

Organizing in a Global Age:
Unions, Immigration and the Politics of Belonging

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In 2006, millions of immigrants filled the streets of hundreds of cities to march and rally to oppose House bill HR 4437 and to call for fair and just immigration policy reform. SEIU, UNITE-HERE along with several other unions actively participated in helping to organize these rallies and mobilize their members to participate. In 2007, partly in response to this massive outpouring from the Latino and other immigrant communities, liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans fashioned together immigration reform legislation and attempted to move it through Congress. Organized labor was strongly divided over the proposed immigration reform legislation. The roots of this disagreement reflect competing strains within the labor movement over how to embrace immigrant workers into the labor movement and reflect old and new tensions. This article explores the question of the shifting relationship between labor unions and immigrant workers by exploring key debates in the labor movement historically and currently over how to view immigrant workers. We ask whether unions are simply seeking to embrace immigrant workers for their own self preservation or if there been a more transformative ideological shift in labor's viewpoint.

The AFL-CIO was central in writing and passing the 1986 immigration law which put sanctions on employers hiring illegal immigrants for the first time. The unions understood penalizing employers who hired undocumented workers as a tool to keep jobs for American workers. By 1993 the AFL-CIO was rethinking the value of employer sanctions and in 2000 the AFL-CIO executive council adopted a resolution calling for the repeal of sanctions.

This reversal is part of a broader trend in American union federations to embrace immigrant workers into their ranks. Historically, labor federations have favored restrictive immigration policy and tough enforcement of immigration laws. Labor has not been immigrant friendly. Today unions are frequently, vocal supporters of immigrant rights. The AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations both support pro-immigrant policies such as a pathway to citizenship (while disagreeing over the use of guestworkers) for undocumented immigrants already in the country, fighting against raids in workplaces, homes and schools by the Immigration Control Enforcement (ICE), opposing “no-match” letter from the Social Security Administration, providing services for immigrants, and have even reversed stances on specific policy issues such as employer sanctions.

Labor scholars and activists have argued this transition away from an anti-immigrant stance is a matter of self-interest. Because of the increasingly global world, because borders are more permeable than ever, immigration is harder to control. Labor activists and leaders argue that unions, facing a stunning decline in membership and an increase in immigrant populations, are left with two options, organize the new immigrants or face extinction. John Sweeney, before becoming the president of the AFL-CIO, argued this when discussing organizing immigrants in the service industry “it’s a matter of survival.... To defend ourselves, SEIU must bring the new immigrants in the industries we represent into the union. Otherwise, we cannot defend ourselves against the employers’ demand for lower wages” (AFL-CIO and Immigrant Workers 1996). David Bacon (2000), a reporter and labor activist, echoes Sweeney's sentiments: “Organizing immigrant workers is necessary, not because we take pity on the downtrodden, but

because we understand what is necessary for our own survival” (p. 14). According to those in the movement, changes in the labor market necessitate a new organizing strategy which includes immigrants and therefore pro-immigrant policies.

This survival thesis, which relies on structural and material explanations of labor organizing, is replicated in scholarship as well. Leah Haus (1995) argues “that the emerging transnationalization of the labor market, defined as rising undocumented and documented migration rates..., has altered the preferences of unions, leading them to resist restrictionist legislation that impedes organization of foreign-born workers” (p. 291). She tells us that if we understand unions as rational, when faced with evidence that the border cannot be controlled, unions will abandon their first preference, restriction, and settle on their second place preference “to organize foreign-born workers, which is facilitated by abandoning a restrictionist posture” (p. 292). Ruth Milkman talks about the early incorporation of immigrants into Los Angeles unions. While organized labor was “initially hostile” to the newcomers in the 1970s and 1980s, when immigrants reached a critical threshold, unions changed their views on immigrants: “necessity being the mother of invention, over the years L.A. became a laboratory for a series of experiments in immigrant unionization” (Milkman 2002 p. 119). Edward Park (2004) suggests that such forces have led to a consensus among organized labor that “the future of labor unions is inextricably tied to their ability to organize immigrant workers” (p. 139).

