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## **UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES: FROM IMPOVERISHMENT TO MAY DAY RESURGANCE**

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For the first time in nearly seventy years, some two million people marched on May Day in the United States. They were protesting moves in the U.S. Congress aimed at cracking down on undocumented immigrants, especially those from México and Central America. The choice to hold the march on the first of May 2006, when so many other nations were also celebrating International Workers' Day, was a notably symbolic move. A working Monday enabled supporters to highlight a national call for a boycott on working, buying, selling, and business as usual. Labeling it "*un día sin inmigrantes*" (a day without immigrants), organizers wanted to demonstrate the potential impact on the American economy if all undocumented immigrants were deported.

The May Day demonstrations for immigrants' rights in cities across the United States were the largest collective outpouring of street protest since the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Over 650,000 people participated in two marches in Los Angeles, 400,000 in Chicago, 250,000 in San José, 75,000 in Denver, and 30,000 each in San Francisco, Sacramento, Fresno, Houston, and New York City. Tens of thousands marched in other cities such as Seattle, Oakland, Santa Barbara, Orlando, Miami, Tampa, and Atlanta (Watanabe and Gaouette 2006;

Gorman, Millar, and Landsberg 2006). This chapter examines how the Latino-based protest mobilization swept across the United States like a storm, catching the non-Hispanic population and even the leaders of the Hispanic community by surprise. How did it happen? What were the underlying causes? Why was May Day chosen? What obstacles did the immigrant rights movement have to overcome? How did race, ethnicity, and language play into the immigration controversy? Will this movement lead to a revival of May Day in the United States?

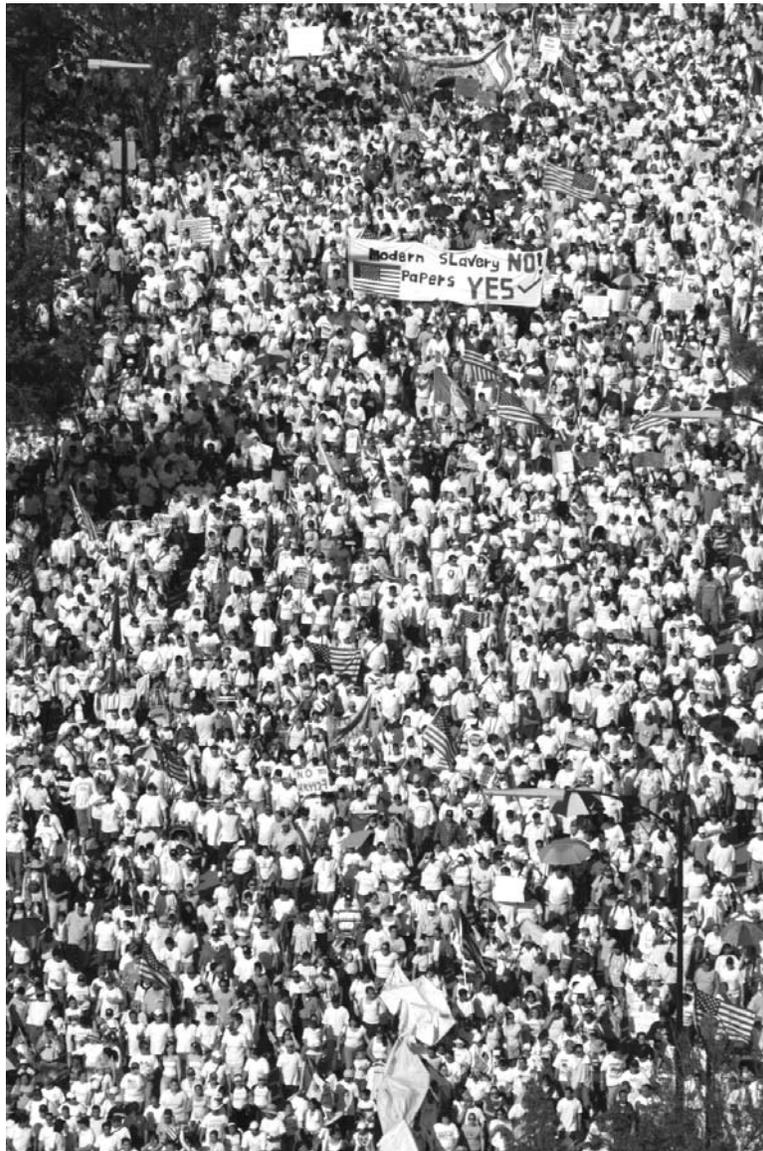
#### REVIVING MAY DAY

The upsurge in Hispanic activism was triggered by the U.S. House of Representatives' passage of the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437) on December 16, 2005. Some of the more draconian provisions of H.R. 4437 include:

