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The New Urban Immigrant Work Force: Innovative Models for Labor Organizing.

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The New Urban Immigrant Work Force: Innovative Models for Labor Organizing. Edited by Sarumathi Jayaraman and Immanuel Ness. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2005. 186 pp. ISBN 0-7656-1533-9, \$64.95 (cloth); ISBN 0-7656-1534-7, \$23.95 (paper).

Recent debates surrounding immigration reform have become increasingly contentious, with a wave of pro-immigrant rallies juxtaposed against calls for tougher border enforcement. Many of these discussions are focused on the economic impact of immigrants. The foreign-born have always been relegated to the lowest-paying and most marginal occupations; in the United States, the Industrial Revolution was fed by eastern and southern European factory workers and by the Chinese, who built much of our railroad system. Agribusiness and consumers alike have long benefited from low-wage migrant workers, drawn mainly from Mexico. Since its inception, organized labor has struggled with how best to incorporate these workers into the movement. While some unions have embraced them, others have enacted exclusionary policies, focusing their attention solely on native-born, skilled white men.

In their edited volume, *The New Urban Immigrant Work Force*, Sarumathi Jayaraman and Immanuel Ness, along with a number of collaborators, explore the working lives of immigrants employed in New York City's low-wage service sector and the challenges they pose for unions. Because of the range of occupations and immigrant groups examined in the book, it is worthwhile to provide a brief overview of the research before discussing its strengths and weaknesses.

Some of the chapters focus explicitly on the economic conditions of immigrant employment. The foreign-born have always felt strong pressures to return a portion of their earnings to their homeland, and their ability to do so has been shaped by the labor market they are embedded in. In the working-class Peruvian community Alex Julca examines, the uneven availability of employment and persistent low wages often make it difficult for workers to meet the hopes and expectations of family members back home. Diditi Mitra documents how a decline in compensation to taxi drivers in New York City led to the replacement of native-born drivers by immigrants, including Punjabi

Indians, who use their networks to facilitate the movement of new arrivals into this occupation.

The unique circumstances surrounding immigrant employment often require new and innovative strategies on the part of unions. Immanuel Ness's account of efforts to organize grocery store workers focuses on the important role played by community groups. These organizations, with their networks among activists, allow the union to engage in broader tactics that unite workers who would otherwise remain isolated in small shops. Jayaraman and Ness draw on older models of membership recruitment to identify some effective strategies for organizing low-wage immigrant workers. They are particularly interested in worker centers, which are useful for building collective identity among those employed in highly volatile industries like the garment trade. The importance of solidarity is also central in Jayaraman's account of team-based organizing. By mobilizing immigrants in groups with their own leaders, the union fosters a sense of empowerment among the workers.

An especially challenging occupational group to organize is domestic workers, who are exempt from traditional labor laws regarding organizing. Ai-jen Poo and Eric Tang document how, despite these obstacles, women have joined together to build a legal, political, and social network uniquely suited to their working conditions. Monika Batra extends this analysis with an in-depth account of an organization of South Asian domestic providers, which was able to effectively use legal services to improve members' working conditions. In the final chapter, Jayarama examines how the Hotel and Restaurant Union (now UNITE-HERE) turned community support for food service workers displaced after the terrorist attack of 9/11 into an industry-wide organizing drive. The tactics the union has employed are far-reaching, from justice-themed campaigns to the creation of an employee-owned restaurant.

Given the diversity of circumstances surrounding immigrants, can any general lessons be drawn? One theme underlying much of the research is the importance of empowerment. Regardless of their origin, occupation, gender, or racial identity, it is clear that workers themselves must be at the forefront of struggles to improve their working conditions. Substantively, this means that external advocacy groups, including unions, cannot dictate issues and tactics. For example, both Jayarama and Batra document how labor can be

weakened when lawyers, with their monopoly over specialized legal knowledge, come to dominate workplace struggles. Immigrants' dependence on litigation can reduce their sense of efficacy and atomize, rather than collectivize, the movement. As Jayarama and Ness argue, unions must also recognize that traditional organizing tactics, particularly reliance on National Labor Relations Board certification elections, do little to empower immigrant workers and are, at best, ineffective at building a grassroots movement.

What, then, are unions to do? How are they to motivate workers who have so much to lose (legally, economically, and socially) to take on leadership roles in the movement? Overall, it is apparent that building community-based organizing campaigns is essential. Immigrants employed by small grocers had success when the union and community coalitions joined forces to organize a series of boycotts against hostile owners. Worker centers are also part of this approach, but as Jayaraman and Ness note, they cannot serve as a substitute for a grassroots organization. Building teams of immigrant organizers and leaders also creates a sense of solidarity among workers. Reflecting this emphasis on community work, the tactics used to organize workers are diverse, from boycotts and other traditional social movement strategies to political campaigns that emphasize social justice.

Despite the numerous contributions made by this volume, I do have a couple of general concerns. First, there is surprisingly little effort to link the growing importance of the recent wave of immigrants to earlier periods of foreign-born unionization. Lest we forget, the Industrial Revolution in this country was driven by numerous non-English-speaking immigrants. The rise of the CIO unions was prompted in large part by the unwillingness of the AFL to organize unskilled workers, particularly those from other countries. Not only were these immigrants the foundation of the industrial union movement, they spurred a number of innovative organizing strategies, including the sit-down strike. Although there are clear differences between the immigrant workers of today and those of yesteryear, it is worthwhile to recall the lessons of the past.

Additionally, like most analysts of the labor movement today, the authors in this volume largely concern themselves with how unions can bring new members, here immigrants, into the movement. The wish to reverse unions' declining numbers is understandable. However, given the unfortunate truth that organizing failures will most likely outnumber successes for some time to come, particularly among immigrant workers, it

would make sense for union advocates to devote at least some attention to ways in which the labor movement can be effective even in the absence of numerical strength. From the eight-hour day to child labor laws, historically unions have often benefited the entire working class, including unorganized workers. Even apparent organizing failures are not always without redeeming value. Today, many unionization efforts are thwarted by concessions employers grant to their workers. The mere act of trying to organize may thereby achieve important gains for workers. While these gains do not represent an ultimate solution to workplace concerns, and may quickly be revoked if they are not supported by a strong union, they may be a first step in demonstrating the power of collective bargaining. Reconceptualizing unions in a way that acknowledges and values important *indirect* contributions like these may be helpful in leveraging their power to help workers like the immigrants who comprise much of the service sector in New York City.

Overall, however, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the current challenges facing immigrants as well as the impact of immigration on the future of the American labor movement. While important to scholars and unionists specifically interested in these issues, it may be even more useful in the classroom. Written in easily accessible prose, it is a work I would recommend to instructors of labor studies, stratification, and immigrant-themed courses.

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L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement. By Ruth Milkman. xiii, 244 pp. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. ISBN 978-0-87154-635-7, \$24.95 (paperback).

In the Preface to *L.A. Story*, Ruth Milkman describes the book as "a valentine to Los Angeles, the city so many love to hate." The use of the term "valentine" is instructive for understanding what follows. A "valentine," after all, is the ultimate symbol of romantic hope, hope that sometimes seeks to transcend both reason and logic.

The central concern of this study is a historical discussion of the past and present state of unionization in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (hence, the title). The principal characters in this drama