

# Unions and Mass Immigration

## *Behind Organized Labor's Support*

By CARL F. HOROWITZ

**L**inda Chavez-Thompson is executive vice-president of the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor organization. When she speaks on issues affecting the federation's 54 affiliated unions, people listen. At a February 28, 2006 press briefing, Ms. Chavez-Thompson had this to say about pending immigration-reform legislation.

We propose that if employers can demonstrate a real need for outside workers, these workers should be allowed into our country with the same rights and labor protections of any U.S. citizen.

The words echoed those of her boss, President John Sweeney, who had remarked a few years earlier:

The struggle of immigrant workers is our struggle. We believe, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Such words succinctly summarize organized labor's current view of immigration and its consequences. Union officials insist that immigration, regardless of origin, is an unalloyed good. Only backward, xenophobic "right-wing" opponents of working men and women stand to thwart it. A rump faction within the AFL-CIO, called Change to Win, which declared itself a separate federation in September 2005, also takes this view, differing in strategy and rhetoric far more than in substance.

---

*Carl F. Horowitz is a Washington, D.C.-area based policy consultant who has published widely on immigration, labor, welfare, and housing issues. He has a Ph.D. in urban planning and policy development from Rutgers University.*

The AFL-CIO already had issued a statement in 2000 in support of unconditional additional amnesty for illegal (i.e., "undocumented") immigrants. And for Ms. Chavez-Thompson, a guest-worker plan represented an imposition of conditions, inhibiting the right of immigrant workers to become "full members of society—as permanent residents with full rights and full mobility that greedy employers may not exploit." For the AFL-CIO, legalization is a necessary prerequisite to effective organizing and collective bargaining. Change to Win, driven



**AFL-CIO Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson (in sunglasses behind sign) and other labor union executives lead a march in Washington, D.C. near the White House on December 8, 2005.**

more than anyone else by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Andrew Stern, on the other hand, believes that a large guest-worker program would be beneficial. By getting immigrants here (with the implication that once here, they should remain indefinitely), unions can organize them and eventually reassert themselves as a mighty economic and social force. On the broader issue of the need to import workers to boost membership and generate dues payments, however, there is no dispute among top labor leaders.

A labor union, like any organization, seeks to maximize membership. With good reason, unions

in this country are concerned. Their share of representation of U.S. workers isn't just stagnant, it's declining. The Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that in 2006 a mere 12 percent of the total U.S. workforce, and 7.4 percent of all private-sector employees, belonged to a union. These figures were down from the year before, respectively, 12.5 percent and 7.8 percent. Each set of figures pales before the levels of 50 years ago, however, when nearly a third of all private-sector nonagricultural workers were members. Union anxiety in such a context is understandable.

The full legalization vs. guest-worker debate must be placed in the larger context of the overall impact of mass immigration. And the reality is that organized labor in this country for the last two decades has been indifferent to the consequences of immigration, and contemptuous of those who point them out. The massive amnesty program passed in 2006 by the U.S. Senate, known as the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (S.2611), in original form, would have added 103 million people to this country over its first 20 years, either through admissions or adjustments of immigration status, estimated The Heritage Foundation's Robert Rector. It is to a group of stubborn House Republican conferees whom Americans owe that legislation's well-deserved demise.

For unions, especially those representing unskilled workers in labor-intensive industries, immigrants mean potential membership, money, and political influence. It wasn't always like this. In fact, for many decades, as Cornell University labor economist Vernon Briggs explains, unions

could be counted on to oppose mass immigration, legal or otherwise. The transformation of Big Labor into immigration enthusiasts has placed it alongside big business and separatist ethnic (mainly Hispanic) politicians in a coalition dismissive of the importance of U.S. sovereignty. It is a reversal of fortune at once fascinating and appalling.

### Evolution of Labor's Position

Organized labor had been a vociferous opponent of mass immigration as far back as the late nineteenth century. Union leaders were suspicious that

low-skilled immigrants would accept wages unacceptable to native-born workers, thus driving wages down. In large enough numbers, immigrants could threaten union bargaining power, even if over the long run many might join. Such fears were, and remain, justifiable. "(E)very serious study over the past 100 years," notes Cornell's Briggs, "has found that wages are depressed by immigration, the adverse impact being most severe for unskilled workers."