- Section 202 – makes it a criminal offence to provide housing or transportation for illegal aliens. Also provides for extraterritorial federal jurisdiction in such cases.
- Section 203 – makes illegal presence in the United States a felony crime.
- Section 607 – requires the federal government to take custody of illegal aliens detained by local authorities, even if a person was originally arrested for violations of local or state laws. (This would also serve to curb the practice of 'catch and release.')
- Section 1002 – requires the construction of approximately 700 miles (1127 kilometers) of 'reinforced fencing' at five zones of the most frequent illegal crossings along the U.S.-México border that currently have no barrier. (The longest continuous zone runs from eastern California along nearly the entire length of the Arizona border with México.)

Political activism for immigrants' rights snowballed across the country during the months after the passage of H.R. 4437. The May Day demonstrations came on the heels of the largest political protest events in recent memory in such U.S. cities as Los Angeles (March

25: up to 1 million), Dallas (April 9: 400,000), Washington DC (April 10: 500,000), and Phoenix (April 10: 300,000). In San José, which has the largest Hispanic population in Northern California



and where most of the research for this chapter was conducted, the May Day march was ten times larger than the previous largest-ever demonstration that had occurred only three weeks earlier on April 10 (also for immigrants' rights), and fifty times larger than the largest antiwar demonstration in the city, held on March 20, 2004.

Carrying signs that read "*No a la H.R. 4437*," the protesters made it clear with their posters, banners, and slogans that undocumented immigrants are not what H.R. 4437 makes them out to be: "*No somos criminales*" ('We are not criminals'). One poster joked about an apparent contradiction in policy ("The Pilgrims were the first illegal immigrants"), reminding the crowd that the first European settlers to arrive on the U.S. northeast coast, though uninvited (and certainly without visas), were initially welcomed and aided by Native Americans. Another poster pointed out that "America is a nation of immigrants," while still another pleaded, "I came for my children." Other banners asked to "Honor our contribution," reasserting that undocumented immigrants are not burdens on society but instead give a great deal to the U.S. economy. Finally, there were slogans of empowerment such as "*Sí, se puede*" (Yes, we can) and "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*" ('The people united will never be defeated').



Immigrants' rights protests were tempered only by the U.S. Senate's passage of a more moderate bill, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (S. 2611), on May 17, 2006. While S. 2611 would have stepped up enforcement of immigration laws, it would not have turned undocumented immigrants into felony criminals as would H.R. 4437. More importantly, it partially addressed one cause of undocumented immigration: the inadequacy of channels for obtaining visas and permits for entering and working in the United States legally. By providing for a three-year temporary guest worker visa and new visas for non-immigrant immediate family members, S. 2611 would have helped meet the U.S. economy's demand for low-wage labor, as well as enabled more foreign workers to enter the country legally. Nevertheless, S. 2611 would have encouraged the treatment of undocumented immigrants as threats until they could achieve legal status after a tortuous clearance process. Neither H.R. 4437 nor S. 2611 could have become law until a Senate-House Conference Committee reconciled the differences between the two versions of legislation.

The lack of consensus and political will in Congress allowed both H.R. 4437 and S. 2611 to die natural deaths. A year later, H.R. 1645 (the STRIVE Act) attempted to integrate Senate and House concerns by addressing enforcement first, positioning it as a precondition to opening a guest worker program and providing undocumented immigrants with a lengthy pathway to citizenship. Failing to satisfy the hawks in Congress and splitting the immigrant rights movement, it too failed to get passed. With the following year (2008) being an election year, immigration reform became too hot a political issue to be tackled in the 110th session of Congress. As a result, the desire among all sides for comprehensive immigration reform, albeit for different visions of reform, never came to pass.

