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USA

African Americans and Immigrant Workers

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Most African Americans support the right of young undocumented immigrants known as DACA (“Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival”) youth to stay in the country and become citizens. They reject the racism of Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric.

At the same time, their attitude toward older immigrants in undocumented status — those working in “blue collar” manufacturing jobs — is not so simple. These immigrants are viewed as job competitors.

Anyone who has worked in a factory or a job site knows that this tension exists. The mitigating factor is a strong union or leaders on the job who practice job solidarity.

Historically it’s been whites versus Blacks in these jobs. Today as the size of the immigration population has grown, it can be Blacks versus the undocumented. Even as unemployment overall has declined, the number of high paying blue-collar jobs has significantly fallen.

Although Black unemployment is at its lowest level in decades (still double that of whites), the numbers can be deceptive. Participation in the workforce is lower than in the 1970s when many racial barriers were busted. African Americans were able to cross the color line and get higher paying skilled jobs in construction, auto, steel and the airlines.

Black male labor participation is only 68%. In 1973 it was 78% according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since more jobs are now in technology and service jobs, the participation rate for Black men is expected to drop to 61% by 2026.

Today’s lower participation also reflects mass incarceration and fewer opportunities. Workers are not counted unless they register at state employment offices.

Job Competition and Tensions

Conflicts between white and Black workers have a long history. The backlash by the white working class against African American job gains accelerated in the 1980s under President Reagan. Affirmative action programs and consent decrees that forced employers and unions to end discrimination on the job were fiercely opposed.

All ethnic minorities had benefitted from these fights for equality on the job. Black and Brown workers were natural allies and fought together. This struggle has generally been the framework to win full equality for all workers.

The tensions between undocumented immigrant workers and Blacks is more recent, beginning with the reform of restrictive immigration law in 1965 and the end of legal segregation in the late 1960s.

Millions of legal and undocumented people came to the country. These social changes, coupled with the technological revolution that wiped out hundreds of thousands of mining, steel, auto and manufacturing jobs in the 1980s, brought a new ethnic dynamic into the once white-dominated workforce. African Americans had held many of

these jobs, and were rarely retrained with plant closures.

Demagogues like Trump and his racist base focus on “illegal” immigrants because most whites see the immigration issue as one of violating the law. The undocumented are “illegal aliens” who should be deported.

Black workers see the racism of this argument and don’t accept its lack of humanity. Yet many African Americans see opportunities to get better jobs if blue collar undocumented workers are eliminated as competitors.

The reality in big cities is fewer high-wage jobs for Black high school graduates. Some African American workers say, “Why not, if it gives us more jobs.” Civil rights leaders have said little about this conflict.

A January Harvard-Harris poll found that a clear majority of African Americans support a major reduction of legal immigration. Some 85% want the number to be less than one million people per year.

The Justice Department is also targeting legal residents and naturalized citizens if it can find errors in applications. Trump openly says his goal is to reduce the number of immigrants, including international students, living in the United States.

A March 16, 2018 article in The Los Angeles Times, “Liberals say immigration enforcement is racist, but the group most likely to benefit from it is black men,” discussed the issue. The Times has had extensive coverage of undocumented agricultural workers in the Central Valley of California. Many farm workers have faced ICE raids and deportations. Farm bosses have had difficulty getting non-Latinos, whites and Blacks, to take those jobs even at higher pay.

The Midwest and South have seen immigrant labor take jobs in the former unionized meatpacking industry and in urban centers. Deportations have become an issue for these employers who seek more temporary visas for workers from Mexico.

The issue of immigration is complex and not simply “legal” versus “illegal.” It is about actual jobs and who gets them. For the African-American communities, the concern is the lack of decent paying jobs and who their competitors are. It is why these tensions and conflicts are important to recognize.

Chicago Bakery Example

An article in the Chicago Sun Times (“At major Northwest Side bakery, labor issues pit blacks vs. Hispanics,” February 16, 2018) shows what can happen without leadership, weak or nonexistent unions and a fight for jobs between Blacks and immigrants.

“They’re being pitted against each other, so they don’t get along,” says Dan Giloth, a community organizer on the West Side. “We believe this is a divide-and-conquer strategy.

“Unfortunately, in Chicago, there is a widespread segregationist employment model to contract out most of your production work through temporary agencies and look the other way when they target employees by race or immigration status,” says Giloth, a former union organizer who is project manager for the group Coalition Against Segregation of Employees. “The goal is to create a very vulnerable workforce â€” and keep the wages low.”

The Sun Times added:

“Aryzta [a conglomerate in Switzerland] bought Cloverhill in 2014. At the time, according to bakery employees and community organizers, most of the employees were natives of Mexico, who’d been hired through Labor Network, a temporary-employment agency.

“But many of those workers weren’t temporary in the dictionary sense of the word. Most were so-called ‘permatemps’ temp workers who were permanently employed at Cloverhill. Most had been there for years, at least, and some for decades.”

After an audit of the three bakeries in 2017, a total of 800 workers, mainly from Mexico, lost their jobs. The Cloverhill Bakery had to hire new workers. Some 80 to 100% are African Americans.

