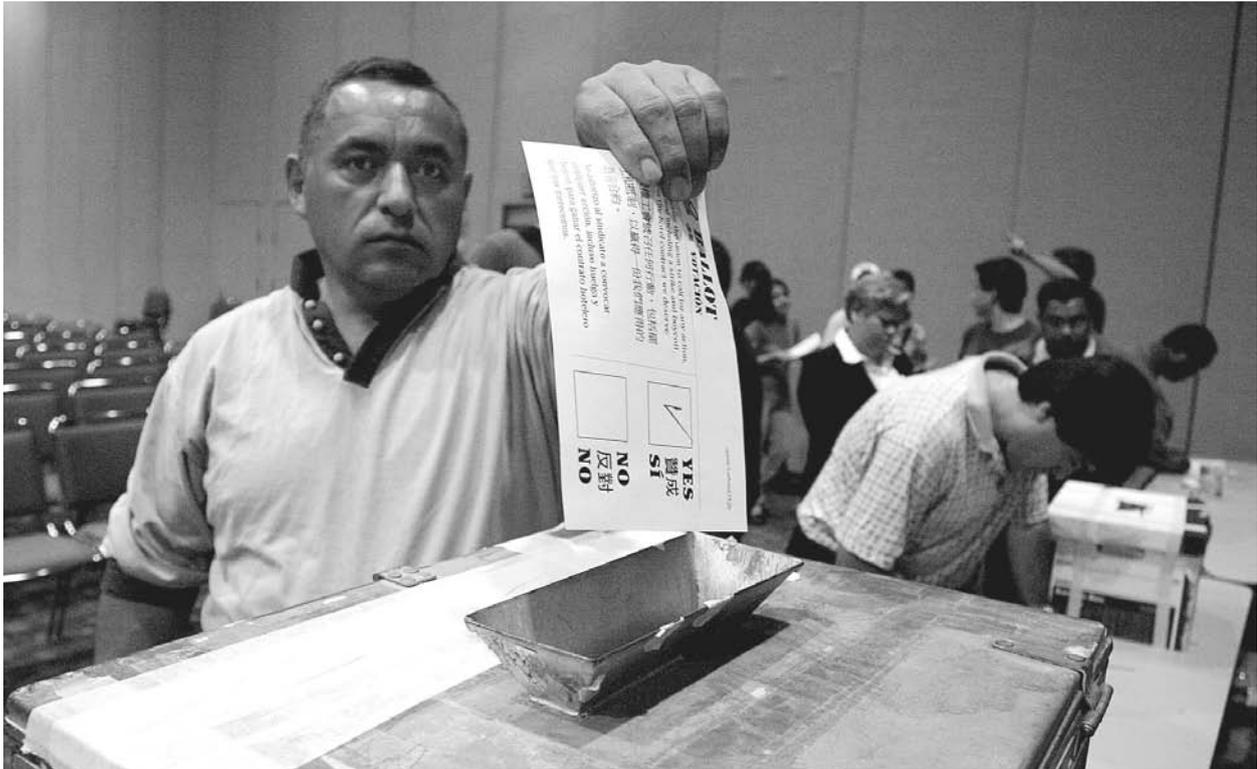


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HR 4437, a bill sponsored by Wisconsin Republican James Sensenbrenner, which passed Congress in December, 2005, hit immigrant communities across the country like an electric current. Its proposals to make undocumented status a federal crime propelled people into the streets by the millions on April 10 and May 1 of 2006, and inspired a wealth of activity, from work and consumer boycotts, student “blowouts,” and school strikes, denunciations from pulpits and union halls, and a surge in coalition-building.

Photo: In Tijuana, a worker looks over the fence between Mexico and the United States, trying to find a moment when the Border Patrol may not be looking, so that he can cross.

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The Democratic victories in November 2006 owed much to this upsurge. Although non-citizens could not vote, they mounted phone banks and walked precincts, and helped ensure the defeat of 20 of the most outspoken candidates of the House anti-immigrant caucus, led by Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo.

