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USA

An Eruption in the Streets

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MARCH, 2006 MARKED an eruption that hit the streets, showed its strength, and took everyone including its participants by surprise. Millions marched all over the country: 300,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Denver, 10,000 in Detroit and Milwaukee, 10,000-20,000 in New York, 20,000 in Phoenix - and somewhere between 500,000 and a million in the Gran Marcha in Los Angeles on March 25. As the U.S. Congress and Senate hold their wretched deliberations on "immigration reform," the communities affected have shown they will not be passive objects, but active subjects, in this debate. As this issue goes to press, mass marches have continued and Congress has recessed in deadlock on the issue.

On the day of the Gran Marcha the white liberal left seemed to have missed the mobilization and didn't know to meet downtown at Olympic and Broadway at 10am. Why? As Daniel Hernandez reported in the LA Weekly (reprinted elsewhere in this issue), if you didn't listen to mostly Spanish-language media (but Korean too) and didn't read La Opinion, or didn't tune into Pacifica radio KPFK all week, well, you probably missed the news.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/photolamarchIV.jpg>]

Marching in LA

The non-English media and the Catholic Church played a major role in mobilizing people for these marches. Spanish-language media promoted the march continuously for ten days. Cardinal Mahony, who heads the largest Catholic archdiocese in the nation (Los Angeles), came out against the Sensenbrenner Bill [\[1\]](#) as a violation of Christian principles, affirming that the mission of the church was to aid the poor.

In the 1980s and 1990s Mahony opposed Padre Luis Olivares' work in providing refuge and sanctuary to the poor and undocumented. Olivares' sermons regularly quoted from Leviticus 19:33-34, "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." It took 15 years for Cardinal Mahony to realize that Latinos are the present and future of the Catholic Church in California (75% of the Southern California archdiocese of five million are Latino).

Student Walkout and Tragedy

On March 28 came the students' turn. Forty thousand Los Angeles high school students walked out of their classrooms, continuing the wave of protest against measures to turn their families into felons. If Spanish-language media contributed to the gigantic turnout on March 25, text-messaging and MySpace helped create a collective walkout that surpassed the Chicano walkout of 1968 as well as the walkouts of 1994 - and faced police violence and suspension.

The LA Unified School District imposed a lockdown that afternoon, but the walkouts continued all week. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa - who supported the Gran Marcha - disappointed students by urging them to go back to their classrooms. KPFK broadcast live a four-hour town hall Student Speakout on March 31st that featured passionate and articulate students explaining their actions.

In a horrifying tragedy, 14-year-old Anthony Soltero committed suicide after an assistant principal at De Anza middle school kicked him out of school, banned him from eighth grade graduation activities and told him he'd be sent to

prison for organizing a walkout on March 28.

The Realities of Immigration

There are persistent myths about "illegal immigration":

– The debate focuses mainly on Mexican immigrants, but in fact only about half of all undocumented workers are Mexican. Another 10-15% are other Latinos. It is estimated that there are 500,000 undocumented Chinese living in the United States, who tend to be more silent because of the fear and consequences of deportation. The Gran Marcha was overwhelmingly Latino, but there were many other contingents. One in five Koreans is undocumented and they had a contingent; Filipinos marched as well as Irish.

– We're told that organized labor won't support the undocumented who, the Republicans keep telling us, undercut middle-class American living standards and access to jobs. Historically there's some truth in this. But one of the strongest institutional supports to the march in Los Angeles was none other than the Service Employees (SEIU), whose spectacular growth in the last decade was due to organizing low-wage service workers, mostly undocumented, and UNITE-HERE who have organized hotel and restaurant workers.

– Undocumented immigrants supposedly use public services but contribute little to the economy and tax base. The most pernicious myth is that women cross the border to have babies born in America, while others come to collect welfare. Not only is this false, but people know it: In fact most Americans see undocumented workers as very hard working (80% according to a Pew Hispanic Research Center report) and only 4% of the population thinks "illegal" immigration is a pressing problem. The same study reveals that the population is seriously divided over what to do - give the immigrants green cards (40%) or deport them (53%). In a CNN poll released on April 3, 70% said they feel sympathetic toward the undocumented.

Amnesty, Legalization and Open Borders

The Sensenbrenner bill (HR 4437) is about as pointless as it is vicious - except as an organizing tool for the far right. This backlash bill would further drive undocumented workers underground and to the margins of society. It's not only Californians who depend on the work and skills of these essential workers. The Senate's attempt to come up with a more "moderate" bill (McCain-Kennedy) that creates a guest worker program, favored by Bush, could be the carrot to Sensenbrenner's stick.

The debate is a potential political disaster for the Republicans, four of whom - Senators Sam Brownback, Mike DeWine, Lindsay Graham and Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter - sided with Democrats on the issue. Senator Frist forced the debate because he is currying favor with the far right in the party for his own presidential bid.

President Bush sits in the middle because he knows that passing the infamous anti-immigrant Proposition 187 [2] made the Republican Party radioactive in California and destroyed Governor Pete Wilson's political career. For Bush, who has immigrants in his family, comes from a border state and wants Latinos in the Republican Party, a "guest worker" program is perfect because it answers the need of employers for a contingent, low-wage labor force that will be rotated out before it can organize.

