

International Workers' Struggle

US Immigrant Workers' struggle

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US Immigrant Workers: Invisible and Abused but Making their Voices Heard

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The number of undocumented ('illegal') immigrants in the United States (US) is about 12 million and according to a new estimate they account for 1 in every 20 workers. There are an estimated 7.2 million undocumented workers. Women represent about 35% of the undocumented immigrant population and an estimated 54% are in the workforce. Undocumented immigrant workers are an integral part of the U.S. economy and account for nearly 1 in 4 farm workers, 1 in 6 maids and housekeepers, 1 in 7 construction and 1 in 8 food preparation workers. 27% of butchers and food processing workers are undocumented.

In contrast to the anti immigrant rhetoric in the US, less than 2% of the world's immigration ends in the U.S. Migration by people within the 'Third World' is more common than the movement of the 'Third World' citizens to the 'First World'. This article will outline some aspects of immigration largely from Latin America to the US and spotlight on 'illegal' and 'legal' immigrant women workers. As workers, they are most vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and human rights violations. But both the 'legal' and 'illegal' immigrant women are moving from exploitation to militant struggles for justice and dignity.

Why do People Migrate to the US?

About 12% of the population in the U.S. is foreign born, more than half of this population is from Latin America. Mexicans constitute the majority of the immigrants from Latin America. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights outlines in its 1994 report that First World imperialism and development policy in the Third World has resulted in resource depletion, debt and poverty from many people in these nations. The extraction of resources by the U.S and other First World nations forces many people in the Third World to migrate to follow their countries' wealth.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented on January 1, 1994. This agreement removed most barriers to trade and investment among the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Public Citizen, the US advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader, reported that independent farmers were hit particularly hard by NAFTA, with thousands wiped out and farmland shifting into the hands of huge agribusiness corporations such as Tyson and Cargill. Mexico's agricultural sector was hit the hardest with cheap imports of corn and beans from the U.S. and Canada flooding the Mexican markets. 1.3 million agriculture jobs were lost- 1 million men and 300,000 women were

affected. Immigration increased from Mexico from approximately 350,000 per year in 1992 to approximately 500,000 per year in 2002 - 60 percent of these immigrants are undocumented.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) was signed in August 2005 to extend the policies of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include 5 Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. Public Citizen says DR-CAFTA is based on the same "failed neoliberal model" as NAFTA and serves to "push ahead the corporate globalization model that has caused the 'race to the bottom' in labor and environmental standards and promotes privatization and deregulation of key public services." This free trade policy will increase the already desperate conditions faced by the poor and heighten immigration the U.S.

The US hegemony over Latin America dates back to the 19th century. In the 1840s the US government annexed one third of Mexico. It is no coincidence that the states in the US with the highest number of immigrants from Mexico like California, Texas, and Arizona formerly belonged to Mexico! In Central American countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, the US supported military regimes that brutalized the poor and indigenous communities. Large numbers from these countries migrated to the US in the 1980s to escape poverty and war.

Draconian Immigration Laws

The U.S policies have always been for the free flow of profits to corporations. The free flow of people has, however, been restricted by several draconian laws. In the early 20th century laws set immigration quotas favouring Anglo Saxons and excluding people of colour. It limited entry to Latins, Slavs and Jews.

The Bracero programme- 1942-1964 enabled 4.5 million Mexican peasants to migrate to the US during that period to work in farmlands as contract labour. They were paid lower wages than the American workers and worked in highly exploitative conditions. This contract labour did not prevent 'illegal' immigration from Mexico. Large landlords and agricultural businesses profited from pitting documented workers against undocumented workers - Mexican workers against American workers - and driving down the wages for all.

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Nationality Act of 1996 endorsed by President Clinton a democrat represented the harshest attack on immigrant workers. It mandated an increase in police apparatus and U.S. patrol to terrorize undocumented workers and deport them without due legal process.

The Sensenbrenner bill, known as HR 4437 passed by the Lower House in December 2005 criminalizes undocumented workers and anyone who will assist them. This bill has sparked a nation wide movement by the immigrants and the organizations who support them.

