Labor-led Immigration Restriction

Book review
by Wayne Lutton

The context within which popular demands for the restriction of Asian immigration were made in the last century is little understood by contemporary Americans. Too often dismissed simply as outbreaks of "nativism" or "racism," a more careful consideration of this chapter of our history reveals that it was free labor who led the campaign to end large-scale Chinese (and later Japanese) immigration. In time, organized labor, in the person of Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor, came to endorse a sharp restriction of immigration from European sources as well.

Alexander Saxton is one of the first historians to reexamine these events. The UCLA professor conducted original research among primary documents housed at the California State Library at Sacramento, the California Historical Society in San Francisco, as well as the libraries of San Francisco, UC-Berkeley and UCLA. His book, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, was published a quarter-century ago and has only now been reprinted by the University of California Press. For the reader wishing to learn why Asian immigration was curtailed in the late 19th century, this is a good place to begin your inquiry.

Migrating from the East to the West coast, especially after the end of our Civil War, many Americans and recently-arrived immigrants, found themselves competing for work in the mines, on the railroads, in construction and industry, against Chinese workers who were paid anywhere from one-quarter to one-twelfth of what had been the prevailing wage. West Coast businessmen contracted with Chinese labor bosses to provide set numbers of workers, who were then shipped over to the United States on steam ships often as not owned by their future U.S. employers. Once ashore in California, the newly-arrived Chinese workers came under the control of what were known as The Six Companies--Chinese syndicates that controlled the Chinese workers and their communities. Wages were paid to the Companies, and no Chinaman could return home without the express permission of the Company to which he was enrolled.

Although the Chinese in America worked for a fraction of what free labor demanded, there was no shortage of takers in a China that even then was overpopulated and suffered from periodic famines and chronic political instability. The goal of the "coolies" was to earn what they could in America and then take their savings back to China.

American capitalists welcomed the steady supply of cheap foreign labor. They argued, as does Microsoft chairman Bill Gates today, that their businesses would fail or be forced to move overseas if they were not permitted to import Chinese workers.

Saxton estimates that by the early 1870s, Chinese constituted at least a quarter of the labor force in California, playing a prominent role in agriculture, heavy construction, and manufacturing. As the author remarks in his Introduction, "clearly, the importation of indentured workers from an area of relatively depressed living standards constituted a menace to a society developing, at least after 1865, on the basis of free wage labor."

Workingmen and their families came to recognize that they

The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California

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***Wayne Lutton**, Ph.D. is associate editor of* THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.

were caught in an economic vice. "The main carriers of the movement" to restrict further Chinese immigration, the author explains,"were those who came in competition with Chinese or feared possible exposure to such competition. These fears, based on the low living standard of imported Cantonese laborers and on the contract system of their importation, were by no means imaginary. A more or less free labor force was being pressed into competition with indentured labor. On the other hand, the main defenders of Chinese importation were to be found among those who benefitted from the employment of contract gang labor."

And who most benefitted from the indentured labor from Asia? “It is scarcely surprising,” Professor Saxton observes, “that California’s new Republican elite should largely have coincided with the users of Chinese labor. Defense of the Chinese on economic grounds (though certainly the Republicans mounted such a defense) held the disadvantage of exposing their own interest. And here it was not so much a matter of concealment, for they believed their interest legitimate; it was rather than of seeking some higher ground than private profit.”

Saxton goes on to relate how the special business interests launched a public relations campaign somewhat ironically patterned after the anti-slavery crusade of the Abolitionists. Far from admitting that they wanted to use cheap foreign labor as a sledge hammer to drive down the wages of free working men and women, they instead invoked the Declaration of Independence and the Bible, asserting it was anti-American and anti-Christian to place any limits on immigration.

In his concluding chapter, the author recounts how, by the late 19th Century, organized labor came to see unrestricted immigration-- from whatever source--as a threat to the living standards of people already here. As early as 1889, unionists in Boston called for a fifteen year moratorium on all immigration. Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor challenged other union leaders to have the courage to do what was in labor’s best interest: lobby for federal legislation to end large-scale immigration.

The Indispensable Enemy makes for fascinating reading. What we learn here is that demands for immigration restriction came from the grass roots after American workers learned that mass immigration had severe negative wage effects, which remains true today. This Spring witnessed what amounted to a replay in the ongoing campaign to restrict immigration, with big business uniting with particular ethnic, religious, and legal interests to abort efforts to enact limits on legal immigration. The battle first joined by workers on the West Coast in the 1860s continues. □