

Organizing the Unorganizable

The unlikely spark for a rebirth of labor

Ruth Milkman

▶▶ In 1990, after a few years of intensive organizing, a group of immigrant janitors in Los Angeles went on strike, endured a brutal police beating, and then won union recognition. All but invisible to the public, these workers cleaned up after hours for the well-paid lawyers and other professionals who inhabit the glitzy office towers of Century City, an upscale section of Los Angeles. Most were immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of them undocumented. Like countless other foreign-born workers who populate the lower echelons of southern California's vast blue-collar labor market, they worked long hours for minimal pay, often under substandard (and sometimes illegal) conditions.

The Century City victory was a turning point for the national "Justice for Janitors" campaign of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which would go on to win a series of contracts guaranteeing improved wages and working conditions for an ever-growing number of southern-California janitors, as well as janitors in several other U.S. cities. By the end of the century the local janitors' union not only had consolidated its position within the L.A. building-services industry but had also become one of the most dynamic and politically influential labor unions in the city and a vocal advocate for its burgeoning population of low-wage Latino immigrant workers.

In numerical terms, the janitors' triumph was an insignificant development, involving only a few thousand workers in the nation's second-largest city. Yet in the early 1990s, after decades of deunionization and in an extremely unfavorable political climate, any progress in the U.S. labor movement was a notable achievement. In the once-legendary "company town" of Los Angeles it was especially impressive. And the fact that the protagonists included undocumented immigrants—long presumed to be "unorganizable"—seemed almost miraculous. The janitors' success sparked a resurgence of union organizing and community-based economic-justice campaigns in Los Angeles, a wave of activity that has since spread across the nation—highlighting the potential for a broader labor resurgence.

The late-20th-century transformation of work through deunionization and restructuring, as well as the influx of immigrants into low-wage employment, were national and global rather than local or regional developments. But like so many other social trends, these emerged earlier and on a larger scale in southern California than elsewhere. In the 1970s and 1980s, partly because of its pioneering role in employer-driven work-force casualization, Los Angeles attracted a massive influx of immigrants to its burgeoning low-wage labor market. Many—especially those from Mexico and Central America—arrived with

few economic resources and little education. The newcomers often lacked legal documentation as well, making them especially vulnerable to the super-exploitative labor practices that flourished anew in this period.

Contrary to the claims of some commentators that the influx of impoverished immigrants precipitated the deterioration of wages, benefits, and working conditions in service, construction, and other blue-collar jobs, the timing suggests that the causality runs in the opposite direction: immigrants were hired mainly in the years after the jobs in question had been degraded by deunionization and restructuring. The details vary by industry, but employers' vigorous efforts to de-unionize workplaces in the 1970s and 1980s led native-born workers to abandon jobs as unions were weakened, wages declined and benefits and job security evaporated. Only then did immigrants move into the now-vacant positions. And soon afterward, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the foreign-born work force proved to be a key factor facilitating union renewal in the region.

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Unions have not always been pessimistic about immigrants—in fact, they have relied on them for leadership and growth throughout U.S. history. During its formative years, organized labor's growth was predicated largely on recruiting immigrants and their offspring, who made up a huge proportion of the working class in the urban and industrial regions of the country that were the primary sites of union-building. In the New Deal years, ironically, U.S. labor leaders were disproportionately foreign-born themselves, even when anti-immigrant sentiments within the unions were at their height.

Just as it did for European immigrants in the Midwest, organized labor brought California's Mexican Americans substantial improvements in economic status in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as new opportunities for leadership. Even when it had an explicitly left-wing character, as was often the case, unionism among Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles "involved at its core an attempt by the children of the immigrant generation and those who had arrived in the United States as youngsters to integrate themselves into American society," as the historian George Sánchez argues. "Ironically, such labor and political activity often served as the greatest 'Americanizing agent' of the 1930s and 1940s."

But this history had been largely obliterated from public memory by the 1970s and 1980s, when mass immigration resumed. Just like their counterparts a century ago, both union organizers and employers presumed that the impoverished, poorly educated newcomers of recent years could not be organized into labor unions. After all, many immigrants were (or imagined themselves to be) mere sojourners, visiting the United States for a short period to earn some money to support their families back home, and should thus be reluctant to assume the considerable risks involved in unionization. And even if wages and working conditions seemed poor by U.S. standards, immigrants were presumed

to be using a different standard of comparison, one based on their experience in their countries of origin, against which even non-union jobs north of the border might not look so bad.

Initially, few L.A. unions made any effort to organize immigrants. “The leadership could not interact with the workforce that was coming here,” one building trades official later recalled. “At the beginning they [union leaders] thought, ‘They’re lazy. They’re uneducated. They don’t speak the language. They’re just going to come here and take the money and run.’ All the stereotypical things that you’ve always heard, all those things were said.” For the large numbers of undocumented migrants, fear of deportation was presumed to be an insurmountable obstacle to unionization. The typical attitude among unionists, one informant explained, was, “No, you can never organize those guys. You’re beating your head against the concrete.”