Women Immigrant Workers Fight-back

The destabilizing effects of the U.S. policy in Mexico and other countries in Central America has not only devastated agriculture but destroyed indigenous manufacturing and more than 28,000 small businesses in Mexico by allowing retail giants like Wal-Mart to enter the market. Since the NAFTA was instituted in 1994 there has been large scale migration of women from the poverty stricken rural areas to the US- Mexico borders to work in maquiladoras (export processing plants) which are largely sub contractors or subsidiaries of transnational corporations. From the maquiladoras, many Mexican women have migrated to the U.S and have found employment as janitors, as maids in private houses, in the service sector, in the apparel, electronic and health care industries and in farms.

Agricultural/Farm workers: There are over 2 million farm workers in the U.S. 80% of these workers are foreign born and largely from Mexico. Women comprise only 20% of these workers and more than half are undocumented. Julia Gabriel of Coalition of Immokalee Workers says, "As women and workers we have to fight for our rights and against violence both in the fields and in our homes". Julia Gabriel came to the U.S from Guatemala to work in the farms. She was enslaved in a farm labor camp in South Carolina (a southern state). She was forced to work 12-hour days along with other workers- seven days a week for little pay. According to reports, men were beaten and women were sexually abused. Julia and six co-workers escaped and reported what had happened. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farm worker organizing group based in Immokalee, Florida, took up their case. CIW members worked with Julia and other slave victims to expose this slavery operation. CIW has aided in the prosecution of five slavery operations by the Department of Justice and the liberation of over 1,000 workers. In March 2005, in a precedent-setting move, fast-food industry leader Taco Bell Corp., a division of Yum! Brands (NYSE: YUM), agreed to work with the CIW to address the wages and working conditions of farm workers in the Florida tomato industry.

Hotel workers: There are about 90,000 unionized hotel workers in the U.S. represented by UNITE HERE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees). There are, however, more than a million non union hotel workers. The majority of these workers are women and immigrants. A study that covered 7 years called 'Creating Luxury and Enduring Pain" describes the hard working conditions of hotel house keepers and the injuries sustained during work. In January 2005 hotel workers in Washington, DC threatened to strike during the inaugural of Bush's second term Presidency. The hotel management dropped their demand for a two tiered health care benefits system which would have pitted new employees against the old ones. It also gave a wage increase and increase in pensions.

Laundry workers: UNITE HERE represents 40,000 industrial laundry workers in the U.S. Industrial laundry workers who are largely immigrant women handle soiled linen from hospitals and hotels. It is among the most unpleasant and dangerous jobs in the U.S. Mariana Alberti, an immigrant from Central America and a laundry worker in Sterling Laundry, a large industrial laundry company in the capital, Washington, DC tried to unionize workers. She was terminated but was reinstated when the supervisors changed. Working conditions were appalling with workers being exposed to scorching temperatures, feces and blood soiled linen. In August of 2003 the workers (more than 2000 mostly immigrant and female) voted to unionize. The employer went on record referring to the women workers as 'cows' and said he would rather burn down his company than have a union. In September of 2003 the brave workers went on strike which ended in a victory in April 2004 after 7 months of arduous struggle. UNITE negotiated a three-year labor agreement with Sterling, providing workers with a pension plan, free individual and family health coverage, and the largest wage increase in company history.

Other workers: Large numbers of immigrant women from Latin America and the Philippines work as domestics in private households, janitors in companies and high rise buildings and in the health care industry underpaid and invisible. In the late 1980s, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spearheaded a campaign to unionize janitors in Los Angeles a major city in the West coast of the U.S. Tens of thousands of lowly paid janitors (largely immigrant women) demonstrated across the country on International Women's Day in 1995 to protest low wages and the lack of health benefits. Due to the successful 'Justice for Janitors' campaign over 100,000 janitors across the U.S. were able to get increased wages, expanded health care benefits and full-time jobs. On May Day this year 450 low paid janitors mostly immigrants at the University of Miami won the right to form a union after a 2 month strike with an outpouring of support from students and faculty across the country.

Immigrants on the Rise - Recent Protests

Across 153 cities in the U.S millions of people marched on May Day this year in support of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants. The spark that ignited a powerful movement leading to huge demonstrations across the country was the Sensenbrenner bill passed in the House in December 2005. This bill criminalizes undocumented immigrants and those who help them. The demand of the grass roots immigrants' movement is amnesty for all immigrant workers, fully and immediately. On May 25, a comprehensive immigration reform bill was passed in the Senate. This 'compromise' bill is again a betrayal of the immigrants. Under this bill only an estimated 4-5 million of the 12 million undocumented immigrants will be granted citizenship and the rest will be deported. In addition it supports massive militarization of the US Mexico border.