This wave of activism did not just happen overnight. It built on over two decades of efforts by immigrants to change sweatshop conditions, and, more broadly, to change an economic system that consigns some people to the bottom of an economic pyramid, working for the benefit of others.

New Strategies for Overcoming Old Laws

In the last decade in California, New York, and Texas, and in states where the immigrant population has appeared more recently, immigrants have been the backbone of strikes and union organizing drives in some of the hardest-fought labor struggles since the farm workers' battles of the late 1960s. In 1993, drywall hangers shut down home construction for a year in half of California. Over a decade later,

workers at the largest pork processing plant in the world, in North Carolina, walked off the job to march in immigrants' rights protests, and to force the company to slow down its brutal "line speeds," responsible for hundreds of disabling injuries. The fact that a union contract did not exist in this last example did not deter the workers, however.

"I see immigration law the same way I did when I first started as an organizer," says UNITE regional manager Cristina Vasquez, who came up out of the garment shops of Los Angeles three decades ago. "It's a tool of the employers. They're able to use immigration laws as a weapon to keep workers unorganized."

The last decade of strikes and organizing drives has profoundly changed the attitudes of unions and workers, setting new rules for the conduct of successful labor battles. They have an inclusive character reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century birth of the United States labor movement, when the radical "wobblies" of the Industrial Workers of the World proposed "one big union" for everyone. Today's marches, mass picket lines, and flying squads of strikers are a reminder of the Congress of Industrial

Photo: San Francisco hotel workers at 14 of the city's fanciest hotels cast their ballots in favor of a strike, 3139 in favor, 88 against.

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Organizations (CIO) of the 1930s. In a world where workers and unions are hamstrung by routine procedures, on a playing field where only employers win, immigrants have recognized that their strength lies in having faith in the power of their own numbers, in direct action, and in the common culture shared by whole communities.

This wave of immigrant-based labor activity hasn't been lost on labor activists seeking a new constituency for unions, and strategy and tactics appropriate for what many of them describe as class war. Unions in building services, hotels and restaurants, garment production, and light industries have rebuilt themselves by tying their organizing strategy to this upsurge, and are learning to combine intense community pressure with all-out attacks on parent corporations, often involving marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other mass actions to mobilize and amplify the pressure workers can bring to bear against their employers.

Today, organizing tactics rely increasingly on close alliances between workers, unions, and communities to offset the power exercised by employers. Asbestos

removal workers joining the Laborers Union in New Jersey and Long Island, or employees at the huge Blue Diamond almond-processing plant in Sacramento allying with the International Longshore and Warehouse union, organize around conditions they face on the job. But they also take their campaigns out into the community, organizing around immigration, discrimination in the schools, police misconduct, and many other issues that are part of daily life in immigrant communities

Unions Embrace New Members, Sometimes Resist New Leadership

The alliance between unions and immigrant workers, however, has been hampered by conflict over the rights those workers have once they become union members, and their ability to exercise leadership in the organizations they've joined. The United Farm Workers historically went through a number of internal struggles over the efforts of members to exert control from the rank-and-file. Once Southern California's drywallers won their strike in the mid-1990s, they began to conflict with existing union

Photo: Grape workers and union organizers at a rally at the 'Forty Acres,' the historic home of the United Farm Workers. The rally was organized to encourage workers at VBZ, a large Delano, California table grape grower, to vote for the union in an election held the following day. One of the union's original organizers sings songs from the UFW's first campaigns.

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leadership in the Carpenters Union. And a sharp struggle took place once immigrant janitors helped reorganize the Los Angeles local of the Service Employees.

Workers who faced down government terror in El Salvador or Guatemala, and who share the militant traditions of many immigrant workers from Mexico, also come with the expectation they will have a significant amount of control over their union once they are members. For Latino workers, unions have become an indispensable tool for winning political power, but they often join unions whose structure and power are held by others, and find they have to win power inside their unions as part of the process for using the union for larger struggles.

