

“Aqui estamos y no nos vamos!”: the struggle for immigrant rights in the US

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Latino immigrants have launched an all-out fight-back against the repression, exploitation, and racism they routinely face in the United States with a series of unprecedented strikes and demonstrations. The mobilizations began when over half a million immigrants and their supporters took to the streets in Chicago on March 10. It was the largest single protest in that city's history. Following the Chicago action rolling strikes and protests spread to other cities, large and small, throughout the country. Millions came out on March 25 for a “national day of action.” Between one and two million people demonstrated in Los Angeles - the single biggest public protest in the city's history, and millions more followed suit in

Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Tucson, Denver and dozens of other cities. Again on April 10 millions heeded the call for another day of protest. In addition, hundreds of thousands of high school students in Los Angeles and around the country have staged walk-outs in support of their families and communities, braving police repression and legal sanctions. The message is clear, as marchers have shouted:

“aqui estamos y no nos vamos!” (“we are here and we are not leaving!”).

These protests have no precedent in the history of the United States. The immediate trigger was the passage in mid-March by the House of Representative of HR4437, a bill introduced by Republican representative James Sensenbrenner with broad support from the anti-immigrant lobby. The draconian bill would criminalize undocumented immigrants by making it a felon to be in the United States without documentation. It also stipulates the construction of the first 700 miles of a militarized wall between Mexico and the United States and would double the size of the U.S. Border Patrol. And it would apply criminal sanctions against anyone who provides assistance to undocumented immigrants, including churches, humanitarian groups, and social service agencies.

Following the passage of HR4437 by the House the bill became stalled in the Senate. Democrat Ted Kennedy and Republican John McCain co-sponsored a “compromise” bill that would have removed the criminalization clause in HR4437 and provided a limited plan for amnesty for some of the undocumented. It would have allowed those who could prove they have resided for at least five years in the U.S. to apply for residency and later citizenship. Those residing in the U.S. for two to five years would have been required to return home and then apply through U.S. embassies for temporary “guest worker” permits. Those who could not demonstrate they have been in the U.S. for two years would be deported. Even this “compromise” bill would have resulted in massive deportations and heightened control over all immigrants. Yet it was eventually jettisoned by Republican opposition, so that by late April the whole legislative process had become stalled. It

is likely that any further legislative action will be postponed until after the 2006 congressional elections this November.

However, the wave of protest goes well beyond HR4437. It represents the unleashing of pent-up anger and repudiation of what has been deepening exploitation and an escalation of anti-immigrant repression and racism. Immigrants have been subject to every imaginable abuse in recent years. Twice in the state of California they have been denied the right to acquire drivers' licenses. This means that they must rely on inadequate or nonexistent public transportation or risk driving illegally; more significantly, the drivers' license is often the only form of legal documentation for such essential transactions as cashing checks or renting an apartment. The 3 000 kilometer U.S.-Mexico border has been increasingly militarized and thousands of immigrants have died crossing the frontier. Anti-immigrant hate groups are on the rise. Blatantly racist public discourse that only a few years ago would be considered extreme has become increasingly mainstreamed and aired on the mass media.

More ominously, the paramilitary organization Minutemen, a modern day Latino-hating version of the Ku Klux Klan, has spread from its place of origin along the U.S.-Mexican border in Arizona and California to other parts of the country. Minutemen claim they must "secure the border" in the face of inadequate state-sponsored control. Their discourse, beyond racist, is neo-fascist. Some have even been filmed sporting T-shirts with the emblem "Kill a Mexican Today?" and others have organized for-profit "human safaris" in the desert. Minutemen clubs have been sponsored by right-wing organizers, wealthy ranchers, businessmen, and politicians. But their social base is drawn from those formerly-privileged sectors of the white working class that have been flexibilized and displaced by economic restructuring, the deregulation of labor, and global capital flight. These sectors now scapegoat immigrants - with official encouragement - as the source of their insecurity and downward mobility.

Immigrants and their supporters have organized through expanding networks of churches, immigrant clubs and rights groups, community associations, Spanish-language and progressive media, trade unions, and social justice organizations. The immigrant mobilizations have undoubtedly terrorized ruling groups. In April it was revealed that KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton - Vice-President Dick Cheney's former company, with close ties to the Pentagon and a major contractor in the Iraq war - won a \$385 million contract to build large-scale immigrant detention centers in case of an "emergency influx" of immigrants.

The immigrant issue presents a contradiction for dominant groups. Capital needs the cheap and compliant labor of Latino (and other) immigrants. Latino immigrants have massively swelled the lower rungs of the U.S. workforce. They provide almost all of the farm labor and much of the labor for hotels, restaurants, construction, janitorial and house cleaning, child care, gardening and landscaping, delivery, meat and poultry packing, retail, and so on. Yet dominant groups fear a rising tide of Latino immigrants will lead to a loss of cultural and political control, becoming a source of counter-hegemony and of instability, as

immigrant labor in Paris showed to be in last year's uprising in that European capital against racism and marginality.

