

Overview: Migrant Labor and Contested Public Space

Editors

WHEN THE ISSUE OF UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS ARISES IN THE UNITED STATES, THE Mexican border dominates public discussion due to media depictions and an intense anti-immigrant lobby. How immigration policy and the tenor of this polarizing issue will change under the Obama administration is still unclear. President Obama's campaign promise to put millions of undocumented immigrants on the pathway to citizenship may be postponed until his second term, disappointing Latino leaders and immigration advocates. Early signs, according to Adalberto Aguirre, are that employer sanctions and work verification will be promoted, along with methods for border security that do not necessarily criminalize immigrants. However, economic crises often strengthen pressures to deport undocumented workers and to emphasize law enforcement over worker and human rights. As Adalberto Aguirre, Jr., and Jennifer K. Simmers show, the 700-mile fence Congress approved along the U.S.–Mexico border has become a monument in the built environment that shields politically acceptable behavior (e.g., U.S. citizens) from threats (e.g., an invasion of Mexican border crossers). Border crossers from Mexico into the United States are perceived as illegal or illegitimate. Thus conceived, a militarized border takes the form of National Guard postings in “Operation Jump Start,” pilot-less drone aircraft, and other variations on an electronic battlefield. Stopping the movement of Mexican bodies across this transnational and transcultural space robs it of the opportunity to perform as a cultural expression for crossers and residents.

Today, even the AFL-CIO maintains that such barriers will not discourage impoverished people from attempting undocumented entry, but will instead push the problem from one location to another. For nearly a century, mainstream labor organizations and the parties representing them associated themselves with nationalist principles and an imperial agenda, refusing to organize the immigrant sector of the labor force. Indeed, business unionism constituted a core constituent of the anti-immigrant lobby. Tanya Basok's article documents the shift of organized labor to a moderately pro-migrant position. Part of the change is accounted for by the rise of individuals to positions of power within unions whose families have experienced the humiliations associated with undocumented status. There has also been a growing recognition that it is in the interest of unions, whose clout has

diminished markedly over the last three decades, to protect this growing segment of the workforce.

Loren Redwood's article on immigrant workers in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast reveals the limited reach of labor's new direction. Bush administration policies aimed at rebuilding the Deep South after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita lured low-wage Latino workers (documented and undocumented) with promises of plentiful and lucrative employment in cleanup and construction projects. The article details the significant demographic implications of this policy, as well as the appalling work conditions and criminal employer practices it facilitated. Carol Cleaveland and Laura Kelly's essay, "Shared Social Space and Strategies to Find Work," demonstrates the tensions that arose in the city of Freeport due to an influx of Mexican migrants hoping to find work in landscaping and construction as part of New Jersey's housing and development boom. As in other metropolitan areas, these day laborers form part of the informal labor market. Lacking hiring halls and other union protections, they congregate in public spaces and are subject to harassment from hostile private citizens and law enforcement. Like Redwood's piece, this article covers activist strategies to support the rights of immigrant workers.

Gregory Maney and Margaret Abraham discuss the problem of NIMBYism—the informal policing of local physical and symbolic boundaries to maintain places of domination and control—in terms of the conflicts faced by community-based organizations in New York that were attempting to support Asian immigrant victims/survivors of domestic violence and to create worker centers for immigrant day laborers from Mexico. The authors discuss cultural and structural obstacles that impede efforts of community-based organizations to provide neighborhood-friendly services to these vulnerable populations. They suggest strategies that advocates might adopt to minimize the negative impact of NIMBY movements that engage in threats, intimidation, isolation, marginalization, and violence against immigrants inhabiting public places and using publicly supported services.

In their analysis, John Horton, Linda Shaw, and Manuel H. Moreno show that like the working poor generally, immigrants are among the most likely to be sanctioned for noncompliance in the Los Angeles County GAIN (Greater Avenues of Independence) welfare-to-work program. The program is significant since only the total welfare caseloads in the states of California and New York exceed those of Los Angeles County. In an overall strategy of survival among the poor, GAIN represents a fallback means of support. The largely unskilled workers in the paid labor market who are compelled to seek such aid resist welfare reform measures whenever program requirements make their struggle for a better life more difficult. Unlike the welfare rights movements of the 1960s that led to progressive changes, today collective patterns of everyday resistance are individual and personal. The authors argue that all current welfare reform measures should aim toward the development of a national strategy to reduce and eliminate poverty as a constitutional right.

Shabnam Koirala-Azad discusses Nepali social action in the context of immigration, transnationalism, and diaspora. The article charts an approach to development aid that jettisons a reliance on individual self-interest, which is often associated with corrupt practices and ongoing dependency in the recipient country. The author details barriers to sustainable transnational cooperation and the shortcomings of hometown associations, whose focus on remittances often represents the most productive and practical links of individuals in the diaspora to the home country. Koirala-Azad examines how a San Francisco Bay Area-based organization, Kartabya, sought to overcome these limits in its relations with an environmental organization and a health network in Nepal. These activists hope that their work can serve as a template for social change that seeks to fashion a more equal global structure.