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L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement.

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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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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

are the region's labor force, which is becoming increasingly immigrant-dominated (hence, the subtitle). But the script has a critical omission in the plot line. The post-1965 revival of mass immigration in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the nation has not been the product of spontaneous generation. The missing link between local unionization and the local labor force is the instrumental role played by immigration policy at the national level over this time span. Without the inclusion of this powerful influence on outcomes, the reader is left with an excellent description of *what* is happening but no understanding about *why*. Immigration is, after all, a policy-driven phenomenon.

In the historical discussion, Milkman details how the business community and the local government of Los Angeles began the twentieth century by making the city the citadel of the "open shop" movement and a bastion of anti-unionism. Nevertheless, as a result of aggressive organizing efforts during the Depression years of the 1930s and the massive expansion of defense-related industries throughout southern California during the war years of the 1940s, Los Angeles had by the mid-1950s become one of the most highly unionized metropolitan areas in the nation. In 1955, 37% of its non-agricultural labor force was unionized—a figure above the national level of 35% for the same year. Beginning in the late 1950s, however, a sharp reversal in the trend of union membership commenced, both locally and nationally. By 2004, union density had plummeted to 15% in Los Angeles and 13% nationally.

With one notable exception, the author identifies all of the usual suspects to explain the rapid decline in union membership over the past 50 years: the emergence of political leaders at the national level who were hostile to unionism; the demonstrated weaknesses of prevailing labor law as a bulwark to protect labor organizing; the strengthening of the tactics used by business to discourage unionization; the shift in industrial production trends from goods production to service provision, which has altered national employment patterns; the deregulation of the trucking industry; the introduction of an array of labor-saving technologies; and the advent of globalization pressures (such as a growing flood of imported goods, the presence of which dampens domestic firms' ability to accommodate cost increases that might influence prices, and an increasing reliance on job out-sourcing).

The one "usual suspect" that is omitted from Milkman's discussion is any specific discussion of the impact immigration policy has had on the supply of low-skilled workers since the 1960s. The nation's immigration policies and the lack

of enforcement of these laws over these years are never discussed directly. Indeed, any consideration of the swelling effect of immigration policy on the supply of labor as a factor that might impede union organizing and limit union bargaining power is largely rationalized away. Although acknowledging immigrants' mounting presence over this time span, the author asserts that "the immigrant influx" is "more of a *consequence* than a *cause* of de-unionization" (p. 107, emphasis in the original text) in both Los Angeles and the nation over this period.

Her explanation is that in the immediate wake of the union movement's collapse in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, the high-wage system for low-skilled workers also collapsed. It is alleged (but not proven) that the former workers in these industries simply moved on "to greener pastures." To fill the void, since there was still a demand for many of these occupations, immigrants—mostly illegal immigrants—moved in during the 1980s and 1990s. This presumes, of course, that they were not already there in large numbers. But they were. By 1978, President Jimmy Carter had already identified illegal immigration as a "crisis issue" and had proposed a comprehensive legislative program to combat it (including sanctions on employers who hire illegal immigrants). Congress responded by creating the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, chaired by the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh. The Commission, in turn, found that illegal immigration at the time was "out of control." Nowhere were there more illegal immigrants already in the country than in Southern California. Indeed, throughout the 1970s, Cesar Chavez was leading the vocal attack on illegal immigration and demanding that the federal government get illegal immigrants out of the labor market because they were undermining his organizing efforts in California. So there was no void to be filled; there was just an available alternative source of labor to be tapped, expanded, and exploited.

It is this same dubious conclusion of a benign impact drawn by Milkman that has led several of the nation's major unions in recent years to depart from the historic position of organized labor favoring immigration restrictions and enforcement. Tragically, these unions have now joined with business lobbyists to support the pro-immigrant policy agenda. Milkman's study gives intellectual support to that policy turnabout.

Abandoning the interests of the vast majority of American workers today to curry organizing support from immigrant workers (many of whom are illegal immigrants) is an unlikely way to garner widespread public support for unionism. In the past, organized labor's advocacy of restrictive im-

migration policies was seen to be congruent with the best interests of American workers in general. But with some key labor leaders now publicly advocating such things as mass amnesties, guest worker programs, repeal of employer sanctions, no border fences, and the like, the alliance between unionism and the general public is imperiled. These leaders—all of whose views are championed by Milkman—make these unions seem like just another special interest group with no devotion to core principles for bettering conditions in the broader society of which they are a part.

Responding to the declining state of unionism in Los Angeles, several local unions and their national leaders made a conscientious decision in the 1990s to attempt to re-organize four industries that still had a significant employment presence in this new era. Each industry had been extensively organized during the heyday of unionism in Los Angeles but had since become largely de-unionized. These industries were women's garment making (led by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees, UNITE); short-haul trucking (led by the Communication Workers of America, CWA, after the Teamsters' union, which had earlier represented such workers, declined interest); residential construction (led by the Carpenters' Union, which sought to organize drywall workers, who had now become a dominant component of this craft); and building services (led by the Service Employees International Union, SEIU, which is now the nation's largest union in membership and which was focusing on re-organizing janitors in particular).

The events surrounding this organizing campaign are carefully documented by the author. But in the final analysis, the best that can be said is that the results are mixed.

The efforts in the women's garment industry and in the short-haul trucking industry were a failure. The organizing drives in residential construction and in the building services industries did succeed in gaining union recognition, enlarging union membership rolls, and, in most instances, securing first contracts. But the terms of the contracts that resulted from both of these "successful" drives are acknowledged to have been significantly worse than were the wages and benefits available decades earlier, when the workers had been unionized. Yes, a toehold was re-established, but the significance of the union presence is still open to question. The goal of union leaders may be to increase union density, but the bottom line for workers is the ability of their unions to make tangible differences in their wages, benefits, and job security. The verdict on that is still out.

The elephant in the room when it comes to the Los Angeles low-skilled labor market is the issue of illegal immigration. This topic is largely downplayed in this otherwise excellent study. Every effort is made to be politically correct. The legally correct term—"illegal alien"—is never used; nor is the euphemistic equivalent—"illegal immigrant"—in any of the discussion. Rather, deceptive phrases like "undocumented workers," "immigrant workers without papers," and "Latino immigrants from Mexico" are used to mask what is really at issue: the presence of a shadow army of workers who are not even supposed to be in the country, to say nothing of being available for hire. But they are—*en masse*—and they significantly affect the labor market environment. The book contains no explicit statement about what should be done to address the issue of illegal immigration. Without one, it is simply impossible to say much in a meaningful way about the future prospects for unionism in Los Angeles.

The author is a sociologist, and it is largely to the sociology literature that she turns to draw support for her conclusions. It is in this context that she is able to argue that "immigrant workers may be easier to organize than their native counterparts" (p. 133). This is because, she contends, they have stronger social networks at the workplace than native-born workers; they are more closely identified with class-based collective organizations; and they share "the experience of stigmatization" of being an immigrant that supposedly gives them a greater sense of unity.

Unfortunately, economists' views of how mass immigration has affected the labor market since 1965 are largely ignored in this study. Such key issues as the wage suppression of jobs for unskilled workers, the incidence of poverty, unemployment levels, widening income disparity, and the out-migration of native-born workers (African-Americans in particular) from Los Angeles are simply ignored. These considerations are critical to answering such questions as what difference it would make if the low-skilled workers in Los Angeles were in a union.

Although this study does have serious limitations, Milkman has addressed *the* issue that no longer can be avoided: are unions to be part of the future for low-skilled workers and, if so, can they make a difference without major changes in the state of American immigration policy?

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