

Transnational Unity in the Struggle for Migrant Workers Rights

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The United States is a country of immigrants. The first wave of immigrants didn't just come to these shores to work, but also to conquer. Europeans initiated a process of colonization of "wild and savage" territories beginning with the arrival of Columbus to the Americas in 1492. The long resistance by the indigenous population brought on the genocide of Native Americans.

In many countries of the Americas, European "immigrants" used people from Africa as slaves to work in the plantations, thereby increasing profits for the "owners" of "means of production" in a primitive form of capitalist production. Slaves were also used as servants in the sumptuous houses of the masters, or as miners, carpenters, and in all sorts of domestic services. The question of slavery was also crucial in the U.S. imperialist expansion into Mexico. The founding fathers of Texas --Sam Houston, Jim Bowie, Stephen F. Austin --were all slave traders prior to conquering the Mexican state of Tejas. When Mexico sent troops to recapture Tejas, the U.S. annexed the territory. The resulting war took a major human and economic toll on Mexico. The "Treaty" of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 forced Mexico to cede 55% of its territory to the U.S: California, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Texas, Utah, New Mexico, parts of Oregon. Shortly thereafter, slavery, which had been outlawed by the Mexican government, was legalized in Texas, and the "founding fathers" started importing slaves from Cuba. This history is pertinent to today's immigrant rights struggle and to the African American reparations campaign. There are striking parallels, for example, between the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and certain provisions of the ID Act of 2005 and the highly repressive immigration act, HR 4437, that was only defeated after massive protests by immigrants on May Day 2006.

After slavery was abolished, the U.S. resorted to importing large numbers of laborers from other countries to perform the jobs for which there was no "suitable labor force" available in the country. Such was the case of the gold mines in California and in the 1860s when hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers built the Central Pacific Railroad. But when the numbers of Chinese immigrants continued to increase beyond the needs of the railroad bosses, the first immigration law was passed: "The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882". This law allowed Chinese who had been working in conditions of super-exploitation for years to stay, but closed the doors to further Chinese immigration.

At the same time, European workers---male and female, old and young--filled the factories of the Eastern United States. By the 1880s, huge numbers of industrial workers had migrated to the U.S. from Europe. Many had a strong sense of social and class justice arising from anarchist and communist ideals. These workers were in the vanguard of the international struggle for the 8-hour workday. Their movement was met with ferocious repression. In 1886, eight labor leaders were sentenced to death by hanging in Chicago for their activism in favor of the 8-hour day. When world wide protests failed to save the "Martyrs of Chicago", their execution became

impetus for the establishment of May 1st as International Workers Day, a day of labor activism observed by workers throughout the world.

The 20th century saw many attempts to control immigration into the U.S. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 gave priority to immigrants of European descent. The Immigration Act of 1924 and the National Origins Formula of 1929 excluded Asian immigrants but opened the doors to workers from the Americas. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 opened a small door for Asian immigration, but gave the government the power to deport "illegal" immigrants suspected of "communist" ideas. In 1965 another major immigration act discontinued quotas based on national origin, gave preference to immigrants with relatives in the U.S., but also restricted immigration from Mexico for the first time in U.S. history. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act granting amnesty to "illegal" immigrants who had been in the U.S. before 1982 but made it a crime to hire "illegal" immigrants. Thus began the era of what immigration rights activists are calling the "criminalization of low wage immigrant workers".

Criminalization of immigrants has led to the militarization of the U.S. border with Mexico, resulting in over 4000 deaths of people trying to enter the United States since "Operation Hold the Line" began in 1993. In 1996, President William Clinton, a Democrat, signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act that toughened sanctions against undocumented migrant workers and significantly increased the number of armed patrols on the border with Mexico. In 1997, after Clinton dispatched Marines to the border, a 17 year old U.S. citizen, Ezequiel Hernandez, was shot dead while herding his sheep. All these developments have encouraged political and media support for armed groups of vigilantes calling themselves the "Minutemen" who "patrol" the border, creating ever more dangers for migrants trying to find work in the U.S.

Today there are 12-15 million undocumented immigrant workers in the United States. Globally, there are at least 200 million workers employed legally or "illegally" outside their country of birth. This huge itinerant labor force of workers, most of whom cannot sustain their families in their countries of origin, is in large part the result rich country policies that end up impoverishing poorer parts of the world. Among the North's poverty-inducing policies are the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, policies that forced developing countries into deepening debt even as they diverted government funds from health and education spending into debt servicing. Then came the current pressure for free trade agreements that attempt to open poorer countries' borders to multinational corporations products, including massively subsidized agricultural products. Free trade among very unequal competitors inevitably kills infant industries in poor countries and often badly damages or destroys well-established manufacturing and small farmers' enterprises as well.

Add to this wars and internal political repression in many exploited countries, including invasions and wars provoked by the U.S. and other "Great Powers". In more recent history military aggression has taken the forms of "war on terror" and the "war on drugs" which have intensified the era of extreme displacement of working people.

