

TIME FOR A MORE RADICAL IMMIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENT

By: David Bacon - reprinted from the American Prospect

In Worthington, Iowa, a federal prosecutor gets a grand jury indictment against Braulio Pereyra-Gabino, union vice-president at the local Swift meatpacking plant. He's accused of not turning his undocumented members in to Homeland Security. In Arizona, Gov. Janet Napolitano signs a draconian immigration enforcement bill, criminalizing work for those without papers and ordering state agents to enforce the prohibition with a vengeance. Since Congress wouldn't pass the recent Senate bill with the same sanctions, she says Arizona has no choice.

The Senate's failure is used as well in Prince William County, Virginia, to justify a local ordinance ordering all public officials to check immigration papers, even teachers, nurses and librarians. They're forbidden to help anyone lacking them. Meanwhile, immigration agents continue detaining and deporting people by the hundreds in workplace and community raids around the country.

Some DC supporters of the recent Senate bill are still floundering about what to do in the wake of its failure. Outside the beltway, though, the immediate need is obvious. Organize and fight back.

Outside Washington a movement capable of doing that is growing. You can see it, not just in the million people who marched in Los Angeles twice in one day. Last May Day in tiny Bridgeton, NJ, and Kennett Square, PA, unions and progressive activists walked alongside immigrant mothers wheeling children in strollers, fighting down the fear that deportation might separate their families.

Everywhere in this country immigrant communities are growing, defying the raids intended to terrorize them - organizing and speaking out. This movement is a powerful response to Congress' inability to pass a pro-immigrant reform bill. It can and will resist and stop the raids, but its potential power is far greater. Like the civil rights movement four decades ago, the political upsurge in immigrant communities makes a profound demand - not simply for visas, but for freedom and equality.

It questions our values.

Will local communities share political power with newcomers? Will workers be able to organize to turn low-paying labor into real jobs? Will children go to school knowing their teachers value their ability to speak two or three languages as a mark of their intelligence, not their inferiority?

Those who fear change are right about one thing. Once we answer these questions, we will not be the same country.

Social change requires a social movement. Rights are only extended in the United States when people demand it. Congress will pass laws guaranteeing rights for immigrants as it did for workers in 1934, or African Americans in 1966 - when it has no choice but to recognize that movement's strength.

In the south of the 1960s, courageous civil rights activists stopped lynching and defied bombings, while registering people to vote and going to jail to overturn unjust Jim Crow laws. They won allies, from unions to students to artists, who helped give the civil rights movement its radical, transformative character. They led our country out of McCarthyism.

Today the movement for immigrant rights and equality confronts choices in strategy and alliances that recall those of the civil rights era. As SNCC and CORE had to move past the accommodations of Booker T. Washington, the immigrant rights movement has to move past the failed strategy of the last three years.

Washington lobbyists have treated local communities as troops to back up conservative beltway legislation. They've promoted a strategic alliance with corporations, whose main interest was converting the flow of migrants into a regulated source of cheap labor, and with an administration using raids to pressure immigrant communities and bust unions. DC strategists tried to appease the right by agreeing to anti-immigrant provisions that robbed their bill of the support of those communities they claimed it was supposed to benefit.

Pointing in a different direction, many community-based coalitions and grassroots groups outside the beltway have made proposals that start from a human and labor rights perspective. They would give the undocumented real residence rights, as the Immigration Reform and Control Act did in 1986. New migrants would be able to live as normal community members, rather than as exploited guest workers. A demilitarized Mexican border would look like the one with Canada. Immigrants would regain due process rights, which after eight years of George Bush, everyone else needs too. Work would be decriminalized, and labor rights enforced for all workers, immigrants included. Families could reunite in the U.S. without waiting years. U.S. policy would stop reinforcing poverty abroad as an inducement for corporate investment, especially in those countries sending migrants here.