We argue the survival explanation fails to help us fully understand this new consensus. One must understand the political battle over belonging, how unions come to define who is worthy of inclusion and defense. Literature using the concept of the politics of belonging began with some ferocity around 1999 and has continued to be a useful tool

for understanding immigrant incorporation and struggles (e.g. Westwood and Phizacklea, 2000; Castles and Davidson 2001; Croucher, 2004; Yuval, Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006; Butler and Spivak, 2007). Belonging does not just designate formal membership, although frequently is a prerequisite, but a more full-bodied incorporation into the collective. Belonging is an identity of membership that in the context of that collective supercedes other potentially cross-cutting differences. To belong is to be included in the calculus by the group alongside other members. For unions, immigrants can go from threat to “strategically” central only once they become part of the workforce worthy of organizing, once they shift from “them” to “us”.

While the lines of belonging are often treated as naturally occurring or self-evident (Yuval-Davis et al. 2006, p. 3), categories of belonging are fundamentally political. The politics of belonging is “the processes of individuals, groups, societies, and polities, defining, negotiating, promoting, rejecting, violating, and transcending the boundaries of identity and belonging” (Croucher 2004 p. 41). The incorporation of immigrants into labor takes place through a politics of belonging which is not reducible to labor market shifts. The politics of belonging, while impacted by labor market shifts, is also a lens through which one views the labor market; it is not an epiphenomenon of economic changes.ⁱ The politics of belonging is being waged by the immigrants *and* by various non-immigrant labor forces. There are multiple narratives of belonging within the union and outside of it that make up this political struggle.

Ambivalence in the pro-immigrant message is a key way of seeing limitations of a strict material or structural explanation. This ambivalence is evident in two ways: 1) a disjuncture between national labor policy and local labor union activity and 2) a

distinction between pro-immigrant policies and pro-immigration policies. While organized labor has come to a consensus in support of organizing the new immigrants, on the ground, the application of pro-immigrant policies are varied and sometimes resisted. Second, this consensus on pro-immigrant policies is not the same as a consensus on pro-immigration policies. Pro-immigrant union policies include organizing immigrants, providing services for and protecting the rights of immigrants already in the United States. Pro-immigration policies would include lower levels of enforcements of immigration law, easier and larger admittance procedures. Pro-immigrant policies do not necessarily lead to support for liberalization of the immigration process; one can in fact organize and reach out to those that are here while at the same time attempting to limit who comes in. This is at the heart of continued controversy among unions about the politics of immigration. The lack of a unified move towards pro-immigration policies indicates the prominence of the politics of belonging, battles over how unions count who is in the fold or who they want in the fold. This lack of a clear message on the issue of immigration policy suggests that the consensus on immigrant organizing is not stable and far from complete, and is not an inevitable response to economic shifts.

Through historical comparisons and an exploration of the current state of ambivalence in the labor movement towards immigrants, we see how the politics of belonging has an independent life from the economic shifts. By considering how self-interest gets defined differently, we see pro-immigrant policies of unions today as a result of political struggles, closely connected with the politics of race and ethnicity, and up for grabs at this particular moment. We also see the pro-immigrant policies as less meaningful and complete as one might initially think by looking at differences between

unions and asking about the follow through on pro-immigrant rhetoric. Understanding the current stance of the labor movement towards immigrants as a result of a political struggle within the unions, as opposed to an evolutionary move for survival, provides better leverage on understanding contradictory stances within the labor movement itself and the role of race, ethnicity and nationalism.

Unions: A Restrictionist History

A brief look at key moments in the history of union federations highlights the need to look beyond strictly economic arguments to understand labors' relation with immigration. The historical restrictionist stances of unions cannot be explained as a rational response to labor market conditions unless one *first* considers how unions were defining their constituency. Self-interest can only be understood once we include a discussion of how workers defined themselves. This necessitates an exploration into race and ethnic formation and notions of belonging.