The two major magnets of migrant workers, the European Union and the United States, have long welcomed foreign labor as a means of extracting higher profits and driving down wage levels generally. Often migrants take on low wage and difficult jobs under poor working conditions that are rejected by American or European nationals in industries such as agribusiness (fruit & vegetable picking) and parts of the service and manufacturing sectors (cleaning, meat packing, etc). In nearly all instances, however, and regardless of the benefits to individuals or to the companies that hire them, migrant workers are victimized, discriminated against, and increasingly criminalized. The suffering that began in their countries of origin is carried to their countries of destination. The purpose of the repressive laws and raids that are being conducted all over these countries is not to expel most undocumented workers. Rather, it is to maintain a large layer within the working class that has fewer rights and is more vulnerable to super-exploitation, thus serving to divide and weaken solidarity among all workers.

The mafias formed to transport people across vast distances are the first ones to exploit people seeking work outside their home areas. African migrant workers to Europe have remarked that, "today slaves have to pay their own transportation." Recently we have seen thousands of Africans and Latin Americans risking their lives and actually dying in their quest to find employment in Europe and the U.S. Meanwhile, the industrialized countries maintain their trade and aid policies—policies that continue to destroy less developed economies. Workers' movements need to study these links in order to better understand and struggle against the international capitalist forces undermining the welfare of workers everywhere. Today migrants are an integral part of the international "working class". Thus, the organization of workers and of movements to defend and protect migrant workers' rights and advance the overall interests of working people must also be international.

INTERNATIONAL UNITY OF MIGRANT AND NON-MIGRANT WORKERS IS THE SOLUTION

Workers of the world must join forces globally to confront one of the worst injustices created by contemporary capitalism: large masses of extremely poor migrant workers desperately seeking work to survive. Fortunately we are already seeing some efforts in that direction. There was, for example, the third "European Transnational Day of Action Against Migrations Control" on October 7, 2006, a date chosen to commemorate the brutal repression of Africans trying to enter the Spanish North African territories of Ceuta and Melilla. International actions like these are important forms of mobilization toward the internationalization of the struggle for migrants' rights. It is interesting to note that this initiative was planned during the European Social Forum of May 2006.

In the United States, on May Day 2006, millions of immigrant workers, their families, friends, and allies marched in the streets during a one-day immigrant worker strike and commercial boycott. This massive outpouring of anger and solidarity had been provoked in large part by a highly repressive immigration law (HR4437) that had been initially approved in the U.S. Congress. Thousands of workers in Mexico also demonstrated in support of their brothers and sisters living without documentation in the U.S. U.S. politicians scrambled to find a compromise. Soon thereafter, HR4437 was defeated.

This US immigrant rights' movement, although highly important and successful, has not yet extended its analysis or its action beyond the borders of the United States. We hope that this will change. There are 200 million migrants throughout the world who suffer from exploitation, victimization, and even criminalization of their situation. We need to understand that massive forced migration is a worldwide feature of global capitalism. Thus, we are calling for increasing globalization of the struggle for migrants' rights.

THIS IS WHY WE PROPOSE:

1. That May Day 2007, International Workers Day, be dedicated to the rights of migrant workers of the world and that the call for freedom and respect for migrant workers rights be heard in all the countries of the world.
2. Given that most countries commemorate May Day as a working holiday with the exception of the U.S., we propose that the May 1st demonstrations, conferences, marches, in the rest of the world be dedicated to denounce the unjust treatment of migrant workers and to demand solutions for these injustices. Meanwhile, in the U.S. we will attempt again as on May Day 2006 to carry out a national strike.
3. We call on our brothers and sisters in the US immigrant rights movement to join forces with migrant workers and their families throughout the world. An international Conference for Migrant Workers Rights in the World should be called within a reasonable period of time to develop an organizational structure to carry out the struggle for migrant workers rights in the world.
4. We call upon unions to become proactively involved with the problems of the world's 200 million migrant workers. We salute and encourage the efforts of the American Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to advance the rights of immigrant workers. On May Day 2007 we hope that all unions will come out in support of migrant workers all over the world.
5. On May Day 2007, we propose that we distribute copies of the United Nations' International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. This convention, elaborated by the United Nations in December 1990, went into effect in 2003 after being ratified by Algeria, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belize, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Chile, Colombia, Comoros, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Gabon, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Honduras, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Liberia, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, Uruguay.

Migrant rights movements need to be aware, however, that this convention, so critical to our shared objectives, has *not yet been ratified* by the United States, Canada, any European country,

India, Brazil or Venezuela, among others. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers takes its inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It needs to be similarly well known, respected, and, above all, widely ratified. Herein lies yet another essential objective for our movement.

This document has been prepared for discussion at the World Social Forum of January 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya but it should also be circulated and discussed elsewhere.

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