The mainstream press amplifies the voices of a small anti-immigrant minority, and a conservative Congress kowtows to them. But most polls show that immigrants and non-immigrants alike believe in basic fairness and equality, and are willing to consider these and similar ideas. The problem is that without a powerful movement they remain just that - ideas.

Building that movement in communities, churches and unions requires a change in alliances as well as program. Its natural allies include African

Americans, whose experience of racism and economic desperation is similar to that of immigrants. Unions are already important allies, and most opposed the Senate bill. Immigrant workers are already more active in union drives than most sections of the workforce.

Displaced and unemployed workers can also be allies of immigrants, instead of competitors in the job market. Today many are manipulated by the anti-immigrant hysteria of right wing talk show hosts like Lou Dobbs, because Washington lobbyists won't antagonize their corporate sponsors by criticizing the free market agenda. Yet hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers are victims of the same free trade agreements that cause migration. NAFTA and CAFTA create poverty in Mexico and Central America to benefit corporate investors. That poverty drives people to migrate north. Opposing the offshoring of jobs goes hand in hand with defending the rights of the migrants free trade produces.

The DC strategy pitted immigrants against unemployed workers through guest worker schemes, raids and criminalizing work. Coalition building brings people together in an anti-corporate alliance based, not in Washington where lobbyists dominate the agenda, but in communities with a different set of interests.

Rights for immigrants at work and in neighborhoods can be paired with the right to jobs and federal employment programs. Since 2004 Houston Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee has proposed this kind of tradeoff - real legal status for 12 million undocumented people together with federal support for job creation and training in Black and Chicano communities with high unemployment. She's rejected guest worker programs as a corporate giveaway, hurting both immigrants, who are denied normal rights, and low-wage workers forced into competition with them. Some unions, like UNITE HERE Local 2 in San Francisco, are building alliances by demanding that employers hire more African Americans, while defending the rights of immigrants already in the workforce.

Similarly, workers in unions, immigrants included, need labor law reform and enforcement. Many May Day marchers demanded not just legal immigration status, but the right to organize to raise their poverty-level wages. Immigrant janitors sitting in the streets of Houston, hotel housekeepers enforcing living wage laws in Emeryville, CA, and meatpacking workers organizing against company terror tactics at Smithfield Foods in Tarheel, NC, are as much a part of the immigrant rights movement as those marching for visas.

A coalition that can fight for these demands has its roots in immigrant rights groups, local unions, church congregations and college campuses. The Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, representing Wal-Mart, Marriott and other corporate giants, will not fight for these demands. Nor will the rightwing Manhattan Institute. But many national organizations will. The

AFL-CIO and most unions in the Change to Win Federation will support these demands. So will the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Mexican American Political Association and the American Friends Service Committee.

National groups can provide resources, but to build a movement on the ground, we might study the experience of the young activists in the south in the 1960s, and the radicals in the industrial workplaces of the 1930s. Could students be organized to go to Hazelton, Tucson and Prince William County, to provide support for communities challenging raids and local anti-immigrant laws? Could civil disobedience be as important to their tactics as it was to those who sat in at lunch counters or organized illegal unions at the Ford Rouge plant?

Immigrant communities don't need another bad Congressional compromise. They need a freedom agenda. It can be a program like the Freedom Charter of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement - a vision to fight for. It can be a bill in Congress, like Sheila Jackson Lee's, forcing politicians to consider an alternative to guest workers and more raids. And it can be a mobilizer, drawing people to picket lines in front of the ICE detention centers holding their family members.

There people can sing new Spanish or Arabic words to the old anti-slavery anthem: "Let my people go."

For more articles and images on immigration, see
<http://dbacon.igc.org/Imigrants/imigrants.htm>

See also the photodocumentary on indigenous migration to the US,
Communities Without Borders (Cornell University/ILR Press, 2006)
http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/cup_detail.taf?ti_id=4575

See also *The Children of NAFTA, Labor Wars on the U.S./Mexico Border*
(University of California, 2004)
<http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/9989.html>
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