

# American Labor's Surrender to Immigration

## *Roots of a historic reversal*

Book Review by David Simcox

Sometimes even the most obvious truths can be confounded by self-interested ideologues and dilettantes of political correctness.

Vernon Briggs describes expertly in *Immigration and American Unionism* how America's labor organizations, from the pre-civil war National Labor Union to today's AFL-CIO, have generally thrived in times of low or declining immigration and struggled in periods of mass immigration. Working people, millions of whom are not union members, have also thrived or struggled in lock step with the fortunes of unions, as shown in data on real wages and distribution of income, and in the current wage stagnation of our own mass immigration era.

For a century and a half leaders of American labor have recognized this connection. Masses of new workers imported at will by a U.S. government doing employers' bidding — or recruited by the employers themselves — have undercut union bargaining power, helped break strikes, and made organizing harder. These simple, obvious facts until now have underlain American Labor's consistent opposition to mass immigration.

Labor's willingness to proclaim that high immigration was bad for the American working man — unionized or not — was as compelling in its candor and accuracy as it was devoid of the conceits of political correctness. Samuel Gompers, himself an immigrant, had it right when

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he said "Immigration is, in its fundamental aspects, a labor problem." Even so Labor's concern more often than not has been either ignored or given only lip service by policy makers. The historical record of Labor's legislative victories from ending the Foreign Contract Labor law to the Chinese Exclusion Act to today's employer sanctions is a dismaying record of under-enforced mandates.

The economic interests that dominate politics at all levels of government more often get their way, not by overcoming unwelcome view points with reasoned debate, but by seeing to it that inconvenient issues such as immigration and the declining labor standards of American workers are kept off the agenda in the first place.

Briggs does not go into the strategy in detail, but his work reminds us that another book is needed to show how historically the business-dominated pro-immigration lobby has subtly co-opted the churches, charities, educators, ethnic groups, civil rights movement, internationalists, lots of well-intentioned but innocent Americans, and, most recently, even some labor leaders, in the prevailing ideology that immigration is pre-eminently a moral need, essential for the nation's spiritual and economic growth and demographic "success."

For Briggs, the much maligned restrictive immigration law of 1921 ushered in a golden age of American trade unionism that lasted until the 1965 Immigration Act reopened the doors to mass immigration. Between these two historic pieces of legislation the nearly fifty years of low immigration contributed to the rise of union membership — in numbers and as a percentage of the labor force — to its highest levels ever. Unions gained the most worker-friendly legislation they had ever know. Real wages expanded and income

### Immigration and American Unionism

by Vernon M.  
Briggs Jr.

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distribution moved toward greater balance.

Briggs' book could not be more timely. In the 1990s a radically new creature has been emerging in American labor history — a pro-immigration trade union movement, as startling as would be the emergence of the Republican party as the champion of redistributionist fiscal policy. Briggs is at his best in charting this weird turnabout. Organized Labor's changing priorities became apparent with the AFL-CIO's acquiescence in the 1990 immigration act, which increased legal immigration significantly, particularly in temporary worker categories. In 1996 Labor withheld its support for the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, whose stepped up deportations and limits on welfare to immigrants would probably have been hailed by Samuel Gompers as necessary measures to curb unfair competition by illegal workers and end implicit employment subsidies to employers who prefer low-wage legal immigrants.

The turnabout was completed in 1999 when the AFL-CIO made its first appeal for an end to the very employer sanctions it had led in demanding as far back as the early 1970s. Labor has since called for an amnesty for the up to eleven million illegal aliens who have accumulated since the 1986 amnesty, as many as seven million of whom are in the labor force.

How did the immigration reform movement's loss of one of its oldest co-belligerents come about? Briggs' analysis of the factors at work rings true. Civil rights and women's rights revolutions sensitized the AFL-CIO to more "inclusionary" approaches, a trend reinforced by the increasing clout of government employee unions within the federation. Major affiliated unions, such as the Service Employees and Hotel Workers, developed large Hispanic and immigrant constituencies that demanded more union involvement in immigrant issues. Labor had been losing membership in the 1970s and 1980s and seeking new numbers among immigrants became a survival strategy. Perhaps most persuasive to Labor was the demonstrated unwillingness of Washington to seriously enforce employer sanctions since their enactment in 1986 and to prevent the unfair job competition of illegals.

Briggs wonders, as will the reader, just how Labor's de facto surrender to continued illegal immigration will help increase unions' clout or improve the labor standards on those now working. Immigrants in the work place

might be inclined to join unions in return for Labor's solidarity with them. But will that be enough to make a difference if subsequent waves of illegals are to provide the strike breakers and pools of nonunion workers that strengthen employers' hands?

Labor's claimed organizing victories among immigrants in services, construction, and light manufacturing often amount to little more than the replacement of unions that once represented well-paid workers, but which were obliterated by floods of low-wage immigrants, with new, largely immigrant unions earning half the pay of the 1980s. Briggs is clear about Labor's cruel dilemma:

*Organized labor is at a crossroads. It can seek an expedient course and embrace mass immigration for political advantage, which it seems to be doing. But if it actually does so, it will have abandoned its traditional moral role as the advocate for the economic well-being of American workers. It cannot have it both ways.*

The author, who has spent much of his professional life thinking about declining unionism, offers a cogent and ambitious plan of action for improving the fortunes of labor and of the millions of working Americans who have benefited from its existence. The plan calls for a mix of legislative and regulatory changes in immigration and labor policies.

For Labor, Briggs would have far better enforcement of labor standards at the work place and reforms in labor-management legislation to end state "open-shop" laws and simplify and speed up union representation decisions in all industries.

His program for immigration will sound familiar and heartening to reformers: Adopt the precepts of the Jordan commission to reduce legal immigration and deemphasize family reunification; put refugees under an overall immigration ceiling; reform a seriously out-of-control political asylum process; and finally, begin serious enforcement of employer sanctions based on fraud-proof identification systems.

Labor's surrender to the mass-immigration coalition is a serious blow to immigration reform and to the dignity of American workers, but it need not be fatal. As always, there will be unions that do not follow AFL-CIO's lead. The refusal of many unionists to follow the federation's endorsement of the pro-immigration, Hispanic nationalist

candidate Villaraigosa in Los Angeles' June mayoral election is an important display of resistance. Briggs' book is an essential education for those who care about this issue and its implications for the country. •