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Immigrants and Us

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More than half a million in Los Angeles, 300,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Denver, 30,000 in Washington and Milwaukee. Tens of thousands more in Detroit, Phoenix, Houston, Dallas, Reno, Newark and New York City, as well as places like Grand Rapids and Nashville. Sparked by the punitive Sensenbrenner bill, which would criminalize undocumented workers and anyone who helps them, immigrants flooded the streets of cities and suburbs across the nation. The rest of the country watched in astonishment as the wave of immigrants that has swept our economy crested into a mass movement that will transform our politics.

The key word is *will*. The comprehensive reform of immigration policy that the movement wants is not going to come from this Congress, riven as it is with splits among Republicans who want to keep the poor huddled masses out; Republicans who want to keep them in but keep them poor; and Democrats too weak and anxious to light the way down a better path. At this writing, in fact, the best outcome for now appears to be no resolution at all. Nonetheless, whether it takes two years or ten, this movement, bolstered by its growing social and electoral clout, will have its demands addressed: family reunification; a solution to the visa backlog, now at 6.2 million and counting; and the coveted "path to citizenship" that allows immigrant workers to build lives with a future.

This will happen with or without the vigorous participation of the "progressive movement." But it would be far better, for progressives and for immigrant advocates, if the two groups could work together in a broad social movement that places the rights of immigrants at the heart of a struggle for economic justice. After all, the most frequently cited arguments for stricter immigration controls--and the fears, grounded in experience, of lower-skilled American workers, especially African-Americans--stem from systemic problems plaguing the bottom of the labor market: low wages (tamped down by a federal minimum pegged at \$5.15 an hour); lax enforcement of labor laws (rendering the right to organize unions virtually meaningless); widespread and abusive systems of subcontracting in low-wage industries; and, yes, a ready supply of cheap immigrant labor, vulnerable to exploitation because of its illegal status.

The competitive dynamic between low-skilled American-born workers and undocumented ones is a difficult issue, there's no point in denying it. But it's not the impossible conundrum many commentators have suggested. The response is clear: Raise the floor--increase the minimum wage, enforce and reform labor laws, address the healthcare crisis, crack down on employers who exploit immigrant workers, grant undocumented workers civil rights and ultimately citizenship rather than second-class "guest worker" status. These measures would improve the lives of workers across the board. In other words, immigration reform must be linked to labor-market reform. And immigrants would be a key constituency for that broader program.

The labor movement has made great strides in recent years on immigrants' issues, as some unions have seen

that their future depends largely on their success in recruiting members among the growing low-wage immigrant workforce. And they have been rewarded with increasing numbers of immigrant members. The faith-based community also gets it: The Catholic Church, from moral principle or awareness that Latinos are its lifeblood (or both), helped to galvanize the recent demonstrations, with LA's Cardinal Roger Mahony pledging civil disobedience if the Sensenbrenner bill becomes law. Evangelical churches with large immigrant congregations and faith-based organizing groups also helped fill the streets.

Progressives must show, too, that they care about immigrants' issues if they want immigrants to throw their energy and weight into progressive causes. But for the most part, they haven't. While a few leaders, like Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, have fought for sensible and humane immigration policies, others have added their voices to the xenophobic chorus, and most progressives have simply remained disengaged. This makes neither moral nor strategic sense. Numerically, immigrants could become an anchor of the progressive base and over time a key part of an electoral strategy. Consider what happened in California after the passage of the immigrant-baiting Prop 187: Democrats (including a new generation of Latino politicians) reaped the benefits after enraged Latino voters knocked the wind out of the Republican Party. Today's mass protests, which were similarly triggered by anger at an anti-immigrant bill, grew out of a network of community organizations, church-based groups, low-wage-worker organizations, hometown associations and a vibrant ethnic media--an infrastructure that could play a crucial role in future elections and campaigns.

Undocumented immigrants are among the most exploited and most vulnerable segments of our population, and movements among such groups have historically been generative: They develop leaders and create energy for broader reforms. Immigrants have a natural interest in progressive change on a range of issues, standing as they do at the crossroads (and often in the cross hairs) of globalization, corporate power and economic inequality. Indeed, in the current debate we should be discussing not only how to treat people when they get to the border but what makes them come--growing inequality between North and South, the need to escape poverty and the hope that success will make it possible to send money home. There's no way to devise an effective border policy if we fail to address the root causes of migration. So progressives and immigrant advocates have a mutual interest in the global justice agenda, specifically in seeking alternatives to trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA that would reduce global inequality.

As government authorities engage in racial profiling and random road checks in immigrant communities in the name of national security, those communities have a special stake in protests against violations of civil liberties. Many recent immigrants also take a skeptical view of the war in Iraq, especially those from Central American countries with strong left traditions that have been on the receiving end of US military interventions.

Progressives sometimes express an uneasiness about this new movement, based on concerns about immigrants' social conservatism. But bridges can be built that benefit both sides. At the founding convention of the Arizona Migrant Coalition last September, 500 mostly Catholic and evangelical Latinos gave a standing ovation to an openly lesbian, white progressive state senator. They did so because she has been one of their most reliable allies. Social alliances--as the relationship between big business and moral conservatives has shown--are made, not born.

A word on guest workers. Some progressives (and most Democrats) supported the McCain-Kennedy bill, which authorizes guest-worker programs that provide a path to citizenship, as well as the bipartisan bill that emerged from the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 27, which included "temporary workers" along with several sweeteners added after the massive show of strength from immigrants in the streets. The improved Senate bill was a testament to the exciting momentum of this new movement. But these legislative proposals represent a trade-off that relegates future flows of immigrant workers to second-tier status, while addressing the urgent needs of those already here. The guest-worker provisions feed the voracious appetite for cheap labor of employers, who should be required to treat all workers with dignity and respect and to provide them with family-supporting wages and benefits. These employers prefer temporary workers not because the jobs

are temporary but because they know that these workers can be pushed harder, paid less and prevented from unionizing. On this issue the AFL-CIO has it right: Guest-worker programs are wrong. And a two-tier system would undercut exactly the sort of broad class-based agenda that could bring progressives and immigrant advocates together.

To be sure, the immigrant rights movement faces some major challenges. Will it embrace a broad social vision or a narrowly nationalist one, seeking only acceptance and assimilation? Will it represent diverse immigrant constituencies who face issues beyond legalization, such as assaults on civil liberties? And will it make common cause with African-Americans and other historically oppressed groups? The visionary and sophisticated leadership of the emerging movement suggests that the answers to those questions will be yes. But it remains to be seen whether progressives will place justice for immigrants at the center of their vision and work. The next opportunity: nationwide actions and demos planned for April 10 (see www.april10.org).