Employers do not want to do away with Latino immigration. To the contrary, they want to sustain a vast exploitable labor pool that exists under precarious conditions, that does not enjoy the civil, political, and labor rights of citizens and that is disposable through deportation. It is the condition of deportable they wish to preserve since that condition assures the ability to super-exploit with impunity and to dispose of without consequences should this labor become unruly or unnecessary.

The Bush administration is opposed to HR4437, not because it is in favor of immigrant rights but because it must play a balancing act by finding a formula for a stable supply of cheap labor to employers and at the same time for greater state control over immigrants. The Bush proposal is for a "guest worker" program that would rule out legalization for undocumented immigrants, force them to return to their home countries and apply for temporary work visas, and implement tough new border security measures. There is a long history of such "guest worker" schemes going back to the bracero program, which brought to the U.S. millions of Mexican workers during the labor shortages of World War II only to deport them once native workers had become available again.

The immigrant rights movement is demanding full rights for all immigrants, including amnesty, worker protections, family reunification measures, a path to citizenship or permanent residency rather than a temporary "guest worker" program, an end to all attacks against immigrants and to the criminalization of immigrant communities.

A major challenge confronting the movement is relations between the Latino and the Black communities. Historically, African Americans have swelled the lower rungs in the U.S. caste system. But as African-Americans fought for their civil and human rights in the 1960s and 1970s they became organized, politicized and radicalized. Black workers led trade union militancy. All this made them undesirable labor for capital - "undisciplined" and "noncompliant."

Starting in the 1980s employers began to push out Black workers and massively recruit Latino immigrants, coinciding with deindustrialization and restructuring. Blacks moved from super-exploited to marginalized - subject to unemployment, cuts in social services, mass incarceration, and heightened state repression - while Latino immigrant labor has become the new super-exploited sector. Whereas 15 years ago no one saw a single Latino face in such places such as Iowa or Tennessee, now Mexican, Central American and other Latino workers are visible everywhere. If some African-Americans have misdirected their anger over marginality at Latino immigrants, the Black community has a legitimate grievance over the anti-Black racism of many Latinos themselves, who often lack of sensitivity to the historic plight and contemporary experience of Blacks with racism, and a reticence to see them as natural allies.

The increase of Latino immigration to the United States is part of a worldwide upsurge in transnational migration generated by the forces of

capitalist globalization. The corollary to the rise of an integrated global economy is the rise of a truly global - although highly segmented - labor market. Surplus labor in any part of the world is now recruited and redeployed through numerous mechanisms to where transnational capital is in need of it. Immigrant labor worldwide is now estimated at over 200 million, according to UN data. Some 30 million are in the United States, and least 20 million of them from Latin America. Of these 20 million, some 11 million are undocumented.

The anti-immigrant lobby argues that these immigrants "are a drain on the U.S. economy." Yet the National Immigrant Solidarity Network points out that immigrants contribute seven billion dollars in social security per year. They earn \$240 billion, report \$90 billion, and are only reimbursed five billion in tax returns. They also contribute \$25 billion more to the U.S. economy than they receive in healthcare and social services. But this is a limited line of argumentation, since the larger issue is the incalculable trillions of dollars that immigrant labor generates in profits and revenue for capital, only a tiny proportion of which goes back to immigrants in the form of wages.

If capital's need for cheap, malleable, and deportable labor in the centers of the global economy is the main "pull factor" inducing Latino immigration to the United States the "push factor" is the devastation left by two decades of neo-liberalism in Latin America. Capitalist globalization - structural adjustment, free trade agreements, privatizations, the contraction of public employment and credits, the breakup of communal lands, and so forth, along with the political crises these measures have generated - has imploded thousands of communities in Latin America and unleashed waves of migration, from rural to urban areas and to other countries, that can only be analogous to the mass uprooting and migration that generally takes place in the wake of wars.

Transnational Latino migration has led to an enormous increase in remittances from Latino ethnic labor abroad to extended kinship networks in Latin America. Latin American workers abroad sent home some \$57 billion in 2005, according to the Inter-American Development Bank. These remittances were the number one source of foreign exchange for the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, and Nicaragua, and the second most important source for Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Suriname, according to the Bank. The \$20 billion sent back in 2005 by an estimated 10 million Mexicans in the United States was more than the country's tourism receipts and surpassed only by oil and maquiladoras exports.

These remittances allow millions of Latin American families to survive by purchasing goods either imported from the world market or produced locally or by transnational capital. They allow for family survival at a time of crisis and adjustment, especially for the poorest sectors - safety nets that replace governments and fixed employment in the provision of economic security. Emigration and remittances also serve the political objective of pacification. As Latin American emigration to the United States dramatically expanded from the 1980s and on it helped dissipate social tensions and undermine labor and political opposition to prevailing regimes and institutions. Remittances help offset macroeconomic imbalances, in some cases, avert economic collapse, thereby shoring up the political conditions for an environment congenial to transnational capital.

Therefore, bound up with the immigrant debate in the United States is the entire political economy of global capitalism in the Western Hemisphere - the same political economy that is now being sharply contested throughout Latin America with the surge in mass popular struggles and the turn to the Left. The struggle for immigrant rights in the United States is thus intimately connected to the larger Latin American - and worldwide - struggle for social justice.

P.S.

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