Cross-Border Solidarity

While immigrant-based activism has been a product of the migration of millions of working people from Mexico and Central America, that activism has also spilled back over the border into Mexico. Even before the passage of NAFTA, the growth of maquiladoras just south of Texas, New

Mexico, Arizona, and California, led to the flight of thousands of jobs from the U.S. In the Southwest, thousands of those jobs belonged to immigrants themselves, whether in Levi's garment factories in San Antonio or Green Giant's freezers in Watsonville.

The connection is not hard to see. Just south of San Ysidro, or El Paso, or Brownsville, workers toil for incredibly low wages, according to The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM) Director Martha Ojeda. "They earn \$5.00 for an eight-hour day, when the same business in the U.S. pays workers \$7.50 for a single hour, even if those workers are not legal immigrants." Despite the promises of the backers of the free trade agreement between the United States and Mexico, wages in the border factories haven't gone up in 13 years.

In the decade after passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, efforts to develop working relations with unions and workers in Mexico sprouted all along the border. The United Electrical Workers and the United Steel Workers have formed cooperative relationships with Mexican unions—the

Photo: Yolanda Serna, an organizer for the United Farm Workers, talks with grape pickers as they eat lunch in the fields, during the campaign to organize a union at VBZ, a large Delano, California table grape grower.

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Authentic Labor Front and the Mexican Miners Union—to try to organize unions in border factories and to defend workers against government policies of low wages and privatization.

CJM and other cross-border groups have provided help to border workers in their efforts to organize independent unions at Sony, Alcoa, Custom Trim, Sara Lee, Han Young, and a host of other plants.

Migration of Capital and Labor

Migrant Rights International estimates that over 170 million people today live outside of the countries in which they were born, not just moving from Mexico to the United States, but from developing countries to developed ones all over the world. Transnational corporations invest in the developing world, moving production to whatever area the wages are lowest. And in developed countries, they hire the workers who have been displaced by high unemployment and falling wages—by-products of the very economic realities created by transnational corporations. The migration of people is as much a product of the global economy as the migration of capital.

In this system, corporations are aided by United States immigration laws. While they are presented in the media as a means of controlling borders, 20 years ago, during the height of the debate over the Immigration Reform and Control Act, Mexican academic Jorge Bustamante declared that United States immigration legislation always has the purpose of regulating the price of Mexican (and more broadly, immigrant) labor in the United States.

In fact, United States immigration policy is institutionalizing the global flow of migration, not stopping it. Its basic function is defining the status of people once they're here. Many in corporate America now think they see a better way to regulate the cost and supply of this flow, through guest worker programs.

Guest Worker Programs: Open Regulation of the Price of Labor

The National Association of Chain Drugstores (think Wal-Mart), the American Meat Institute, and many other corporate players (organized in the

Photo: Estela Guzman and her daughter, Jaquiline. When they first moved from Oaxaca, Mexico, they lived in a tent camp in Geyserville, California.

© David Bacon



essential worker immigration coalition) backed a bill that passed in the Senate for an enormous expansion of guest worker programs in which employers would recruit four hundred thousand contract laborers every year outside the United States. Under these proposals, migrants will now be considered only as workers, directed to the industries where they can be used most profitably. While the Senate and House couldn't agree on competing bills last year, it is almost certain that this Senate proposal will be reintroduced this year, with the support of large sections of the Democratic and Republican party leadership.

There are many visa categories employers already use to bring workers to the United States as contract laborers, in programs for high tech and healthcare workers, farm workers, garment workers, and others. The workers displaced by these programs, or threatened with displacement, are often other immigrants or workers of color whose jobs had higher wages and more job security. Furthermore, when workers under contract are fired, they lose their ability to stay in the country, effectively giving employers the power to

deport.

Although the proposal to broadly expand the guest worker program comes from large corporations, and is supported by President George Bush, its primary supporters in Congress have been Democrats.