#### *Breakthrough in the barrier of fear*

Undocumented workers and their families have long lived in fear of being caught and facing summary deportation. They have always kept a low profile, focusing on working hard and maintaining strong family ties. A new federal immigration law that would have automatically turned them into felony criminals touched a nerve in the Hispanic community, although on its own it was probably not

sufficient to bring them out to the streets in open protest. However, the Spanish-language media in the United States took up the immigration issue, and the discussion on the airwaves, print media, and the Internet rapidly gained momentum. Hispanic organizations decided that it was time to mobilize their once-quiet constituencies. The slumbering giant that tirelessly harvests America's vegetables, sweeps America's floors, builds America's homes, repairs America's cars, and cleans America's hotel rooms was awakening to a new political reality.

The rally of as many as a million people in Los Angeles on March 25, 2006, was a watershed because it sent a loud message to Hispanics all over the United States that it was time to come out of the shadows and engage in the political process. For undocumented persons, it sent a message that there are now so many of 'us' (an estimated 12 million people in addition to another 30 million legal relatives and compatriots) that there is now finally security in numbers; it was time to come out and openly protest against the attempts in Congress to criminalize 'illegal aliens' and extend the wall along the U.S.-México border. The weeks that followed witnessed mass political mobilizations in city after city. Even cities that were never before centers of political activism—Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, San José—suddenly jumped onto the national scene with protest demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people. For the first time, undocumented persons joined their legal brethren in open protest, proudly bearing placards calling for the legalization of their residence in the United States.

Despite the nationwide spread of these coordinated actions, the organization of immigration rights protests has been very decentralized. The mobilization of large marches was coordinated by local or regional coalitions like the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights and March 25 Coalition in Los Angeles, the San José Immigrant Rights Coalition, and the National Capitol Immigration Coalition in Washington, D.C. With the public now relying so heavily on the Internet, the Web has proven to be an unprecedented tool in mobilizing millions for coordinated actions across the country.

But behind the scenes were numerous nationwide ethnic-based organizations that played a key role in planning, mobilizing, or at least raising consciousness for nationwide protests, such as the

Mexican-American Political Association, La Raza, Coalición primero de Mayo, Latino Movement USA, Hermandad Mexicana Latinoamericana, and the League of United Latin American Citizens, which claims to be the largest and oldest Hispanic organization in the United States.

However, fearing the loss of permanent union jobs and downward pressure on wages, the main U.S. trade union establishment, the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), continued to oppose a 'guest worker' program and amnesty for undocumented workers. Even the newly-formed Change to Win Federation, which broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2005, failed to really embrace the immigrant rights movement. Both trade union federations feared the true legacy of May Day, that of workers spontaneously implementing a general strike without the mediation of labor bosses. As a result, most traditional labor unions did not support the immigration rights marches and the rebirth of May Day. Only those union locals that had large Latino caucuses mobilized in support of the May Day demonstrations.

#### *U.S. origins of May Day*

May Day is a national holiday in most industrialized and developing countries around the world, celebrated as International Workers' Day. The United States is an exception, where successive governments and the trade union bureaucracy have feared the connection with labor movements around the world and consistently resisted recognizing May Day. Seeking an alternative date, the Knights of Labor in New York City initiated Labor Day on September 5, 1882, in order to recognize the contribution of American workers. In 1884, seeking to make Labor Day an annual event, the Knights of Labor lead the way in selecting the first Monday in September as a holiday from labor. Beginning in 1887, individual states came to recognize Labor Day as an official state holiday. However, it was not until 1894 that Congress made Labor Day a national holiday.

May Day itself also traces its origins to the U.S. labor movement. In 1884 the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, predecessor of the American Federation of Labor (AFL),

called for an eight-hour workday. When implementation appeared unlikely, a general strike was called in Chicago on May 1, 1886. On that day, some 80,000 workers marched down Chicago's Michigan Avenue in what is generally recognized as the first May Day parade. In the succeeding days, supporting strikes broke out in other cities such as Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and New York City. On May 3, police killed four striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago. At an evening rally on May 4 in Haymarket Square, organized to protest the killings, police moved in to disperse the crowd when a bomb went off, killing seven policemen. Police retaliated by firing into the crowd of workers, killing and wounding an unknown number of civilians. Determined to stop the labor agitations, police interrogations and arrests went on well into the night. Eight people were eventually charged and convicted for the deaths of the policemen, though no evidence was ever presented that directly linked them to the bombing in Haymarket Square. Four of the defendants were publicly hanged in 1887. In Paris in 1889, the International Workingmen's Association (Second International) called for international demonstrations on May 1, 1890, commemorating the struggle of Chicago workers. Thus was born the international tradition of May Day.