Large-scale immigration, then as now, had its advocates. There existed an explicit alliance of (cost-minimizing) employers and (vote-maximizing) politicians. Back then, however, labor leaders opposed this alliance. Not long before his death, in a letter to Congress dated March 19, 1924, American Federation of Labor founder Samuel Gompers had this to say while lawmakers were debating legislation to restrict immigration:

America must not be overwhelmed (by immigrants)... Every effort...must expect to meet a number of hostile forces and, in particular, two hostile forces of



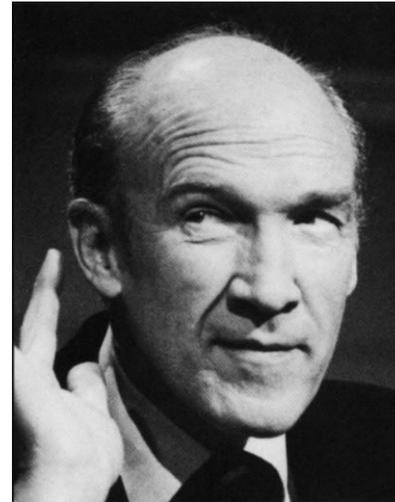
**Samuel Gompers (center), founder of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), like most labor leaders, opposed unrestricted immigration because it lowered wages. The AFL was instrumental in passing immigration restriction laws from the 1890s to the 1920s, such as the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the Immigration Act of 1924, and seeing that they were strictly enforced.**

considerable strength. One of these is composed of corporation employers who desire to employ physical strength...at the lowest wage and who prefer a rapidly revolving labor supply at low wages to a regular supply of American wage earners at fair wages. The other is composed of racial groups in the United States who oppose all restrictive legislation because they want the doors left open for an influx of their countrymen regardless of the menace to the people of their adopted country.

Sound familiar? A couple months later, Congress passed the legislation, substantially tightening temporary national-origin quotas enacted in 1921. If labor leaders had misgivings about the new quotas, it was that the restrictions were too mild. A. Philip Randolph, black civil-rights leader and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, believed in zero immigration. Still, the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, benefited organized labor, and in some measure owed its existence to union advocacy. Many first- and second-generation immigrant workers subsequently joined unions as they assimilated into American society. And with restrictions in place, they could press for higher wages without fearing large future waves of immigration undermining their bargaining position. For four decades, spurred by the unions' Magna Carta, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, this was the overriding reality.

The 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 represented a pivotal shift in policy. Congress repealed national-origin quotas, making family reunification the main basis for admission. Although supporters had not intended to raise overall admissions—and gave their explicit assurances to that effect—the law did in fact lead to more admissions. Annual legal immigration to the United States over the following decade increased from around 300,000 to 400,000. Congress's application of the Eastern Hemisphere-nation preference system to the Western Hemisphere (1976) and combination of hemispheric ceilings into a worldwide quota (1978) contributed to a further rise to about 500,000 a year.

This trend exacerbated a related problem: illegal immigration. With family reunification now the dominant motive for obtaining permanent visas, persons from abroad increasingly broke our laws in order to join family and relatives already here. In 1978, a concerned Congress created a commission, headed by Notre Dame University President Rev.



Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY)

Theodore M. Hesburgh, to study the issue and provide recommendations. The commission's final report, released three years later, called for a series of measures designed to strike a balance between ending illegal immigration and enabling U.S. employers, especially

in the agricultural sector, to meet their labor needs.

It was now Congress's turn to work out a compromise. Led by Sen. Alan Simpson (R-WY) and Rep. Romano Mazzoli (D-KY), lawmakers put forth a proposal that reflected overriding concerns of the Hesburgh report. Labor leaders at first opposed any compromise that included an amnesty. "Illegal workers take jobs away from American workers and they undermine U.S. wages and working conditions," the AFL-CIO's Rudolph Oswald told a Senate committee. But in the end, as the Simpson-Mazzoli bill repeatedly stalled, resistance to amnesty by the unions, and ultimately lawmakers, wore down in order to achieve a compromise. Congress created amnesty *and* sanctions against employers who hired illegal immigrants. In the fall of 1986, the amnesty-for-sanctions tradeoff became law in the form of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA.