These industry-based visa programs are predicated on the idea that immigration law should be used to supply workers to employers. Only one bill in Congress, by Houston's Sheila Jackson Lee, and supported by the Congressional Black Caucus, would have granted real amnesty to people living here without papers. That bill was virtually shut out of the debate by the leaders of both parties.

In previous periods, when United States immigration policy valued immigrants only for their labor power, it produced extremely abusive systems. The memory of the bracero program, which ran from 1942 to 1964, is so bitter that even today defenders of guest worker schemes avoid association with the name. Braceros were housed in barracks, shipped from job to job, and deported if they went on strike. They were isolated from and pitted against the com-

Photo: Locked out and striking San Francisco hotel workers, members of HERE/UNITE Local 2, rally in Union Square.

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munities around them, as employers sought to create a labor surplus to drive down wages. That’s why Ernesto Galarza and Cesar Chavez fought for 22 years to end the scheme.

A policy based on supplying guest workers to industry, at a price it wants to pay, is an immigration policy that denies community and inevitably produces rootless people, vulnerable to exploitation.

“We all have a right to work and eat,” says Dolores Alcala, who, like most immigrants, expresses a mixture of gratitude to the United States for affording her economic opportunity, and anger over her exploitation. Alcala was only 11 years old when she went to work in the green onion fields in the Mexicali Valley, just below the border. She left for the other side when she was 15.

“I was afraid to come here, especially by myself, but my need was stronger,” she remembers. “My family went hungry all the time, and I just needed to eat.”

But in Los Angeles, although she was able to find

a paycheck in a garment sweatshop, she also found she was not accepted. “What I didn’t expect was so much discrimination, so much abuse, especially in the factory,” she says. While she holds her boss responsible, she thinks the law shares responsibility.

“The immigration law,” says Alcala flatly, “is just trampling on all of us.”

A better alternative to the oppressive Alcala experience would be a policy that recognizes and values communities, and sees their support as a desirable goal. It would seek to integrate immigrants into the broader society, while protecting their ability to practice their own culture.

A pro-worker immigration policy would protect the rights and welfare of all people, immigrant and non-immigrant alike. People in the United States, and in immigrant-sending countries like Mexico, need the same things—secure jobs at a living wage, rights in the workplace and community, and the freedom to travel and seek a future for their families.

Photo: On May Day immigrants and their supporters filled the streets of Los Angeles twice in one day—a huge march downtown, and another through the Wilshire district’s Miracle Mile. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants had taken off work or school to come to the marches, and refrained from buying anything, to show their economic importance.

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David Bacon is a California photojournalist. His latest book, Communities Without Borders (Cornell University Press, 2006) documents indigenous immigrant communities living in both the United States and Mexico.

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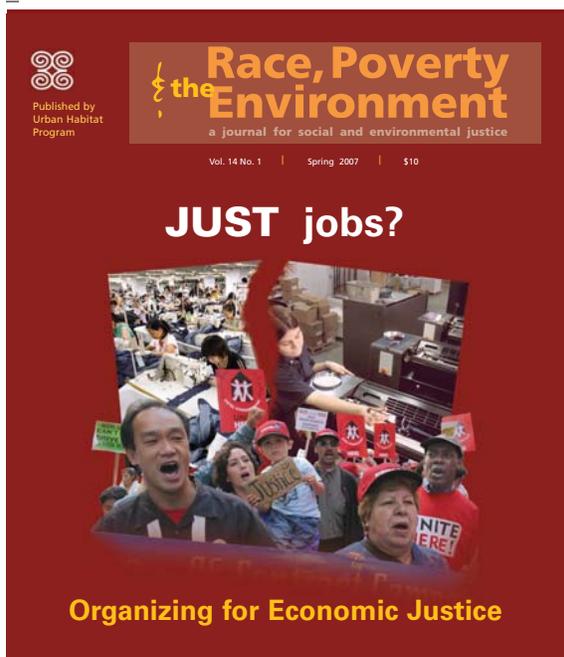
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