Over the next three decades, workers incrementally won eight-hour working days through struggles with individual companies. Finally, the Adamson Act was passed by Congress in 1916, establishing a statutory eight-hour working day for railway workers with additional pay for overtime work. Thus, contrary to popular myth in the United States, May Day did not originate from socialism or communism, but rather from the very U.S. trade union movement that brought about the basic eight-hour working day that is taken so much for granted today.

#### FRAGMENTED POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The base of virtually every immigrants' rights demonstration has been overwhelmingly Hispanic. While a small percentage of non-Latinos have always joined in support, there was no large-scale participation by other ethnic communities (with the possible exceptions of protests in Philadelphia and San Francisco). Yet it was only a short time before when Muslims, Arabs, and everyone

who 'looked like' them were being subjected to racial profiling in searches at ports of entry in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Where were the Muslims, Arabs, and other Asians who mobilized for civil liberties and against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? Many African Americans felt sidelined by the immigrant rights marches that have eclipsed the size of the civil rights marches of previous decades (Watanabe 2006). Why were African Americans not joining the protests in large numbers?

There are at least two factors that account for the lack of participation by other ethnic groups. First, Americans who identify as members of one minority ethnic or religious group or another tend to see it as their primary identity within American society. Even in the Left, speaker after speaker at antiwar rallies talk of the "unity of African American, Latino, Native American, Asian, and Middle Eastern sisters and brothers." Rarely, however, do they mention the unity of workers, farmers, teachers, students, undocumented workers, the self-employed, and the unemployed. Instead, grassroots mobilization is frequently done on an ethnic or religious-community basis and manifested in banners bearing names like Muslim Students Association, Black Voices for Peace, South Asians for Collective Action, Filipino Workers Action Center, and Catholic Mothers for Peace. Thus, when political mobilization happens in the Latino community, even when it occurs nationwide, it may have little initial impact on non-Latino communities.

Second, even when ethnic communities do come together for a common political cause, they often take defensive positions and fail to forge a common cause against a common oppression. For example, when an Asian American in San José accused a black city official of racist discrimination some years ago, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) came to the defense of the black official. When scientist Wen Ho Lee was falsely accused in 1999 of espionage at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, it was primarily Chinese American associations all over the country that came to his support. When Muslims and Arabs were subjected to racial profiling after September 11, the East Asian, Hispanic, and African American associations largely sat on their hands.

The ethnocentric fragmentation that is endemic in the American polity must be broken. Ethnicity-based organizations may

still have a role to play as fronts for grassroots mobilization, but they need to be integrated under pan-ethnic or, better yet, class-based umbrella political organizations. Alternatively, the ethnicity-based organizations could well serve as mass organizations for a working-class political party.

*Parallel media universes*

Prior to the May Day march of 2006, the political firestorm over immigration reform and the rights of undocumented immigrants had been gathering for some time. The kindling point was the passage of H.R. 4437, which touched an emotional nerve in the Latino community where many families have one or more undocumented members. Because nearly everyone knows someone who is or was undocumented, Congressional attempts to criminalize honest, hard-working family members and erect physical barriers dividing families between the United States and both México and Central America struck hard, and on a personal level.

According to U.S. Census estimates for July 1, 2005, 14.4% of the U.S. population (42.7 million people) was of Hispanic origin. Today, much of that population is served by Spanish-language radio and television stations. Spanish-language newspapers are freely available in metropolitan areas. Large national and international networks dominate the airwaves, including Univision, Telemundo, Hispanic Television Network (HTN), Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation (HBC), Spanish Broadcasting System (SBS), and TeleFutura and Galavisión (both owned by Univision). Collectively, the Spanish-language media in the United States has long carried a full range of news, talk shows, movies, singers, and comedies that are little known outside of the Spanish-speaking community. This diverse collection of media plays a crucial role in informing and shaping the consciousness of the Spanish-speaking community in the United States, for whom it serves as a primary media outlet.

