

Introduction

For labor enthusiasts, no period is as important to the history of worker organizing in the US as the 1880s, when hundreds of thousands of people demanded and won the eight-hour day. In large part, immigrant workers, who brought ideas and organizing experiences from their home countries, led the movements that ultimately achieved the eight-hour day, and their efforts did not come without repercussions. In 1886, in what later became known as the Haymarket Riot, eight well-known labor activists were arrested when a bomb exploded at a labor rally in support of the eight-hour workday. Multiple police and civilians were killed and seven of the activists were sentenced to death, despite the lack of evidence linking them to the bombing. Given that most of the accused men were not only German immigrants but also outspoken anarchists, the Haymarket Riot unleashed a wave of anti-immigrant hysteria and police repression of labor activity, anarchist newspapers, and organizers.

Many of the immigrant workers from the 1880s were such capable organizers that they were run out of their home countries, finding refuge and fertile ground to organize in the United States. Industrialization in

the US led to the increasing need for workers to fill dangerous, low-wage jobs in the growing number of factories, mines, and railways. Immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Germany, to name a few, filled these positions, experiencing open hostility, discrimination, and abusive working conditions. Under these conditions, and with the agitation of labor organizers, unrest among workers grew. The forces of industrialization not only brought masses of workers into the US, but also skilled organizers that came together and shared their ideas across nationality, language, and culture. This cross-pollination of ideas led to the creation of one of our nation's most vibrant social movements.

Likewise, today many of the best immigrant organizers were forced to flee their home countries due to their organizing efforts with laborers, students, and farm workers. Still others are the product of a globalized economy that exports products and people, leading many migrants with no previous political experience to question the broader political and economic forces that compel them to abandon their country, family, and home. According to a recent report by the faith-based organization, Bread for the World, though only a quarter of Mexico's population live in rural areas, a disproportionate share, 44 percent of Mexico's immigrant population, come from rural areas.¹ These rural migrants leave behind close-knit communities where their families have lived for decades, and in many cases for generations that date back to the pre-Columbian era. Risking their lives to come to a foreign country, laboring in dangerous, low-wage jobs, and facing regular discrimination, has forced migrants by the thousands to develop a deeper understanding of inequality.

1 "Mexico United States Migration: Regional and State Overview," Mexico City Consejo Nacional de Población, 2006

Some of Mexico's most popular bands, like Tigres del Norte and El Tri, have written songs documenting the politically transformative role migration plays in developing collective consciousness. Some of Tigres del Norte's most famous songs include "We are More American," "My Two Countries," and "Wetback Three Times." El Tri, with songs like "American Dream" and "Undocumented Race," challenge both the US and Mexican governments for exploiting workers and the poor. These songs have been heard by millions in the US and Latin America, helping connect migrants' experiences to a broader audience.

The best organizers see that injustice is also an opportunity to bring communities together to change the conditions they face. They see that those directly impacted by inequality, when given the right tools and support, are ready to stand up and fight. As Dennis Soriano of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice stated, "I am no longer the same person that came to this country only to work and help his family. Now I know that if I am going to be in this country and I want to be treated as an equal, I have to fight. No one will come fight for me. I have to do it myself."

In this section you will hear from Pablo Alvarado, a Central American immigrant who survived the brutal civil war of El Salvador and fled to Los Angeles, where he began using his skills as an educator and organizer to help day laborers alter their living and working conditions, first across California and then the country. He later helped found the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), which has become one of the most dynamic organization's fighting for undocumented immigrants rights. NDLON has

led the charge in Arizona, where some of the most draconian anti-immigrant laws have been passed.

Migration is often not the lone decision of one individual, but is forced by decisions at the policy level that exclude the voices of those most impacted. Mexican president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, famously said he wished “to export products not people” with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The story of Maria Duque and her family show that NAFTA, far from reducing immigration, led to the massive migration of hundreds of thousands of farmers to the US. For Maria and many others, it has also led to a shifting understanding of inequality and race in the US.

Indigenous migrants have also been particularly impacted, reporting some of the highest migration rates in Mexico. Indigenous communities in Mexico, often experienced in self-governance, have become some of the most creative leaders and thinkers in the migration debate. According to Gaspar Rivera Salgado of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales/Binational Indigenous Organizations’ Front (FIOB), “we need development that makes migration a choice rather than a necessity...the right to not migrate and migrate, both rights are part of the same solution.... We have to change the debate from one in which immigration is presented as a problem to a debate over rights. The real problem is exploitation.” Inspired by the Right to Stay Home campaign, the FIOB has also looked at how to develop economic alternatives that encourage self-determination, like helping establish worker-run cooperatives and investing in the production of fair-trade products that allow indigenous communities to stay in their native lands. The framework of the Right to Stay Home

has been critical in shifting the debate among labor, indigenous, and human rights groups within Mexico, and has the ability to play a key role in the immigrant rights movement in the US, pushing organizations and advocates to move beyond short-term solutions to long-term structural change that challenges economic and political forces at the root of migration and exploitation.

Elvira Arellano gained recognition when she was ordered for deportation and defiantly took refuge in her Methodist Church with her eight-year-old, US-born son. Her story documents the immigrant rights movement's effort to achieve legalization over the last ten years. Elvira participated in nearly every organizing effort since the late 1990s to ensure undocumented immigrants could gain authorization to work and live in the US without fear of deportation and separation from their family members. Her story highlights the roots of the movement, and the personal impact of Congress' failure to enact immigration reform or protect immigrant workers' rights. Today, she is still organizing to defend the rights of immigrants, including Central Americans who must make the treacherous journey through Mexico to the US.



Immigrants don't just bring food, dress, or cultural customs—many bring with them a rich history of organizing, and each carries their own experience of exploitation and self-reliance, of community and resistance. While divided across borders, many immigrants come to the US and continue to share culture and build a new community of resistance rich with its own traditions. Out of injustice and discrimi-

nation, undocumented immigrants are creating a new culture of liberation. This is where our story begins, with the story of three migrants that represent millions.