It was the Obama administration in 2015 that sent the Labor Network a request for documentation of the 800 immigrant bakery workers. Nothing happened until 2017 when the Trump Justice Department stepped up enforcement. The undocumented immigrants left before immigration raided the factory.

“Those Hispanic employees didn’t return to work,” reported the Sun Times, leaving the bakery desperate to fill their jobs. The company turned to another placement agency, Metro Staff Inc., which provided Cloverhill with workers screened through the government’s “E-Verification” program.

The new wage was increased to \$14 per hour, \$4 an hour more than the undocumented Mexican workers. It is not uncommon that undocumented workers can’t complain even when bosses refuse to pay them Federal labor rates for overtime.

Most of the new employees are African American. The Latino workers still there were paid \$1 an hour premium to train the higher paid African American new workers.

“One of the facts of the case and a reality in America is that the immigrants do the work for less than an American will,” says [former consultant Felix] Okwusa’s lawyer, George Oparanozie. “It shows the dynamics of immigration in this country. Many of these Hispanic workers have been here a long time, pay taxes in a lot of instances, and many of them could now be kicked out of the country.”

Black Workers Made Call

Another unusual twist to the story is that the factory was unionized. The Swiss company tore up the contract even though the union is still formally present.

Lynne Lane, according to the Sun Times, was a union steward at Cloverhill. She said there were tensions as the two groups work side by side. Lane, who is Black, says it was Black workers who called a government hotline to report the Mexican workers to immigration authorities.

“It was [African American] workers in the plant that saw, you know, like I said, that had been treated unfairly and treated like secondary-class citizens by Hispanic workers,” Lane says.

“So, it was a whole lot of employees in the company. Well, they were given a number, as far as I know. They were given a number to call ... to call Immigration.”

Lane, who started in 2015, said then the workforce was 90% Latino; now the workforce is 90% African American.

One Latina former employee at Cloverhill said her husband was fired. “The ICE audit was devastating, she says: “We knew we could not prove he had authorization to work. We felt disappointed. Seventeen years working there, and suddenly they tell you this?”

Chicago Alderman Gilbert Villegas says Blacks have been pitted against Hispanics in the day-labor world “for quite some time. African Americans were discriminated against because day-labor agencies knew they could take advantage of the undocumented workers. Everybody who wants to work should have a fair opportunity and not be taken advantage of.”

Ironically, the E-Verify system that many unions have criticized can benefit African Americans. Most employers assume Blacks are citizens.

Labor unions (down to 6.4% in the private sector, according to a 2016 Bureau of Labor Statistics report) are so weak, even in cities like Chicago, that these segregated temp-agencies can set labor policies.

Broader Context

What occurred at the Chicago bakery should not be a surprise. Community organizers and academics have reported and analyzed the reasons for the conflicts.

Vernon M. Briggs. Jr. in a 2008 testimony before the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights explained:

“Because most illegal immigrants overwhelmingly seek work in the low skilled labor market and because the black American labor force is so disproportionately concentrated in this same low wage sector, there is little doubt that there is significant overlap in competition for jobs in this sector of the labor market. Given the inordinately high unemployment rates for low skilled black workers (the highest for all racial and ethnic groups for whom data is collected), it is obvious that the major loser in this competition are low skilled black workers. This is not surprising, since if employers have an opportunity to hire illegal immigrant workers, they will always give them preference over legal workers of any race or ethnic background. This is because illegal immigrant workers view low skilled jobs in the American economy as being highly preferable to the job opportunities in their homelands that they have left.”

In a 2014 paper on “neoliberal economic policies and their impact on African Americans,” Stephen Steinberg from the University of Notre Dame wrote that thanks to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, “African Americans found themselves in the proverbial position of being ‘last hired.’”

Steinberg went on “Once again, African Americans found themselves in the proverbial position of being ‘last hired,’ even though their new competitors in the labor market were mostly ‘people of color.’ To make matters worse, in both popular and academic discourses, immigrants have been cited as proof that African Americans lack the pluck and determination that have allowed millions of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean to pursue the American dream.”

African Americans and Immigrant Workers

Many African-American workers are thus pitted against natural allies instead of their employers. Throughout U.S. history, under slavery and then the segregated Jim Crow era, those in power convinced poorer whites to “blame” Blacks for their economic plight.

Many whites are Trump supporters for the same reason. They see all immigrants as well as Blacks as their competitors for jobs. The bosses are let off the hook since it is easier to keep “the others” below them, especially when unions are nonexistent or weak.

The struggle of African-American men and women to get jobs is the result of structural racism. White racism is easier to recognize because of 400 years of oppression and exploitation. But building solidarity with undocumented immigrants is not so obvious. They are the newcomers.

Divide and rule tactics will fail when working-class people are in unity against the common enemy — the employers, police forces and government protectors. Standing up and resisting the bosses is how solidarity is built between Blacks and undocumented immigrants, as well as between African Americans and anti-racist whites.

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