Credit: Tony Rinaldo

Immigrants are not the cause of labour degradation

Immigrant employment is not the cause but rather the consequence of growing inequality and deterioration in workers' pay and working conditions. In fact, immigrants have revitalized labour-organizing efforts in recent decades, argues Ruth Milkman.

A cornerstone of Donald Trump's populist appeal is his anti-immigrant animus; he tirelessly promotes the view that immigrants have unfairly "cut in line" ahead of US-born workers, and that this is a key reason for working-class emiseration. But in reality, despite their legendary willingness to take "jobs Americans don't want," immigrants are at best a minor player in the dramatic economic restructuring that has lowered the living standards of non-college-educated US-born workers in recent decades. Trump's xenophobic rhetoric obscures the forces that have driven this transformation, which first emerged in the 1970s in the United States and then spread to other wealthy countries.

Both migration dynamics and the balance of power between labour and capital shifted dramatically during the past few decades of the twentieth century. In the United States, labour migration from the global South grew rapidly after the 1965 Hart–Celler Act lifted immigration restrictions that had been in place for the preceding four decades. In the same period, new business strategies radically reshaped the workplace and weakened organized labour. Manufacturing firms moved more and more jobs from rich countries to those where labour was cheaper, undermining union power. Other large companies turned to domestic outsourcing, subcontracting key tasks to smaller firms, which typically competed for business by squeezing labour costs. And employers launched a massive anti-union offensive in sectors that could not be outsourced, such as construction. Meanwhile, business lobbyists successfully promoted deregulation, upending industries such as transportation and telecommunications and further eroding union power. By 2017, only 11% of US workers, and 6% of those in the private sector, were union members, down from about 35% in the 1950s.

De-unionization, deregulation and subcontracting combined to turn jobs that once had high wages, health coverage and pension benefits, and employment security into low-wage, precarious jobs with few or no benefits. After jobs were degraded in this way, many US-born workers abandoned the industries affected and sought employment in more desirable sectors. In response, employers recruited immigrants to fill the resulting vacancies, including undocumented workers as well as those with legal status. Thus immigrant employment in low-wage work was more a consequence than a cause of the reversal of fortune suffered by the US-born white working class — large swaths of which famously supported Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. The alienation and anger of those workers, while amply justified, is profoundly misdirected.

By the early twenty-first century, both unions and worker centres had developed deep roots in the immigrant workforce.

Ironically, even as US-born workers were becoming increasingly disillusioned with organized labour, which had lost so much of its former power and influence, immigrant labour organizing was expanding. Although employers had assumed that immigrants (especially the undocumented) would be docile workers who would be too fearful to join unions, in the 1980s and 1990s they signed up in droves. Despite the considerable risks that union organizing involves, and despite the fact that the jobs they found in the United States were superior to those they had previously held in their countries of origin, immigrant workers proved more receptive than US-born workers when presented with opportunities to join labour organizations.

The same aspirations for economic advancement that led them to migrate in the first place also made unionization and other forms of collective action appealing to immigrants. And their organizing was, ironically, made easier by the fact that so many employers engaged in referral hiring: because co-workers often recruited one another, immigrant social networks were embedded inside many workplaces, facilitating the process of building labour solidarity in unionization efforts. And in contrast to famously individualistic US-born workers, many immigrants saw their own fate as bound up with that of their community, a collective orientation that also facilitated labour organizing.

The Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors campaign in the late 1980s and 1990s was the iconic example of immigrant unionization, but similar efforts also succeeded in construction, health care, hotels and other industries in this period. Meanwhile, non-union forms of labour organizing were emerging among immigrant workers, led by hundreds of new 'worker centres' that sprang up in cities across the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. These community-based organizations organized and advocated for low-wage immigrants in sectors that traditional unions had abandoned or in which they never gained a foothold: domestic work, restaurants, taxi driving and day labour, to name a few. Although worker centres had far fewer resources than labour unions, they proved extremely adept at 'naming and shaming' employers who exploited immigrants, publicly exposing violations of minimum wage laws and other abuses, and initiating lawsuits to win redress as well. By the early twenty-first century, both unions and worker centres had developed deep roots in the immigrant workforce.

Although the influx of immigrants into the United States slowed to a trickle after the 2008 financial crisis, and unemployment is low, the Trump administration has nevertheless ramped up deportations, bringing policy in line with its xenophobic rhetoric and striking fear into the heart of long-established immigrant communities. The troubled US labour movement has remained a key defender of immigrant workers' rights. But its future survival also depends on educating and mobilizing US-born workers to oppose the neoliberal business strategies that have driven down their incomes and working conditions, rather than scapegoating immigrants. ❐

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