The law did not live up to its name. Roughly 3 million illegal immigrants—those who had been continuously here prior to 1982 and certain agricultural workers who had worked for at least 90 days prior to May 1, 1986—applied for a phased-in ad-

justment of legal status. About 2.7 million, about three-fourths of them Mexican, were approved for legal residence and eventual full citizenship. With less fanfare, lawmakers much later, in 2000, passed “late amnesty” legislation on behalf of unsuccessful applicants, with lawsuits legalizing (or putting plaintiffs on the road to legalization) those still not qualifying. All told, Congress has created six additional amnesties, of a general or nation-specific variety, on top of those contained in IRCA. But employer sanctions, even in the early years only fitfully enforced, became virtually irrelevant as time passed. In 1992 the federal government levied 1,063 fines on employers for hiring illegal aliens. By 2002 that number had plummeted to 13—a nearly 99 percent drop! Congress added fuel to the fire in 1990 by raising legal entry ceilings by roughly 40 percent and creating a “diversity” lottery to make up to 50,000 visas a year available to persons from ostensibly underrepresented nations the world over.

Illegal immigration, meanwhile, continued its climb. By the mid 90s, annual net growth of the nation’s illegal population had reached about 300,000. By the early part of this decade the average yearly rise was in the 400,000-to-500,000 range. The Washington, D.C.-based Pew Hispanic Center estimated that about 11.1 “unauthorized” (i.e., illegal) immigrants lived here as of March 2005, up from around 4 million in 1986. Some 56 percent of these persons had come from Mexico, and another 22 percent originated from elsewhere in Latin America. Given that such persons as a rule don’t announce their legal status, the figure might be well on the low side.

Organized labor saw a golden opportunity for

organizing. Here was a large and growing pool of unorganized migrant workers, many of them poorly paid and possessed of legitimate grievances against employers. Unions could bolster their declining relative share of the total U.S. work force—if only some new people were in charge.

### Enter the Sweeney Era

The Bronx-born John Sweeney was raised in a hothouse of Irish-ethnic labor progressivism. He joined his first union, a forerunner of the Service Employees, while in college in the 1950s. In 1976

Sweeney became head of New York City’s SEIU Local 32B. Four years later he had risen to become president of the international union.

Sweeney sought to remake the union into a model for union organizing and political activism. And he would do so by any means necessary. In the mid 1980s, he and his top aides (including future SEIU



**AFL-CIO President John Sweeney leads a rally for the United Farm Workers of America. Sweeney is a staunch advocate of mass immigration.**

President Andrew Stern) came up with an audacious street-agitprop campaign called “Justice for Janitors.” The union would organize office and hotel maintenance workers by forcing building management to require janitorial subcontractors to recognize the union. Demonstrators, mostly Hispanic immigrants, picketed buildings, blocked sidewalks, shouted abusive chants, and shook loaded canisters at ear-splitting volumes. This in-your-face campaign began in Denver and spread to cities nationwide, infuriating pedestrians but leaving its mark more than once in the form of union recognition. Whereas established industrial and craft unions were failing to gain members, and in many cases losing them, the Service Employees were picking up hundreds of thousands of workers. The success of this and other organizing methods sent a message:

Confrontation succeeds, and future membership lies south of the border.

By 1995 Sweeney had emerged as a logical heir to the AFL-CIO presidency. The Republicans had won control of both houses of Congress in the previous fall elections, and suddenly Democrats, the party of organized labor, seemed on the ropes. President Lane Kirkland was forced out in an internal coup. When the federation convened that October in New York City, Sweeney ran against interim President Thomas Donahue and won.

