Mobilizing Immigrants and Blacks

written by Peter Drucker | February 26, 2010

AS STEPHEN STEINBERG SAYS, "There is nothing progressive about flooding the lower echelons of the labor market with desperate immigrants who depress wages . . . It is also problematic when the nation imports workers to fill higher echelons of the job pyramid. . . ." Progressives should support elements of his policy agenda such as vigorously enforcing anti-discrimination laws, expanding affirmative action and creating a job corps for minority youth.

But Steinberg's call to "face some hard choices" on immigration policy seems to imply, as many on the left argue here in Holland, that the left has to choose between defending immigrants or defending the wages and social gains of native-born workers. The reality is rather that immigrants are interesting to capital, and thus competitors of African Americans and other native-born workers, primarily to the extent that they are defenseless, have fewer rights and benefits and lower wages, and are less well organized. The left should respond by helping them organize and helping them win equal rights, benefits, and wages.

Whole sectors of the world economy now depend on undocumented workers who are paid less and treated worse than the law requires. These workers live in fear while the employers who exploit them go unpunished. This situation should be turned around. Even legal workers are at a disadvantage when they are denied the rights to vote or speak freely — as under the Patriot Act — denied food stamps and welfare — as in the United States since Clinton's "welfare reform" — or prevented by language barriers from knowing their rights, a situation that the English Only movement seeks to perpetuate. A labor movement that fails to make these fights a high priority is cutting its own throat.

Experience shows, on the other hand, that when immigrants have the same rights and militancy as non-immigrant workers, capital cannot use them to undermine labor's gains. In the Netherlands for example, where the children and grandchildren of Moroccan "guest workers" are Dutch citizens, speak Dutch and have a strong sense of entitlement, employers are unlikely to hire them anymore to do low-paid work. Now employers much prefer Polish immigrants, who are not rooted here and are barely beginning to protest against the way they are treated. The cases of countries like Germany and Israel, which give rights to some immigrants but not others depending on ethnicity, are particularly revealing. When Israel decided to get rid of the Palestinians who were doing much of the country's dirty work, replacing them with Jews of Arab origin — often from even poorer countries than the West Bank and Gaza, but Hebrew-speaking citizens and union members — was not considered a serious option. Instead Israel imported rightless, unorganized Romanians and Vietnamese to do the dirty work.

So Steinberg should add some items to his policy agenda: the right of immigrants to vote, whether citizens or not (as was permitted in many U.S. states until the beginning of the 20th century); equal protection under the constitution; equal entitlements to social benefits; a living wage for immigrants; explanations of civil and social rights in immigrants' own languages; tough employer sanctions for those who break the law; amnesty and green cards for undocumented workers who blow the whistle on lawbreaking and union busting employers.

None of this will be easy to win; but neither will Steinberg's other demands be. None of it amounts to a full solution to the racism that African Americans suffer from; neither would it eliminate the poverty that creates desperate immigrants. Getting rid of capitalism is the best way to

achieve those goals. Meanwhile the best way to make progress toward them is to fight for demands that will mobilize and empower both immigrants and the most oppressed native-born workers, and make it easier for them to unite in the struggle.

Footnotes