Employers also tend to view immigrants—documented or not—as more tractable than natives, and thus uninterested in unionization. Roger Waldinger and Michael Lichter have documented this perspective in detail, based on interviews with employers in several L.A. industries. They report that many employers regard native-born workers as “lazy,” prone to “whining,” and possessed of a strong sense of entitlement; immigrants, by contrast, are seen as eager, superior, and subservient workers who are willing to work hard at any job, even for low wages. As one employer told Waldinger and Lichter, immigrants are “willing to work for a dollar. They don’t have an attitude of ‘you owe me a job.’ They’ll give eight hours’ work for eight hours’ pay, and they’re happy doing it.” These employers considered the most recent arrivals (those most likely to be undocumented) as especially highly motivated workers who evaluated wages and working conditions by the standards of their home countries. “Compared to where they came from, this is paradise!” one employer exclaimed. Employers, like many labor organizers and outside observers, simply took it for granted that immigrants lacked any interest in unionization—although they would soon be proven mistaken.

However, by the late 1980s, as more and more organizers began to grasp the potential for immigrant unionization, the once conventional wisdom about “unorganizability” began to dissolve. Indeed, in Los Angeles, and sometimes elsewhere as well, unionists were increasingly persuaded that foreign-born workers were actually far easier to recruit than natives, and by the 1990s that revisionist view would be widely echoed in public commentary as well as inside the labor movement. Alongside union efforts to recruit immigrants, a variety of community-based organizations and worker centers emerged in southern California during this period with a focus on economic-justice issues. Some of these new groups had close ties to organized labor, while others were more independent and critical of traditional union organizational forms. The living-wage movement, led by the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy and similar groups around the state, passed ordinances in several jurisdictions raising wage levels for workers employed under government contracts. And worker centers

also emerged around the state with a focus on advocacy for low-wage workers—most of whom turned out to be foreign-born. Some of them focused explicitly on immigrant workplace rights, especially for domestic workers and day laborers with little or no access to conventional unionism.

Southern California's massive and relatively homogeneous Latino immigrant working class proved highly receptive to unionization efforts for several reasons. First, the newcomers were deeply enmeshed in social networks that often became a key resource for union mobilization. Second, they had a more collectively oriented world view than most native-born workers. Class-based collective organizations like labor unions and worker centers may be more compatible with the lived experience, world views, and identities of many immigrants (especially Central Americans and Mexicans) than with those of native-born workers. Finally, they shared an ongoing experience of stigmatization in the face of open hostility from the native-born—and often explicitly nativist—community. In all of these respects, the transnational migrant workers of late-20th-century Los Angeles had much in common with earlier generations of working-class immigrants to the United States.

Moreover, national data suggest that Latinos have more positive attitudes toward unionization than most other ethnic groups. In the 1994 national Worker Representation and Participation Survey, for example, 51 percent of Latino respondents nationwide (regardless of nativity) who were not union members indicated that they would vote for a union if a representation election were held in their workplaces, compared to 35 percent of non-Latinos. The figures were similar for Asian-American respondents, 49 percent of whom said they would vote for a union, compared to 35 percent of non-Asians. African-American respondents expressed even stronger support for unionism, with 64 percent indicating that they would vote for a union, compared to 32 percent of non-African-American respondents. Although Latinos are not quite as pro-union as African-Americans, both groups are consistently more positive toward unionism than whites.

The distinctive patterns of immigrant employment—most importantly, the over-representation of foreign-born workers in the most casualized sectors of the labor market, where unionization is rare, and their under-representation in the highly unionized public sector—are at the root of their relatively low overall rate of unionization. These differential employment patterns also help explain why the most recent immigrants are less highly unionized than those who have been in the United States longer: newcomers—especially Latinos, the majority of whom have little formal education—are especially likely to be employed in the most casualized (and least unionized) sectors of the labor market. That is the reason why Latinos have not yet attained a larger presence in organized labor, despite their positive attitudes toward unions. But as the immigrants-rights marches that burst onto the nation's streets last spring revealed to all, the potential of this growing working-class population for helping to revitalize unionism is enormous.

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The dynamism of the southern-California labor movement in the late 20th century was the product of a combustible mix of ingredients—a vast immigrant working class strongly predisposed toward collective action; an imaginative and committed cadre of union leaders buoyed by the comparative advantages that flowed from the region’s exceptional labor history; and just enough geographical distance from organized labor’s old guard to open up a political space for organizational innovation. Nowhere in the United States is there more palpable evidence of the potential for today’s working-class immigrants to reenact the drama of union upsurge that brought earlier generations of newcomers to the United States into the economic mainstream in the 1930s and 1940s.