Once in office, Sweeney quickly moved the AFL-CIO several steps leftward. And part of the federation's new program was its outspoken advocacy for mass immigration. American workers, he insisted, would not lose out in the face of a huge influx of Third World newcomers. "The notion that immigrants are to blame for the deteriorating living standards of American low-wage workers must be clearly rejected," read an AFL-CIO policy resolution of the Sweeney regime. The federation found allies among ethnic and business activists, with immigration-restriction legislation now pending. Labor leaders helped to strip provisions such as mandatory Social Security number verification and strict limits on refugee admissions from the bill, whose original sponsor was Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Tex. Though such proposals, in fact, were based on sensible recommendations by the congressionally-chartered U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, lawmakers acceded to interest-group pressure and passed watered-down (albeit beneficial) legislation in 1996. In February 2000 the AFL-CIO Executive Council issued a statement announcing its opposition to IRCA employer sanctions and support for unconditional amnesty for illegal workers. Far from being an opportunistic

flip-flop, this statement was the culmination of a shift in the making since the mid 80s.

**Pro-Immigration Triumvirate**

Perceived self-interest shaped organized labor's earlier opposition to mass immigration. It now shaped its reversal. Union leaders no longer saw illegal dishwashers, cooks, landscapers, or construction laborers as competitors for our jobs. Instead, labor officials recast them as the heart and soul of their organizations' future, a great untapped resource. Unions effectively had joined the employer-ethnic politician alliance of which Samuel Gompers had warned many decades earlier.

The friendliness between labor and business is understandable, if rooted in opposite motives. Trade groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Restaurant Association support normalizing the immigration status of illegal workers. Randel Johnson, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's vice president on labor and immigration issues, for example, reacted favorably when the Bush

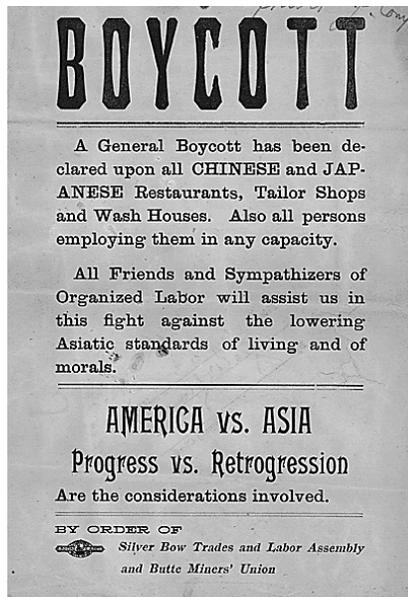
“**Unions have come to believe that Hispanic and other Third World immigrants can be organized into a coalition of “people of color,” so much the better to press legitimate workplace grievances. And they regularly put this conviction on the line.**”

administration unveiled its own guest-worker plan in January 2004. “We need a system of ‘earned targeted adjustment’ for undocumented workers that fill vital roles in the economy, which would enable them to achieve legal status,” he said. Union leaders, for their part, may continue to rail against “the corporations” in their press releases and convention speeches, but they are partners on immigration. The arrangement is mutually beneficial. Business gets the low-cost labor it seeks; labor gets the opportunity to boost membership and dues. They may be at odds over *how* to do this—the AFL-CIO vehemently rejects the sort of massive guest-worker legalization program supported by the Chamber of Commerce and the Change to Win unions—but they are in full

agreement that mass immigration is here to stay and should be expanded.

The alliance between unions and ethnic radicals, on the other hand, is a product of ideological compatibility. Each is an indispensable bloc within the Democratic Party, and has been instrumental in that party's sharp turn to the Left over the last dozen years or more. Each sees mass Third World immigration as a vehicle to promote progressive,

2003, for example, the AFL-CIO issued a statement "In Support of Immigration Reform." Its dozens of signers included unions such as the Teamsters and the Operating Engineers, plus a farrago of nonprofit organizations such as MALDEF, the Mexico Solidarity Network, the Hispanic Farmers Association of El Paso, the Tennessee Immigrant Rights Coalition, and the National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild. The



Organized labor sponsors annual May Day rallies in major urban areas to mobilize support for ethnic-activist causes. Today's labor-ethnic alliance views "immigrant rights" as "worker rights," which the May 1 rally poster (above right) makes clear. The "Boycott" poster from the early 1900s (above left) illustrates organized labor's concerns about mass immigration lowering labor standards and wages for American workers.

anti-business policies. In the process, the unions are underwriting this country's decomposition. For the ethnic advocacy groups, such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), are aggressive in filing lawsuits and organizing marches to promote immigration and linguistic separatism, especially where the endgame is inducing employer commitments to greater ethnic "diversity." Such organizations are going beyond progressive politics; they want semi-autonomous ethnic mini-nations on U.S. soil.