By looking at the disparity in union stances towards European immigration and Chinese immigration, we see how self-interest and market forces are read through the lens of belonging; race and ethnicity are central to that lens. In the nineteenth century, unions were inclined to favor unlimited European immigration . At the same time however, Chinese workers were understood as a threat. The National Labor Union in 1870 argued strongly for restrictive legislation preventing Chinese immigration. Chinese were understood as competition because race was central to worker identity. “The belief that workers of the world should unite was heavily modified in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century by national and racial solidarities that could quickly

undercut class-based solidarity ”. Worker’s were defined as white and therefore unions were geared towards supporting those interests first. The exclusion of the Chinese cannot be understood as being motivated by self-interest unless we first understand the racial lens through which workers viewed themselves and immigration.

Much of the anti-Chinese agitation came through the organized labor’s leadership in the late 19th Century as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, and the Workingmen’s Party all adopted anti-Chinese worker positions; and many of their members were involved with violent attacks against Chinese settlements in the West. Dennis Kearney, an Irish immigrant, headed the Workingmen’s Party in the late 1870s and early 1880s; this party was anti-capitalist, and staunchly anti-Chinese, and Kearney viewed Chinese immigrants as an inferior race who undercut American worker’s living standards. Samuel Gompers, an English immigrant, who headed the American Federation of Labor from the 1880s-1924, argued consistently for the exclusion of Chinese and later Japanese workers into U.S. trade unions, and for a restrictionist anti-Asian immigration policy. Almost the entirety of the U.S. organized labor movement during this period drew a line in the sand between acceptable Northern European immigrant workers and those who could never belong. Dennis Kearney said, “California must be all American or all Chinese” (Kearney, 1878).

The shift to a more general restrictionist stance is explained by both a shift in the main sources of immigrants and a shift in union tactics. First, Chinese workers had been banned from further immigration since 1882. By 1900, the main source of immigration had shifted from the familiar northern and western countries to eastern and southern European countries. Also, by 1900 the labor movement was officially anti-immigration;

unions had begun to define their interests much more narrowly. Who counted as worthy of protection was not only simply white American workers, but union workers. Workers, focused on getting what they could from their employers through collective bargaining, were not concerned about solidarity with workers in other factories much less other countries. Under this view of union activity, divisions along racial and ethnic lines could take on much more prominence as any non-union worker became a scab. The new immigrant workers were seen as the “other”. Employers using new immigrants to counter union activity contributed to the nativist response by unions. This shift to business unionism caused, and was caused by, the nativist reaction to the new immigrants of the early twentieth century .

The recognition of the role of race and ethnicity is central for understanding how business unionism in the United States developed a nativist response but also for understanding the particular form it took. Not all restrictionism is the same. In this case we see unions being a central force in the development of the 1924 National Origin Quotas. This act did not focus merely on quantitative limits on immigration but placing numerical limits on immigrants from particular countries and the exclusion of future Asian immigration at the time. Union support for these qualitative restrictions on immigration cannot be explained simply by looking at labor market forces. The idea of national origin quotas addressing job competition can only be understood if we place an understanding of ethnic politics up front:

The hostile response of old (‘native’) labor was directed not against immigration per se, however, but against the particular type of immigration that took hold during the industrializing period. Because many old-stock workers were themselves immigrants and because family reunification was contingent upon open frontiers, principled union

opposition to all immigration was highly problematic. But new immigrants were visibly different.... Allowing ‘native’ labor to specify opposition to immigration in qualitative, racial terms .

Ethnic divisions and identities are essential for understanding how workers defined who counted as part of the “us” worthy of protection. Labor market forces led to nativist responses, but to understand those labor market forces one needs to understand how they were socially constructed through union tactics and an understanding of belonging.

The central role of ethnicity and belonging is also clear when we see unions supporting liberal immigration policies in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1946 a CIO representative testified in favor of more liberalized immigration policies in order to avoid “national isolationism” and the AFL representative testified that they needed more people.ⁱⁱ Unions were able to do this at the time for two reasons: first, unions following the new deal had achieved some key successes solidifying collective bargaining and getting minimum wage laws, and second, the first generation Americans resulting from the previous wave of immigrants were now union members . Immigrants who previously were understood as “others” were now part of the workers who could be protected by unions. Here we see what divided the “us” and “them” when thinking about job competition was not dependent on legal citizenship or even native born status necessarily, but understandings in unions about race, ethnicity and belonging.