But is Los Angeles a model for labor in the rest of the country or an anomaly? Although the obstacles are formidable, there is nonetheless potential for the embryonic labor movement revitalization in southern California to burst forth onto the national stage as the maverick unionists who pioneered such efforts as the L.A. Justice for Janitors campaign try to reproduce their successes on more spacious ground. Many of the conditions that fostered labor-movement growth in the L.A. region during the 1990s have since become increasingly widespread throughout the nation. Latino immigrants, once highly concentrated in southern California, are now far more geographically dispersed and can be found in nearly every corner of the United States. And crucially, the center of gravity of the U.S. labor movement as a whole has now decisively shifted toward the former AFL unions—the type of unions that long dominated southern California’s labor movement, in contrast to the rest of the country, where the manufacturing-based CIO unions were the most dynamic part of the labor movement from the 1930s until deindustrialization, deregulation, and the rollback of New Deal reforms led to their virtual collapse starting in the late 1970s.

Although many former AFL unions have also been struggling to survive within the emerging neo-liberal order, on the whole they have weathered the storm far better than their CIO counterparts. One major advantage is that most AFL unions have an occupational focus, not an industrial one, and are rooted in sectors of the economy, such as services and construction, that are largely insulated from the effects of globalization and capital mobility. And because these unions came of age well before the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board and other New Deal labor regulatory agencies, they have access to a broader strategic repertoire than their CIO counterparts.

If there is any hope for a new upsurge of labor-movement activity of the sort that took place in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, it is likely to come from these former AFL unions. Among them, by far the most promising organizational model is that of the giant SEIU, which today claims 1.8 million members. The Justice for Janitors campaign is but one of many successful SEIU organizing initiatives; the union has also made huge inroads in organizing health-care workers and in the public sector. This impressive expansion is a national

phenomenon but is especially apparent in Los Angeles, where the SEIU is the labor movement's undisputed powerhouse. It accounted for over 15 percent of all union members in the L.A. metropolitan area in 2001–2002, nearly double its national share of union membership. The SEIU has also contributed mightily to the political power of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, dwarfing any other union.

Nationally, moreover, SEIU membership has tripled over the past quarter century, in a period when overall union density has declined precipitously. Although some of this growth was the result of mergers and accretion, the SEIU also has a long history as an organizing union. Starting in 2003, the SEIU led a dissident group of unions that sought to transform the structure of the AFL-CIO; the failure of that bid for reform sparked a major schism within the labor movement, culminating in the mid-2005 disaffiliation of four large unions from the federation and the formation of the Change to Win (CTW) Federation shortly afterward.

It is no accident that nearly all of the unions now under the CTW umbrella are former AFL affiliates—besides the SEIU they include the Teamsters, the Laborers, the Carpenters, and UNITE HERE. That these unions—once seen as bastions of conservatism and corruption—have emerged in the vanguard of current labor revitalization efforts is a powerful testimony to the renewed relevance of the AFL's historical legacy.

Perhaps the most important feature of the current labor-reform effort is its daring, intrepid character. The new CTW Federation characterizes itself as a “mean, lean organizing machine” and has pledged to devote the vast bulk of its considerable resources to recruiting new members. Considered objectively, investing extensively in union organizing may seem foolhardy or simply irrational. For as everyone agrees, unions organizing today must confront formidable obstacles. Employer power has been strengthened by corporate globalization and the growing ability to outsource jobs, while inside the United States employers are more staunchly committed than ever to “union prevention” and uniformly intransigent in their opposition to any labor-organizing efforts that dare to challenge their hegemony. At the federal level, the United States has the most anti-union political regime in nearly a century, and the same is true in a growing number of states. After decades of devolution, moreover, the structure of labor law severely restricts the room for maneuver open to unions engaged in new organizing, and the few protections that do remain in the letter of the law are enforced so poorly that employers routinely honor them in the breach rather than the observance.

Yet, as Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability.” Similarly, the sociologist Alvin Gouldner has noted, “Structural analysis . . . is commonly taken by surprise when change erupts.” There can be no guarantee that the ambitious efforts of the new union-revitalization movement will prove successful on a national scale, but the recent

achievements of unions in southern California—and for that matter, successful labor struggles throughout history, all of which faced difficult odds—are a testimony to this perspective. And as both the AFL-CIO and CTW have recognized, the enormous immigrant-rights marches this past spring, which have already sparked new immigrant voter-registration and political-mobilization efforts—once again prefigured by the L.A. labor movement’s political work over the past decade—are the most hopeful sign yet for a rebirth of labor in the new century. ■

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