Unions have come to believe that Hispanic and other Third World immigrants can be organized into a coalition of "people of color," so much the better to press legitimate workplace grievances. And they regularly put this conviction on the line. In August

statement supported "a fair and realistic process to provide an adjustment of status for undocumented workers," and opposed "the expansion of existing temporary non-immigrant worker programs or the creation of any such new programs at this time." That's an odd way to define "reform."

The labor-ethnic alliance has been manifest in street action, not just manifestos. In 2001 the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the General Amnesty Coalition, and other groups co-sponsored a May Day March for Workers' Rights and March for Immigrant Rights. In October 2003, Sweeney welcomed illegal aliens to a pro-amnesty "freedom ride," a bus convoy that converged on Liberty State Park in New Jersey. And in the early spring of last year, Service Employees Local 1877 provided

security for a pair of massive rallies in Los Angeles on behalf of illegal immigrants. Such shows of force make clear that unions are ready to rumble with advocates of real immigration reform.

### Amnesty without End

Unions in this country have performed a 180-degree shift in the way they view immigration. Whereas they once saw high levels of immigration as a threat to the welfare of working Americans, they now see it as the workers' best hope. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Labor's unreserved support for amnesty, which lacks even the pretense of distinguishing legality from illegality. Of course, "amnesty" has become a highly unpopular word, which is why supporters prefer to use soothing euphemisms such as "regularization," "normalization," and "comprehensive reform." But the reality remains that such people see immigration to this country as a right, not a privilege. As such, for them, deportation, like restriction of admission, constitutes a denial of human rights. Their vision of America as an egalitarian catch-basin for the entire world has animated every single amnesty proposal, whether or not enacted into law. Unions, like other

immigration enthusiasts, refuse to acknowledge that each grant of amnesty only raises the expectation of future amnesties, demonstrating the wisdom of Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington's characterization of immigration as "self-perpetuating."

Organized labor has come to view immigrants as essential to its own institution-building. There is strength in numbers, and the numbers can add up very quickly if they originate from the world over. "We're always looking for opportunities for people to join unions. That's our number-one reason for working with immigrants," noted AFL-CIO spokeswoman Kathy Roeder a few years ago. More recently, Jim Gleason, a Colorado-based United

Brotherhood of Carpenters chieftain, defended his union's outreach program to illegal immigrants this way: "If you want to grow, you have to represent the people who are doing the work."

Union officials are looking out for themselves, all right, but not necessarily for rank-and-file members or the public at large. In a 2001 nationwide Zogby poll taken shortly before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, 60 percent of union households in this country thought amnesty was either a "bad" or "very bad" idea. And a recent *Time* magazine poll showed 63 percent of respondents from all walks of life considered illegal immigration a "very serious"

or "extremely serious" problem. Patriotism aside, Americans sense that a rapidly increasing labor pool depresses wages, especially at the entry level, a fear justified by extensive research by Harvard economist George Borjas.

Organized labor's strategy to ratchet up Third World immigration is ironically self-defeating. It is true that unions may acquire additional members and dues collections, a possibility to which the SEIU experience attests. But it is likewise true that unions will get a bumper crop of workers relatively unskilled, uneducated, and pos-

sessed of a poor command of the English language. In other words, these are *replaceable* workers, not in a good position to press their demands. Why should employers give in, knowing that they have a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of immigrants from which to draw? That is why despite continuing high levels of immigration, the unions' share of U.S. workers continues to slip. The nation as a whole, meanwhile, is paying a heavy price in the form of more job displacement of the native-born, further expansion of foreign-language enclaves, and more stage-managed political balkanization. That's not a legacy anyone, least of all union officials, should covet. ■