Bernadette Ellorin with the Justice for Immigrants/Filipin@ Coalition stated, "There are more than 4 million Filipin@s in the U.S. and we have one of the largest undocumented populations. Migration was never a choice for us. We were forced to leave our loved ones back home because our home countries can't sustain us..... We can't carry out self-determination due to the racist, anti-foreign, anti-immigrant U.S. policies. The struggle of immigrant workers is one with all working people. Immigrant rights are workers' rights".

The time is ripe for the progressive and socialist forces in the US to forge unity between the super exploited immigrant workers and the domestic-local workers and expose the tyrannical nature of capitalism which pits workers against each other. Migration from exploitation to emancipation can then become a reality for all.

US Immigrant Workers Movement: Birth of the New Civil Rights Movement?

PB

"There are economic interests who want to perpetuate a global low-wage work force and maintain the pool of exploitable labor of Mexicans in the United States and Mexico."

— BALDEMAR VELASQUEZ, FARM LABOR ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

May 1, 2006 made history. It was the day when the traditional May Day was resurrected by the new immigrant workers in the US. Despite the US origins of May Day, it has been wiped out from peoples' consciousness. The new immigrant rights movement changed all of that. A multitude of organizations -immigrant rights organizations, progressive sections of the labour movement and unions, left political parties and religious organizations - and multinational workers resolved to organize a national 'day without immigrants.' May 1st was chosen for its special symbolism as an international workers' day. It was no ordinary day of protest but a national day of boycott with the key slogans of 'no work', 'no school', and 'no selling, no buying'.

New Draconian Anti-Immigrant Bill

The momentum for the May 1 boycott built after millions of the people marched in all the large urban centres including Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, New York, and Boston during March and April. These marches were to protest the passage of the HR 4437 (The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005) in the United States House of Representatives on December 16, 2005. It is also called the Sensenbrenner bill after its sponsor the Wisconsin Republican James Sensenbrenner.

The draconian Sensenbrenner bill further criminalises the super-exploited undocumented immigrants. Some of the provisions are: 1) Requires up to 700 miles (1120 km) of fence along the US-Mexican border at points with the highest number of 'illegal' immigrant crossings. 2) Requires custody of undocumented immigrants detained by local authorities. 3) Mandates employers should verify workers' legal status through electronic means. 4) Criminalises, with a prison term, the 'assisting' of undocumented immigrants. As written it includes any charity, church or neighbour, who aids the undocumented immigrant to remain in the U.S., for example by providing food, clothing or shelter. In case mass deportation results in labour shortage one congressperson suggested "... let the prisoners pick the fruits."

Shaken by the building immigrant workers movement, McCain-Kennedy bill and other alternative bills are being proposed. The alternative bills largely retain a lot of the provisions of the HR 4437 and has a "guest worker" program which sends the workers home after a few years. The two labour federations American Federation of Labor -Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and Change to Win, although oppose the HR 4437 in principle, support some sort of legalization and guest worker program. This is a grave mistake. The Braceros program, a type of guest worker program from the 1940s to 1960s, was employed to lower wages and break strikes. In a national speech on May 16 Bush announced that he is sending 6000 National Guard troops to increase border patrol along the US-Mexico border and supported the establishment of a guest worker program and the denial of citizenship to millions of immigrants. The Democratic leadership mostly agreed.

Imperialism, Free Trade, and Labour

US is a country built not only from the sweat of immigrants but also the slavery of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans. In 2003, 11.7% of the population, about 33.5 million, were foreign born residents and approximately half arrived after 1990 (8). It is estimated that about 11-12 million are undocumented immigrants of which 7.2 million are undocumented workers. Undocumented immigrants from Mexico are 56 %, other Latin American countries are 22 %, Asia are 13%, and Europe and Canada about 6%. Most of these new immigrants have less formal education, lower wages and higher unemployment and clustered in the jobs with dangerous and abominable conditions (4). For example, in New York City's Chinatown the restaurant and garment sweatshop workers work about 100 hours a week - compared to a standard work week of 40 hours per week - and were paid as low as \$ 2 an hour - compared to a minimum wage of \$ 5.15 an hour (8).