The national origin quota system, so strongly favored by labor, seemed slated for reform in 1964 and labor’s response was defined by a focus on protecting the current American worker, by notions of belonging and race. A consensus emerged among political actors involved in immigration reform in the wake of the Civil Rights

Movement: national origin quotas were unworkable and understood by many as an example of intolerable racial discrimination . However leading up to immigration reform in 1965, unions expressed concerns about opening the door to new immigrants. Labor asked for language which strengthened the authority of the Secretary of Labor “to control immigration in the interest of protecting American workers and the economy in general” . Before an immigrant could be admitted based on labor, it had to be proved that an American worker could not fill the job. During the 1965 immigration reform we see new lines of belonging beginning to be defined. Old restrictions on belonging, limits on Asian immigrants or immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, gave way to new ones. For the first time in American history a limit was placed on the number of immigrants from the Western Hemisphere.

From 1965 till the late 1980s, labor focused its restrictionist energy on immigration from Mexico and Latin America. During the 1967 Constitutional Convention, the AFL-CIO adopted a resolution calling for the Department of Justice to “take immediate steps to end the fiction of permanent residents who actually are not residents at all, but commute to work across the Mexican border.” These commuters, according to the Resolution, caused a depression in wages and working conditions, and an increase in unemployment in the border region. By 1971, undocumented immigration from Mexico and Latin America became the focus of the AFL-CIO’s consternation. From 1971 until 1986, the AFL-CIO called for increased border enforcement and employer sanctions.

The AFL-CIO supported the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 which contained an amnesty for undocumented workers and the first employer sanctions for

hiring illegal immigrants. Unions however were split on support for this bill through much of the congressional debate. While some unions favored employer sanctions, others were worried about the prospect of amnesty . Both of these positions reflected the sentiments of the dominant view of most unions in the mid-1980s. At the time, the leadership of the labor movement sought to protect American workers' jobs against undocumented workers who were perceived as coming to take them away, while others defended the rights of new immigrants, including undocumented workers. They argued for a non-punitive approach which included a general amnesty, a bitter pill to swallow for the mainstream non-immigrant based unions. In fact, the impact of the employer sanction law did not punish employers, rather the new law made it a federal crime for an undocumented immigrant to hold a job, and employers used it to fire union supporters (Bacon, David. 2007).

The debate over immigration policy in the labor movement did not end with the passage of IRCA in 1986. Over the next thirteen years, immigrant workers would demonstrate their capacity to organize themselves, join unions, regardless of immigration status, in the face of hostile actions by employers and push unions with large numbers of immigrants to oppose employer sanctions. As a result, the AFL-CIO reversed its stance on employer sanctions and vocally embraced amnesty at its convention in Los Angeles in 1999 This is a result of self-interest being redefined through debates over inclusion, a redefinition of belonging. As we will see in the next section, other forces shift which facilitate this redefinition, but the politics of belonging are central to understanding how these shifts are understood.

The Politics of Belonging

To understand how unions have entered a phase of pro-immigrant policy, one needs to understand the struggle over belonging that has taken place around the new immigrant. Issues of race, documentation status, and native versus foreign worker had been used to define new immigrants out of the realm of union struggles. Labor activists, scholars and immigrants themselves have therefore engaged in a struggle to make new immigrants part of the conceptual American workforce and prove they should be incorporated into the union movement.

Central to the battle over incorporation for these new new immigrants has been a struggle over the conceptualization of the immigrant as “organizable”. The new immigrants were initially seen as lacking the ability to be organized for three reasons. First, the questionable legal status of undocumented workers was thought to make them unlikely to join unions. Labor activists and scholars thought fear of deportation would prevent unions from being able to organize the undocumented portion of the new immigrant population.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, the immigrant was assumed to accept lower wages and working conditions without complaint because their standard of comparison is lower than other workers in America. Finally, the new immigrant was largely understood as Latino and the Latino immigrant was understood as being a more pliant workforce and less receptive to unionization. This unorganizability suggested immigrant workers were a threat to the American worker; they did not belong.^{iv}