In fact, this is no solution at all. What's needed is immediate legal status for immigrant workers, and a clear, uncomplicated and inexpensive path to U.S. citizenship for those who desire it.

The racist anti-immigrant campaign has been building. One year ago the Minutemen Vigilantes began their watch on the borders in California and Arizona. As Marc Cooper has reported in the LA Weekly and The Nation, the Minutemen vigilantes on the borders were miniscule, outnumbered by the media reporters, vans and cameras hyping them to the public. Four hundred news stories followed the "border blockade" by 30-200 Minutemen.

California's number one immigrant, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger joined the debate with an op-ed in the LA Times on March 28, positioning himself to the right of Bush but still in the center on this debate. He wrote, "Criminalizing immigrants for coming here is a slogan, not a solution," yet "granting citizenship to people who are here illegally is not just amnesty... it's anarchy." Republican leaders like National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and others have suddenly discovered the disappearing middle-class, low-wage jobs and loss of benefits - and blamed the undocumented for taking "their" jobs. For the record, Rohrabacher thinks prisoners should be put to work in the fields.

The Democrats have been little better, worrying that if they utter the word "amnesty" they will lose all future elections. The guest worker program in the "moderate" McCain-Kennedy bill is no answer - it institutionalizes permanent exclusion of part of the labor force, and places huge financial and bureaucratic burdens on becoming legal.

But supporters of immigrant rights are all over the lot about what kind of legislation to support. The only decent bill, introduced by African-American Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (TX-D), grants legal status to anyone living in the United States five years from the date of the bill's passage. It builds in a family reunification policy, enforces protection of immigrant workers and requires that the fees paid for those applying for legal status be used for job training in communities suffering high unemployment.

Too Many Silences

Initially civil rights leaders and the Black Congressional Caucus (as Earl Ofari Hutchinson commented in New American Media, March 27, 2006) were MIA. A dirty secret of Prop 187 in California in 1994 was that while polls showed Blacks opposing the measure, 55% voted for it. Hutchinson notes that civil rights leaders "are loath to equate the immigrant rights movement with the civil rights battles of the 1960s." They were a growing presence, however, in the second round of mass marches on April 10.

There's a danger of pitting low-waged African-American versus undocumented workers. It's particularly important for all supporters of human and civil rights to wage a united fight for better wages, benefits and decent jobs. Today immigrants are targeted for "stealing American jobs," while the Black poor are often demonized as "lazy and unproductive" in contrast with "hard-working immigrants." These racist labels don't create jobs: rather they let corporations and the government off the hook.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/UNITE.jpg>]

UNITE-HERE hotel workers campaign

One concrete example is UNITE-HERE Local 2's bargaining proposal with hotels to include contract language that both protects immigrant rights and increase the diversity of the work force, particularly by hiring African-American workers. The union pointed to statistics that Black employment in hotels has dropped below 6%.

Globalizing Poverty

Neoliberal economic policies have increased poverty and desperation throughout Latin America. NAFTA did not benefit impoverished Mexican workers. It depressed their wages - in particular, destroying Mexican farming as low-cost food from subsidized U.S. agribusiness flooded the market - and accelerated the immigration wave. The wage differential between the US and Mexico is 11-1, and 20-1 in the agricultural sector (see Marc Cooper, "The Great Immigration Debate: Getting Beyond Denial," Truthdig.com, March 14, 2006.)

Stanford historian David Kennedy notes that the income gap between the United States and Mexico is the largest between any two contiguous countries in the world. That gap produces massive demand for labor in the United States, matched by a massive supply from Mexico and Central America. Quoted in the Washington Post, Kennedy noted that any attempt by governments to come between these two forces by increasing enforcement does not work - just as it hasn't with drug trafficking.

Socialists are clear on this issue. We are in favor of amnesty, legalization and open borders with an efficient and transparent path to citizenship. Right now the borders are essentially open (to illegal traffic) but dangerous. The trek to the North has increased since the passage of NAFTA in 1994. Mexicans are joined by Central American workers and peasants who face a harrowing and dangerous trip through Mexico and another perilous journey through the hot Arizona or California desert. The U.S. Border Patrol reports that 1,954 people died between 1998-2004 attempting to cross the southern border - more than ever died crossing the Berlin Wall.

The enforcement measures being proposed in both bills - either more border police or a wall - will only make the journey deadlier, not stop it. In the era of globalization, capital moves freely and instantaneously across borders. Yet labor faces border patrols, police, super-exploitation in the workplace and fear of deportation. The drive for ever higher profits has led to a higher level of exploitation of the American worker, the increased use of unprotected immigrant labor - and super-exploited workers globally.

The realities of exploitation in the United States create openings for organizing. Unions should follow the lead of SEIU and UNITE-HERE, organize the undocumented and the low-paid, and press for reforms that are beneficial to all workers whatever their immigration status.

This article is an editorial from the US radical socialist magazine [Against the Current](#) (#122 May/June 2006). It was drafted by editorial board member [Susan Weissman](#).

[1] Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 proposed by House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, which would considerably tighten controls on immigrants and make it more difficult to become a US citizen.

[2] A 1994 ballot initiative designed to deny illegal immigrants social services, health care, and public education. It was supported by the republican governor of California Pete Wilson. After a series of legal challenges it was dropped by the newly elected governor in 1998. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Proposition_187_\(1994\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Proposition_187_(1994))