Consider the Spanish-language and bilingual newspapers in California. In the weeks leading up to May Day, the front-page headlines read: "Marcha histórica en Los Ángeles" ('Historic march in Los Angeles,' *El Mundo*, Oakland, March 30, 2006), "Primero de Mayo" ('May 1' by Armando Roman, *Alianza*, San José, April 20, 2006), "Primero de Mayo, un día sin latinos. ¿Cómo la ve?" ('May

1, a day without Latinos. How to see it?’ by Rosario Vital, *El Observador*, San José, April 28, 2006), and “Americans back immigrant-friendly reform” (*La Oferta*, San José, April 21, 2006).

After May Day, and the abundant news coverage of the May Day demonstrations, the Spanish-language press continued to react strongly to immigration-related events. On May 15, 2006, President George W. Bush announced his plan to dispatch 6,000 National Guard troops to the U.S.-México border in an attempt to placate right-wing supporters, while simultaneously offering an olive branch to immigrants and their employers by supporting a guest worker program and a conditional pathway to legalization for many undocumented workers. Two days later, the Senate’s passage of S. 2611 authorized building some 370 miles (595 kilometers) of new fencing along the U.S.-México border. The headline drama continued: “6 mil soldados a la frontera” (‘6000 soldiers to the border’ by Maribel Hastings, *La Opinión*, Los Angeles, May 16, 2006), “Más tropas y legalización” (‘More troops and legalization’ by Agencias, *Hoy*, Los Angeles, May 16, 2006), “México: ¿Zona de guerra?” (‘Mexico: war zone?’ by Rosario Vital, *El Observador*, May 19, 2006), “Senado aprueba muro en frontera con México” (‘Senate approves wall on border with Mexico’ by María Peña, *La Oferta*, May 19, 2006).

Even those media organizations that publish in both English and Spanish had very different approaches to reporting across the two languages. The former Knight-Ridder newspaper group, for example, reported in the *San Jose Mercury News* (Arrillaga 2006) on “militias and minutemen” patrolling the U.S.-México border. Its sister newspaper, the English-language *Contra Costa Times*, had little to say about the vigilante groups that undertook on their own to hunt down ‘illegal aliens’ crossing the U.S.-México border. Yet in the Spanish-language newspaper *Fronteras*, published by the *Contra Costa Times*, the phenomenon was sensationalized with the title “Nazis en la frontera” (‘Nazis on the border,’ Contreras 2006). Thus, the Latino community became far more aware of, and emotionally involved in, the issues behind the immigration debate than other ethnic communities or the general English-speaking population.

As discussion and outrage over H.R. 4437 escalated in the Spanish-language media, the attention of the rest of the country was

focused elsewhere. When antiwar forces were mobilizing for nationwide demonstrations on March 18-19, 2006, the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, there was relatively little awareness of the gathering storm in the Latino community. As 25,000 people marched against the war in San Francisco on March 18, few had any idea that it would be dwarfed by the 1 million marching in Los Angeles on the following weekend. In effect, the United States today contains parallel universes of culture and political consciousness, each fully internally integrated and national in scope, but almost mutually exclusive in the communities they serve—one thinking (and being broadcast) in English, and the other in Spanish. (Other linguistic communities also have their native-language media, but tend to be more isolated and geographically localized, and thus more apt to rely on mainstream English-language media.)

*The American flag: Dual symbolism*

The antiwar movement and the Left in general has been uncomfortable with the American flag as a political symbol, not out of contempt for the country but rather because the Right has hijacked the flag as a symbol of the right-wing political agenda: national chauvinism, militarization, war, and assertion of U.S. hegemony over the world. By contrast, for the Latino community in general, and for undocumented immigrants in particular, the American flag is not taken to represent loyalty to the U.S. government, but rather the country into which they so desperately seek to become integrated. By adopting the mantle of the American flag, they seek legality and security of residence. They seek identification as being just another working American in a country that was built by immigrants. The slogan, "*Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos*" (Today we march, tomorrow we vote) emphasizes the longer-term goal of finding a legal path to citizenship and the electoral power associated with it. Among the most ubiquitous symbols in the immigration rights marches of 2006 was the American flag. Frequently, the second most prevalent symbol was the Mexican flag. Though sending mixed messages, the prominence of both U.S. and Latin American flags was symptomatic of the dual identity of these immigrants. But they also

came to symbolize the pride of coming out and asserting political power as a community.