Scholars and immigrants both made the case that the new immigrant and the undocumented could and should be a target for unions, that they belonged. Immigrants through local organizing campaigns proved they were worthy labor activists. The Justice

for Janitors campaign took place in 10 cities in 1988 and became the rallying cry for a new model of union organizing, including organizing immigrants. The Service Employee International Union which spearheaded the campaign had its biggest victory in Los Angeles where workers were mostly from Mexico and Central America and a large number of the workers were undocumented. While JfJ was spearheaded by a union, other campaigns around the same time were instigated by immigrant workers themselves. Workers, predominantly immigrants, led a wildcat strike at American Racing wheel in 1991. This strike led to successful negotiations for a wage increase. Following the strike, unions then came in to organize the mostly immigrant workers (Spark 1996 p. 4). In 1992, primarily undocumented drywallers walked off the job and began a 5 month strike which encompassed 6 counties in California. Unionization of the workers was one of the results (including health benefits and pay increases), not the causes. Through such campaigns immigrants defied the belief that they were not receptive to unions.

Scholars and labor activists took these examples and others to make the case that the immigrant was able to be organized and should belong within the American labor movement. Hector Delgado performed a “deviant case analysis” looking at moments when the undocumented defied the unorganizable hypothesis. He concluded that the degree to which the undocumented can be “unionized will be determined largely by organized labor’s willingness, and capacity, to invest the necessary resources to organize these workers” .

Other scholars have focused on shifts towards pro-immigrant policies in certain regions by certain unions. Bruce Nissen and Guillermo Grenier look at organizing in south Florida and Ruth Milkman look at the growth of immigrant organizing in Los

Angeles. These studies highlight how unions have successfully organized immigrants. The regional studies also show how the politics of belonging takes place on the ground in each union. These political struggles are impacted by union structure and local culture. They provide insight into how unions or locals turn pro-immigrant and how immigrant organizing becomes a possibility at all in the 1990s. The fundamental argument in these studies is that other unions can learn by looking at the successful organization of immigrants and in doing so can save the declining labor movement.

Nissen and Grenier explore four different unions in south Florida: ironworkers, carpenters, a service union, and garment unions. They discover that craft unions' exclusionary structure allowed for racial and nationality biases to be expressed, and therefore admitted immigrants later than the other two industrial unions. They also discovered that clear leadership and a welcoming union culture was essential for creating meaningful pro-immigrant policies. All of their findings clearly point to immigrant incorporation as a struggle over belonging, about racial and nativist politics.

While Nissen and Grenier investigate unions addressing immigrant workers, Milkman looks to successful immigrant labor activists in Los Angeles as evidence of their organizability. In an attempt to defeat the "myth of immigrant unorganizability," She points to three factors that might make immigrants more receptive to unions than native workers. First, immigrants might come with experience and good associations with unions from their home countries. Second, the tight ethnic networks could serve as pre-existing networks which unions could utilize to facilitate organizing. Finally, the "shared ordeal" of immigrant and the discrimination they face could serve to generate solidarity and commitment to a progressive organizing campaign (p. 116-117). Milkman cites the

JfJ campaign, the drywaller campaign and others as evidence of successful immigrant organizing in L.A. Milkman calls the early 1990s labor organizing in L.A. “an embryo of the broader revitalization effort that the new ALF-CIO leadership and its allies are currently attempting to jumpstart” . Regional battles are therefore seen as samples or experimental forms to be replicated elsewhere.

There have been some national attempts to move in this direction. This is evidenced by John Sweeney becoming the president of the AFL-CIO in 1995 and the 2000 AFL-CIO resolution calling for an amnesty and an end to employer sanctions. AFL-CIO supported a set of immigrant “Freedom Rides.” In support of immigrant rights, buses set off around the country to educate people on the problems immigrants face. As John Sweeney came under fire, for failing to move more unions and the Federation in the direction of organizing more workers into unions, the issue of immigration is not at the fore. The Change to Win Coalition which challenged the AFL-CIO leadership in the summer of 2005 resulted in a number of large national unions leaving the AFL-CIO. Organizing immigrant workers however was a point of agreement, not a divisive issue. Despite this, the transformation in the union movement is incomplete; a pro-immigrant labor movement is still being built.

