Cornell University
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ILRReview

Volume 61 | Number 3 Article 83

April 2008

Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights

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Keywords
immigrant rights

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Another problem is an increased emphasis on merit aid, which could come at the expense of need-based aid. Among the more novel suggestions in the book is Ehrenberg's proposal that more measures of the volume of low-income student enrollments be incorporated in *U.S. News and World Report*'s much-consulted rankings of colleges and universities. That addition, he argues, could channel colleges' competitiveness into efforts to improve low-income students' enrollment and graduation rates.

This collection of articles provides an excellent overview of the challenges facing students from low-income families, evaluates potential policies, and highlights avenues for future research. For all students, researchers, and policy-makers interested in higher education, it is a must read.

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Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights. By Jennifer Gordon. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 384 pp. ISBN 0-674-01524-X, $27.95 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-674-01524-1, $16.95 (paper).

In *Suburban Sweatshops,* Jennifer Gordon presents a moving account of empowerment and grass-roots organizing of the most vulnerable in our society—undocumented workers—and describes the transformation of a legal clinic into a participatory, member-run workers' center. The book chronicles the development of the Workplace Project, the non-profit organization that Gordon founded in suburban Hempstead, New York. It began in 1992 during a period of expanding immigration, and within a few years it confronted a harsh anti-union backlash. The Project addressed workplace abuse and exploitation of immigrant workers through legal representation. More significantly, however, it promoted effective community building along with political and collective action among disenfranchised Latinos.

Gordon begins by exposing readers to the daily struggles of immigrants employed in the low-wage and informal sectors of the economy, where substandard wages and working conditions are the norm for the undocumented, and more egregious exploitation and abuse are not unusual. She effectively portrays the sweatshop conditions that exist even outside of urban centers. These workers' dream of earning enough to return to their home countries with savings sufficient to buy a house vanishes quickly under the harsh economic realities of miserable wages and a high cost of living. Two jobs are needed just to survive in this context where the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs are reserved for immigrants. Not only poverty and humiliation, but significantly higher workplace injury and fatality rates are borne by immigrant workers. Along with other statistics, the book cites National Academy of Sciences data indicating that Latino immigrants die on the job at a 250% higher rate than average workers in the United States. Regardless of working conditions, virtually all of the undocumented face complications from not having appropriate legal documentation. The consequences include workplace precariousness, inability to acquire a driver's license, and difficulty opening a bank account; even registering children in school and reporting a crime become challenges at best without appropriate documentation. The constant threat of detection, detention, and deportation looms heavily in immigrant communities.

An important theme throughout the book is labor organizing. Gordon does a skillful job of weaving in historical information about union organizing of immigrant workers and the creative campaigns being used by some unions, while acknowledging labor's xenophobic roots and the anti-immigrant sentiment that continues in some sectors of the movement. She reminds us that it was the labor movement that helped pass the Employer Sanctions provision of the Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986, which requires employers to verify the employment eligibility of workers. Even pro-immigrant unions have been challenged when immigrants are brought in as strike breakers in organizing or bargaining campaigns. Gordon notes the willingness of Cesar Chavez in the 1970s to call the INS to deport farmworkers being used as strike breakers. The Workplace Project supported unionizing campaigns and helped workers connect with unions, refusing to believe that the worst-off immigrants were unorganizable. Unfortunately, these efforts were unsuccessful for the most part. More positive outcomes occurred from the less traditional forms of organizing. Gordon also discusses infusing nontraditional tactics and strategies into traditional union-organizing campaigns. One nontraditional area of growing national import to the labor movement involves workers' centers. The AFL-CIO's affiliation of 20,000 independently created groups of workers between 1888 and 1955, which Gordon insightfully recounts, is highly relevant today. After *Suburban Sweatshops* was published, the AFL-CIO

in 2006 announced a historic partnership with National Workers' Centers, offering certificates of affiliation.

The primary, but not exclusive, focus of the Workplace Project was wage and hour enforcement. Abuse was rampant, and state resources were grossly inadequate to deal with the magnitude of the problem. The legal strategies used by the Project included rights education, legal services, and lobbying. The legal needs of the undocumented were daunting, and the immigrant leadership had aspirations beyond providing services. Gordon describes the struggles within the organization to find the right balance between legal services and organizing, along with use of creative lawyering approaches that were a hybrid between the two. The rights education was used to support the organization's goals of collective action. The combination was potent, and undoubtedly contributed to the organization's success in its campaign to enhance minimum wage enforcement in New York.

Growing frustration with the limited relief available under wage and hour laws and the lack of enforcement served as an impetus to take collective action to another level. In 1996, the Workplace Project's immigrant base decided to work toward political change by developing a legislative campaign directed at addressing some of the inadequacies of wage and hour laws. The Project crafted legislation, the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act, that increased the penalties levied against violators. Civil fines increased from 25% to a maximum of 200%, creating the strongest wage-enforcement legislation in the country. The book culminates in the details of how these Latino immigrants, virtually none of whom were able to vote in this country, mastered the political process and facilitated the passage of this statute. Project members not only worked extensively among the immigrant community, but also were instrumental in persuading the business community and Republican legislators that the initiative was worthy of support. They developed collaborative ties with two other workers' centers in the area and together managed to build the type of support that was necessary across the political spectrum. It was an impressive accomplishment considering the nature of party politics in the state and the social dynamics of this period.

Enforcement of wage and hour laws has improved substantially with the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act. The DOL has used it as powerful leverage to settle cases. The law has also been an important tool for union organizers. The unions involved in the 2000 and 2001 green grocery campaign, which organized Mexican grocery store workers in New York City, found the Act to be an important component of their successful strategy, according to Gordon. This serves as an example of how broader community initiatives can advance union organizing, particularly of immigrant workers.

Gordon's book is an instructive read for those interested in the intersection of immigrant workers and union organizing, particularly non-traditional forms of organization. While much of her experience and that of her members would be familiar to those working with undocumented immigrants throughout the country, her real contribution is showing how a bottom-up, worker-run organizational structure can empower and mobilize the marginalized. Both the immigrant movement and the labor movement have been under siege; Gordon's uplifting account should be welcomed as showing us how working together more effectively can accomplish real gains. For labor organizers, her book offers concrete tips and eye-opening insight into how best to reach this constituency. A more condensed version would be particularly advantageous for the labor movement. With current estimates placing the number of undocumented in the United States at over 11 million, and Congress unable to adequately address the situation, immigration is clearly one of the top domestic policy issues facing the country today, making Gordon's book all the more timely.

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The Mismatched Worker. By Arne L. Kalleberg. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. 321 pp. ISBN 13-978-0-393-97643-4, $17.19 (paper).

Work, whether paid or not, takes up the majority of most people's lives; getting it right, then, has enormous consequences for the quality of life. A great many people, unfortunately, do not get it right. That is, they do not fit their jobs or their jobs do not fit them. In *The Mismatched Worker,* Arne Kalleberg draws on decades of his own and others' research to examine the causes and consequences of seven types of mismatch between