This is not to say that members of the Latino community do not share some common perspectives with the antiwar movement. Overwhelmingly, the Latino community is working-class and suffers the double oppression of class and race, or the triple oppression of class, race, and existence at the margins of the legal economy. For example, when asked about the U.S. war in Iraq, the great majority of those who offered an opinion expressed opposition to the war. Many antiwar signs were seen scattered throughout the demonstrations in Los Angeles, San José, and San Francisco, several of which read, "The Latino community says NO to war." Some signs denounced police brutality and the heavy hand of the state. Others made fun of President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and the "Governator" (a reference to California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who formerly acted in the movie *The Terminator* and has been hesitant to allow undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers' licenses). Still other hand-written signs simply read "Support our cause," without specifying which "cause" was being addressed.

Consisting overwhelmingly of working-class people, the Latino community has been largely united with the predominantly middle-class antiwar movement, not only in opposing H.R. 4437, racism, and repressive laws, but also in supporting economic justice, labor rights, civil liberties, and opposing the pre-emptive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the symbolism of the American flag poses a challenge for uniting the movements. For Latinos, the American flag is a symbol of inclusion in a system in which many of them are still marginalized. For the antiwar movement, as for the black-led civil rights movement, the American flag has become a symbol of the hegemony of state power over others, whether it be the United States over other countries (particularly developing countries), whites over blacks, or capitalist profiteers over workers. These dichotomies must be overcome either by decoupling the flag as symbol of the country from the flag as symbol of the Right, or by creating a new symbol of nationhood that is truly inclusive for the working class and marginalized poor.

*Opposition based on racially tinged myths*

Opponents of amnesty for undocumented immigrants launched a few small demonstrations in the days following May Day. They carried signs saying, “No illegals” or “No amnesty for illegal immigrants.” Most insisted that they were not against immigration but rather illegal immigration, arguing that the latter burdens the nation’s law enforcement, welfare, health care, and education systems. Yet many among them carried signs with distinctly xenophobic overtones: “Close borders now” or “Fix your own country before you trash ours.” Still others implied that immigrants from south of the border would drag down the U.S. standard of living. Slogans such as “Amnesty equals joining the Third World” or “Illegal employers import poverty” had unmistakably racist overtones.

Perhaps the central notion among opponents of immigrants’ rights remains that undocumented immigrants are an undue burden on public services. The assumption is that undocumented immigrants, coming mostly from impoverished rural areas and having little education, bring poverty, crime, and Third World diseases, and otherwise dilute the ‘American way of life.’ This is largely based on ignorance and lack of context. First, if undocumented immigrants utilize free public services, so too do legal residents and citizens. For example, all low-income groups tend to lack health insurance, and thus place an uncompensated burden on hospital emergency rooms and public healthcare facilities. Second, because non-permanent residents are not entitled to welfare or federal medical care benefits (Medicaid and Medicare), these public safety nets are not burdened even by legal immigrants, let alone those who lack documentation.

Third, undocumented immigrants enter the United States almost entirely for employment and because they can actually get work. Those who have valid tax identification numbers are required to pay income taxes, and most actually do so. To the extent that they contribute to the economy and pay taxes, they contribute as much as lower-class legal residents to funding the public services that they may utilize. However, to the extent that being undocumented pushes workers into the underground economy, a defined pathway towards legalization would create millions of additional aboveground

income taxpayers. The notion that illegal immigrants burden public services more than they contribute economically is partly based on a racially motivated presumption that they are lazy and do not work. In fact, their participation rate in employment (96% for men) is estimated to be higher than that of legal immigrants or citizens (Passel, Capps, and Fix 2004). However, owing to the frequently temporary nature of their work, many experience a significant degree of underemployment.

Fourth, there is often an automatic assumption by opponents of amnesty that undocumented immigrants, perhaps because they are defined as illegal, contribute more than their share to crime, hence disproportionately burdening the law enforcement, criminal justice, and correctional systems. Immigration opponents have claimed that in many cases 60% to 90% of serious crimes in the United States are committed by illegal aliens (MacDonald 2004). However, actual statistics tell a somewhat different story. For example, in California, according to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, out of a total of nearly 171,000 state prison inmates in April 2006 there were 22,478 undocumented immigrants and persons suspected of being undocumented, a percentage significantly less than those figures cited by immigration opponents (see Sterngold 2006). (These figures do not include persons held in local jails and federal prisons.) According to the Pew Hispanic Center, a Washington, DC based think-tank, California had approximately 2,750,000 undocumented immigrants as of March 2006, out of the 11.5–12 million in the country (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). This gives undocumented immigrants an incarceration rate in California state prisons of approximately 817 per 100,000 population. According to the California Department of Finance, the total population of California reached 37.2 million in January 2006 (California Department of Finance 2006); the incarceration rate of the general population in California state prisons was therefore 460 per 100,000. This is a far cry from the greatly inflated crime rates for undocumented immigrants claimed by immigration opponents.