Nissen and Milkman are both part of the “hopeful architects of new labor” ; these architects need to reconstruct the immigrant as belonging. They argue for a path for unions and they use the survival argument as a *tool* to argue for the new understanding of the immigrant worker as an American worker worthy of union protection. Milkman writes, “All these initiatives notwithstanding, the story here is still one of *potential*” . She points to the transformation in the national scene as not being replicated on the local level

and argues that “[i]f the labor movement is to survive into the new century” it must truly incorporate immigrants.

Nissen also recognizes all of the work left to be done despite pro-immigrant proclamations by the AFL-CIO, “Despite the rhetoric [about new organizing goals], at best only about a dozen national unions are seriously undertaking the task of organizing on a major scale” . However, Nissen recognizes incorporation of immigrants is dependent on union structure and culture, and is not an inevitable outcome of globalization . Nissen in fact worked with a local union in South Florida running a series of educational workshops in an effort to aid the incorporation of immigrants. He encountered Anglo attitudes towards immigrants which interfered, including understandings of immigrants as competitive and unable to be organized. At the core of the work was tension between Hispanics and Anglos. The incomplete nature of immigrant incorporation is because the battle over immigrant belonging is still being waged.

Suggesting that unions are adopting pro-immigrant policies as a survival strategy does not recognize how notions of belonging are essential to understand what counts as an effective survival strategy. By not recognizing the independent nature of the issue of belonging, unions may in fact be doomed to a slow and uncertain relationship with immigrants in the immediate. This is evidenced in part by the national unions adopting a pro-immigrant stance, but such stances not taking root at the local level. It is also evidenced in the failure of even pro-immigrant unions to adopt pro-immigration stances.

A Restrictionist Pro-Immigrant Stance?

The shift in the national scene is far from complete. While national political leaders stemming from local successful campaigns have proven to be pro-immigrant, the

degree to which this has become pro-immigration is unclear. There has always been pro-immigrant voices within the US labor movement, those arguing to organize the immigrant by providing services or defense to those already working within the US borders. But fewer voices are heard arguing for pro-immigration policies, that is policies that call for increased liberalization of immigration policies, to open up the border. This disjuncture has potential damaging implications for organizing immigrants.

Currently the relationship between unions and immigrants is still up in the air. Paul Johnston (1999) writes about the “ambivalent” relationship between labor and the broader immigrant citizenship movement. While the Justice for Janitors campaign did catapult pro-immigrant leaders to the head of the AFL-CIO, the degree to which labor leaders became more pro-immigration is questionable. That is, precisely because Justice for Janitors and other early 1990s campaigns were able to organize the undocumented successfully, it was not necessary to support changes in citizenship laws. JfJ showed organization could occur within the status quo. If stemming the drain of union members is seen as the reason for immigrant organizing, pro-immigration policies do not necessarily follow.

This distinction between pro-immigrant and pro-immigration policies is evident in the AFL-CIO’s campaigns. CIWA, California Immigrant Workers Association, was founded in 1987 immediately in the aftermath of the 1986 legislation. CIWA served to help workers take advantage of the amnesty which the AFL-CIO had agreed to only reluctantly. If the workers were to become part of the work force, the union needed to try to integrate them. This, however, was not an indication of a promotion of liberalized immigration policies, and a permanent desire to welcome newcomers, but a desire to

organize the workers already here. The defunding of the CIWA after organizing the amnesty recipients makes it clear that this program was pro-immigrant but not pro-immigration.

The historic resolution passed by the AFL-CIO Executive Committee in 2000 that called for the end of employer sanctions and a broad amnesty for the undocumented marked an official change of union policy heralded by immigrant rights and business leaders. The proposal however was not a call for more liberalized admittance procedures. The proposal focused on workers once they were already on US soil and working for US companies. In essence these proposals recognize a new definition of “American worker,” but still show a desire to limit access to that category. This same distinction between pro-immigrant policies and pro-immigration policies was evident in the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride begun in September of 2003 and sponsored by the AFL-CIO^v, where the focus was on protecting workers already present, immigrant rights as they apply to those already within the United States. There is no mention of the rights of those who want to immigrate. An American worker is anyone already working within the United States. Future newcomers are not necessarily welcomed. One can still struggle for restrictionist immigration policies.