The immigrants provide food to the US population by working in the low paid and dangerous jobs in farming and meat processing. The 2 million year-round and seasonal migrant farmworkers, includes 100,000 children. Approximately two thirds of farmworkers are immigrants, with 80 % from Mexico. Agricultural work injuries and illnesses disable farmworkers at thrice the rate of the general population (3) and 60% of these families live below US poverty line (1, 7). In the meat processing industry, "exhausted employees slice into carcasses at a frenzied pace hour after hour, often suffering injuries from a slip of the knife or from repeating the same motion more than 10,000 times a day." The workers are asphyxiated by fumes, have their legs cut off and hands crushed doing the most dangerous job in the US (2).

Why do the undocumented workers risk their lives to work in these horrendous conditions? The two parties of the ruling class, the Democratic and Republican, have been pursuing the imperial economic policies with North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Mexico's pursuit of these economic liberalization policies has transformed rural Mexico, forcing 1.7 million subsistence farmers to migrate to the cities, maquiladoras (export factories) or the U.S. It is estimated that 15 million more Mexican farmers, nearly one in six, could soon be displaced with a projected 5 million of those attempting to migrate to the U.S. Since NAFTA, 80 percent of rural Mexicans live in

poverty, with 60 percent living in extreme poverty (5, 6). Besides the economic migration millions have run from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to escape the US financed militias and state terror. Additionally, in the 19th century, US annexed large parts of Mexico, comprising the large states of California, Texas, Arizona. Thus, the Chicana/o leaders “Chicana@s did not cross the border the US crossed the border.” No wonder the immigrants rights organizations are on the streets fighting back the latest round of assault on their rights.

The May 1 Boycott

May 1 could be a watershed in the workers’ movement in the US. After massive demonstrations on March 25 and April 10, on May 1 millions joined in massive marches and workers strikes. This was not a simple march. This was “a day without immigrants,” the historic May 1 boycott. The reasoning was expressed succinctly by Juan Jose Gutierrez, national coordinator for Latino Movement USA “You can only march for so long to make your point ... You have to think of other creative ways to make it clear to Congress and the Bush administration that we expect them to behave responsibly.” He added that it was inspired by the International Workers’ day. Nevertheless, several organizations who are supporting the immigrant rights, such as the Catholic church, opposed the boycott. The central slogans were “Amnesty for All”, “Immigrant rights are workers rights”, “No human being is illegal”, “We are not criminals”.

May 1 witnessed one of the largest demonstrations in US history. More than 153 cities in 39 states in US and in Mexico and other Latin American countries millions of people protested. The numbers were mind blowing: 1 million in Los Angeles, more than half a million in New York City, 700,000 in Chicago, 100,000 in Atlanta, and 100,000 in San Francisco. In addition tens of thousands participated from Boston to Houston. People had signs of “Bush, listen! We’re fighting back!” “We’re here and we’re not going anywhere,” and “There are no borders in the workers’ struggle.” 90% of port truckers in Los Angeles and Long Beach did not work. US’s biggest beef processor was forced to give workers the day off in seven plants in Colorado, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, Texas and Nebraska. Food giant General Mills was unexpectedly forced to stop production at two of its plants in the Boston area. Immigrants from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe participated in large numbers.

As the US Senate was deliberating provisions of the immigration bill on May 17 immigrant rights activists protested outside. As a result of all these protests, the Senate decided to tone down some provisions of the House bill but still most of the provisions were intact. The negotiations to agree on a compromise law have been put off for now. Nevertheless, these laws ultimately criminalise immigrants, fuel racism and increase the super-exploited workforce. The immigrant rights movement is polarising further into the centrists and the progressives. Militant trade union activists, in the spirit of oppressed peoples’ struggle, have called for Brown-Black (and White workers) unity. The progressive forces in the immigrant rights movement will have to continue to organise and build the movement in the spirit of the popular slogan “Si Se Puede” (Yes We Can!).

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P.S.

* Published in "ML International Newsletter" [India], July-August 2006.