While undocumented immigrants were incarcerated at a rate that is slightly less than twice the rate for the general population, this remains significantly lower than the incarceration rates for black and Native American U.S. citizens, who are the most severely affected by racial profiling and negative stereotyping. Even legally

resident Hispanics were somewhat over-represented in the prison population because of racial profiling and being under-privileged. Furthermore, the incarceration rate for undocumented immigrants must be viewed in the context of a population that by definition lives outside the legal margins of society, even when performing normal everyday tasks that the legal population takes for granted. Thus, for example, identity theft crimes may be committed more for the purpose of acquiring a tax identification number needed for employment rather than for the purpose of tapping another person's bank account. Wherever driver's licenses are denied to undocumented immigrants, undocumented immigrants will be found driving without licenses.

Fifth, there is an underlying fear among opponents of amnesty that undocumented immigrants are taking away their jobs and pulling down wages. However, not only are undocumented immigrants hard-working, but they perform jobs that others are unwilling to perform, or at least unwilling to perform at such low (frequently sub-minimum) wages. Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey by the United States Census Bureau (2006), 78% of undocumented immigrants are employed in low-wage and low-education occupations, among them farm labor, cleaning, household service, construction, repair, production labor, and transportation (Passel 2006). Thus, there is relatively little direct competition for jobs between most U.S. citizens and undocumented immigrants. To the extent that undocumented immigrants are willing to work at below-market wages, they do effectively reduce mean wages in those economic sectors where they predominate by virtue of their reduced bargaining power. But this is precisely what the capitalist system seeks in its relentless drive to enhance profit margins by reducing wages and costs. In fact, there is emerging evidence in certain sectors that Latino workers, in taking over low-wage jobs, are actually pushing black workers and other citizens up into higher-wage occupations (Gorman, Millar, and Landsberg 2006).

Sixth, undocumented immigrants effectively increase the purchasing power of all Americans by reducing the cost of certain labor services, such as cultivation, processing, freight transportation, maintenance, and repairs. Nevertheless, to defend undocumented immigrants is not to condone an economic system

that institutionalizes sub-minimum wages by perpetuating multiple unorganized sectors based largely on undocumented labor, nor to justify their social marginalization through exclusion from public services. All human beings have minimum social needs that can be met only by ensuring them a decent standard of living, and the fundamental human rights of unfettered access to healthcare, education, and social justice. This is yet another reason, no less important, for providing a dignified pathway towards legalization of undocumented immigrants who make essential contributions to the economy and have otherwise been law-abiding residents.

*Non-Latino undocumented immigrants: Common struggle*

The controversy over undocumented immigrants has focused almost exclusively on those from Latin America. This reflects the fact that an estimated 78% of undocumented immigrants as of March 2005 originated from Latin America in general, and 57% came from México in particular. That leaves some 1.5 million undocumented immigrants from Asia (13%), 600,000 from Europe and Canada (6%), and 400,000 from Africa and elsewhere (3%) (Passel 2006). While the great majority of undocumented immigrants from Latin America have made illegal border crossings, those from Asia and Europe are associated more with nonimmigrant visa overstays. Nevertheless, the unauthorized immigration status of those from Asia and Europe presents the same socio-economic marginalization and insecurity faced by undocumented immigrants from Latin America.

The statistical trend is even more revealing. In 1986, undocumented immigrants from Asia represented 6% of the total. By 2002, they constituted 10% (Wasem 2004); it took only three more years for that figure to reach 13%. Thus, in percentage terms, persons of Asian origins actually represent the fastest growing major segment of undocumented immigrants in the United States. According to estimates for the year 2000 by the former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service), 1.64% of undocumented immigrants were from China, 1.21% from Philippines, 1.00% from India, and 0.79% from Korea (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2003). Assuming the same percentages held in March 2006 out of a

total of 12 million undocumented immigrants, the following calculated numbers would represent significant underestimations: 200,000 undocumented immigrants from China, 145,000 from Philippines, 120,000 from India, and 95,000 from Korea. The numbers of undocumented immigrants from Pakistan and Iran are not far behind.