An example of the complexity of the immigration issue in the labor movement is the United Farm Workers of America (UFWA) views on immigration policy. UFW leaders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta opposed the infamous 1942-1964 Bracero Program that imported seasonal farm workers who were abused by growers while denying jobs to domestic farm workers. Congress ended the Bracero program in 1964. The UFWA at the time strongly opposed the use of undocumented workers because they

were brought in at harvest time, were fiercely exploited, and were also used as strikebreakers in the 1960s and 1970s by the growers to thwart union organizing drives. The UFWA's position of closing the Mexican border and excluding undocumented workers was strongly opposed by advocates for the undocumented in the Mexican American community who argued that rather than reaching out and uniting with immigrant workers, the UFWA was turning its back on those who needed union support and solidarity (Garcia, 286-287). In 1975, the UFWA was persuaded by Latino groups to only oppose undocumented workers who were engaged in strikebreaking activities (Tichenor, pg. 232). Yet, the challenge of organizing farm workers including new immigrants remained a major impediment for the UFWA. The UFWA opposed employer sanctions as punitive for the workers, and has sought alternative solutions to address the largely undocumented workforce in agricultural that represents the base upon which they seek to organize into their union.

Since 2000, the UFWA has negotiated with agricultural business employers and a bi-partisan group of legislators, to develop legislation known as AgJOBS which would allow many farm workers to obtain temporary immigration status with the possibility of earning permanent residency, and later citizenship, and would also make changes to the existing agricultural guest worker program, known as the H-2A temporary foreign agricultural worker program. Rather than continuing to oppose undocumented workers as a threat to farm workers that already reside in the U.S., the UFWA changed its position towards immigrant workers to reflect a more welcoming immigration position.

However, in the recent round of debates on immigration reform in 2007, the AFL-CIO has opposed the use of temporary guest worker programs, viewing them as creating

a permanent second class group of workers who can be easily exploited with no opportunity to become permanent residents and citizens. UFW President, Arturo Rodriguez, acknowledged these differences stating:

“our brothers and sisters in the AFL-CIO have called for the end of guest worker programs such as the H-2A program and the admission of future foreign workers as permanent residents with full rights at the onset. There are strong arguments for adopting such a position and it is one we respect. However, we believe that the present situation calls for one more effort to create a humane guest worker program which protects the rights of both guest workers and US workers. The reforms contained in AgJOBS are a step in the right direction, but something more is needed. We don’t believe a guest worker program can be successful without making union representation available to the guest workers.”

(Arturo S. Rodriguez. 2008).

There is a chance that unions may become pro-immigration temporarily if they become fully pro-immigrant (which is still far from certain). In an attempt to reach out to immigrants, unions sometimes get involved in immigrant community issues (and sometimes not) . Supporting more liberal immigration policies may be one such mechanism. This may parallel the 1940s when unions having incorporated the latest immigrants were able in moments of low immigration to argue for pro-immigration policies.

Unlike the 1940s, however, anti-immigrant sentiments have grown since the 1990s, spreading from California and other border states, to small towns such as Hazelton, Pennsylvania in a desperate attempt to enforce stricter immigration laws.

Unions in the U.S. do not exist in a vacuum, the steady drumbeat of anti-immigration policy is never far from the surface in U.S. politics. In December 2005, the House of Representatives in Congress passed HR 4437 which would have made federal felons of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., criminalized priests, teachers, and nurses or assisted them in any way, and built a 700-mile wall on the U.S. Mexico border. In response, throughout the spring and summer of 2006, unprecedented marches and rallies were organized by immigrants, and immigrant rights advocates including churches, students, labor unions, and civil rights advocates across the country, including more than 500 thousand in Los Angeles, 300 thousand in Chicago, nearly 500 thousand in Dallas, 300 thousand in New York City and tens of thousands in hundreds of other cities and small towns in 42 states.

Labor unions, with strong immigrant memberships and pro-immigration leadership such as SEIU, UNITE/HERE, and County Federations of Labor in California, and in New York (SEIU Local 32BJ and SEIU Local 1199), became actively involved in working directly with immigrants to organize the rallies. Unions used their resources to provide logistical and financial support, as well as encouraging their rank and file members to turn out. “In New York, for example, Change to Win representatives flew in from Washington, D.C. to facilitate permit negotiations on an expedited basis. These unions brought their organizing and mobilizing experience. Their involvement may also have been a factor in encouraging mainstream politicians to attend the rallies.” (Wang and Winn, June 2006, 8). However, it could also be argued that only a small number of labor unions actively participated in these actions that included a predominance of immigrant workers who took the day off from work and are at present

largely unorganized. This is an indication that most unions are not fully engaged in transforming our nation's immigration policy to welcome more workers and remove barriers to incorporation. There is still an ongoing process of debate occurring on the ground in most union locals as to whether immigrant workers are beneficial or hurtful to U.S. workers.

Without focusing on the fundamental importance of the category of belonging in defining union interests, the uneven incorporation of immigrants is hard to explain and we may be dooming ourselves to a temporary moment of inclusion until another category of workers is deemed an "other." By placing the political struggle over belonging center stage, one can begin to ask if unions want to be fundamentally inclusive or continue the American tradition of exclusive unions. Should working class identity be the ultimate category regardless of race, country of origin, citizenship status and even country of employment?

This critical juncture, when unions, academics and politicians are talking about the impacts of globalization, provides a window for addressing the issue of exclusion or inclusion, for everyone, not just the current "new immigrants". This is a key moment for reconsidering the debate over internationalism in the union movement. Some of this is evident in the new move for cross border organizing and alliances (Bronfenbrenner 2007). However the verdict is still out on how successful those efforts have been and how far such ideas have penetrated into the labor movement, how supported they are by union leadership much less rank and file. Understanding immigrant organizing as the key to rebuilding union membership, as a necessary response for the survival of our unions, may cause unions to miss this historic moment for reconsidering the role of nationalism in the

movement. Placing the politics of belonging center stage can help bring this debate to the fore. By placing the current incorporation within the larger history of an exclusive, nationalist labor movement which has, in small increments, changed its boundaries of who counts as an “American” worker, we see how this latest redefinition may increase membership to some degree but doesn’t really address the fundamental transformations of the global economy. The international pressure to incorporate millions of migrant workers who cannot wait for their local economies to stabilize will only bring more immigrant workers to the U.S. and other developed nations, and labor unions will continue to grapple with the notion of whether to offer a new sense of belonging as part of U.S. unions with transnational ties to immigrants or retain the traditional restrictionist model that has kept millions of immigrant workers outside of union’s reach.

ⁱ Here we follow Gary Herrigel’s idea about the social construction of political economy (1993). He challenges traditional material and structural accounts and stresses the importance of considering identity to explain labor activity. Herrigel writes: “Organizational construction and reform are not seen as a problem of adaptation or adjustment to pressures somehow independent of themselves. Rather, organizations in a political economy (labor organizations, corporations, associations, public agencies, etc.) are understood to be collectively engaged in the definition and conceptual representation of what those pressures are” (p. 378). To understand organizations’ responses to shifts in modes of production, requires an understanding of the political struggle over the perception, definition and social construction of those shifts.

ii The AFL's testimony is more surprising than the CIO's given that the CIO was generally more progressive on race and ethnicity, and the AFL tended to be more hostile towards non-European immigrants.

iii These assumptions were so widespread that in 1993 Hector Delgado writes "The unorganizability of undocumented workers ...has become a 'pseudofact'" (p. 10).

iv These arguments mirror earlier ones about immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Unorganizability was one way in which they were deemed a threat to the American worker. In order for these immigrants to transcend their designation as competitors, scholars and the immigrants themselves had to prove their organizability. "The charge that eastern and southern European immigrants were unreceptive to unionization or made poor union members has also been made – and has been challenged by a number of labor historians" (Delgado 1993 p. 147).

v The Freedom Rides were initially sponsored by HERE, followed by the SEIU, and then the AFL-CIO.

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