With pressure mounting in Congress to arrive at a consensus on tightening border security and rounding up at least a segment of undocumented immigrants, the scale of immigrant arrests, many without trials, escalated in the latter half of 2006 and in 2007. An ominous precedent was set following the September 11 terrorist attacks when more than 5,000 foreign nationals disappeared under secret detentions in the two years after the attacks. Nearly all were Muslims or Arabs. Although the pretext was unspecified "immigration violations," most were held without being charged and few were ever convicted. On June 14, 2006, in the case *Turkmen vs. Ashcroft*, U.S. District Judge John Gleeson upheld the U.S. government's authority to arrest and detain non-citizens on the basis of race, religion, or national origin, and to hold them indefinitely without explanation (Bernstein 2006; Cole 2006).

After congressional and presidential apologies and the payment of reparations for their sufferings, the World War II detentions of Japanese Americans, and to a lesser extent German Americans, purely on the basis of race or national origin was long thought to have been relegated to the dustbin of history. However, the spectre of such ethically reprehensible and openly racist events is once again raising its head. On some pretext of terrorism, enforcing immigration law, or national security, the next target could be Hispanic Americans, South Asian Americans, or East Asian Americans.

The potential threat to fundamental civil liberties is common to all immigrant communities. Therefore, it is in the interest of all immigrant communities to unite to oppose these draconian measures together. Although Latino immigrants have finally broken through the fear barrier and come out onto the streets defiantly proclaiming their rights, undocumented Asians have largely chosen to remain invisible. Only a small number of Asians, particularly those from the Philippines and Korea, have joined protests in solidarity with Latinos. Nevertheless, as more legal members of

Asian communities become citizens and as Asian communities in the United States awaken politically, it can be expected that legal and undocumented Asians alike will increasingly assert their political rights in the future.

#### THE FUTURE

The main challenge for the future is the unification of the immigrant rights movement with the trade union movement of permanent workers against anti-union policies and the profit-driven economy that is so ruthlessly attempting to drive down wages and slash benefits. The May Day demonstrations symbolize the potential for rebirth and unity of the U.S. labor movement, but there is clearly a long road ahead. Most traditional U.S. trade union bureaucracies have settled into the complacent role of being power brokers between workers and corporate management, preferring to avoid political struggles. If undocumented immigrant workers can lead the way, then permanent workers will need to reject their trade union bureaucracies to join them and reclaim May Day as International Workers' Day in the United States.

May Day 2008 could signal a start in this direction. Dock workers of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on the West Coast have announced a work stoppage in protest against the U.S. war in Iraq on May 1. It could rekindle U.S. workers' claim to May Day as part of their rich heritage of struggle for better working conditions and the right to organize. It could also be the next step in linking unionized permanent workers with undocumented workers.

Much like the adverse effects of illegal drugs in the United States, the solution lies not so much in cutting off the supply, but more in reducing the adverse social conditions that give rise to the problem. The root causes of unidirectional migrations are both push and pull. Massive unauthorized immigration simply reflects such extreme pushes and pulls that even legal and physical barriers cannot stem the tide. On the one hand, the desperate economic conditions facing millions of marginalized farmers and underemployed workers in México and Central America as a direct result of globalized development in general, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in particular, are

pushing them to leave their native lands. The meteoric rise of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his leftist Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) in the July 2006 presidential elections in México is a direct result of the impoverishment of the masses of Mexican workers and peasants. Moreover, to the extent that the PRD policies could alleviate poverty, they could greatly reduce the push that gives rise to undocumented immigration. On the other hand, the increasing demand for low-wage manual labor in the United States—driven by outsourcing to the growing domestic unorganized sector, absolute cost-minimization business models like that of Wal-Mart, and the growing demand for domestic services—exerts an inexorable pull.

Undocumented immigrants themselves are not the underlying problem, but rather a symptom of the deeper social contradiction between rich countries and poor countries, or more precisely, between the metropolitan centers and the periphery of the world capitalist system. The U.S.-México border just happens to be one of those not-so-common instances where the center and periphery geographically meet, and where unequal development spawns a massive labor migration in the same manner that unequal water levels between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario spawn the Niagara Falls. No man-made barrier can stop the falls. Only an equalization of the water levels—or in this case, the wage gap—can accomplish that.

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