



3-07-11

Illegal Immigration and the Dilemma of American Unions

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Over its long and often turbulent evolution, the American labor movement has confronted few issues as persistently and as difficult as those related to the subject of immigration. By definition, immigration affects the size of the labor force at any given time as well as its geographical distribution and skill composition. These vital influences, in turn, affect national, regional and local labor market conditions. Most immigrants directly join the labor force upon entering the country, as do eventually most of their family members. Hence, organized labor never has ignored immigration trends. As Samuel Gompers, one of the founders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its long-time president, wrote in his autobiography: “Immigration is, in its most fundamental aspects, a labor problem.”

Immigration, therefore, has affected the developmental course of American unionism while, at the same time, the labor movement has sought to shape the size and character of ensuing immigrant entries through its influences on prevailing immigration policies at any given time.

The dilemma for organized labor has always been that over the long run immigration flows tend to increase the size of the working class (a positive political consideration); but in the short run immigration affects the labor supply which can modulate wage conditions and alter employment opportunities for the same working class (a negative economic consideration).

In its early years, would-be labor organizations initially sought to attract workers to join their ranks based on appeals made along political, utopian, and even radical lines. None of these proved successful. Learning from these adverse experiences, American labor leaders—such as Gompers—ultimately elected to pursue an organizing appeal centered on attaining short-run economic objectives—higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions at the work site. It manifests an economic preference for “bread and butter in the here and now” while rejecting the

political route of “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye.” This “job conscious” focus has traditionally distinguished the American union movement from similar movements in most of the rest of the free world and partially explains why there is no formal “labor party” in the United States as there is in other Western nations.

Thus, it is not surprising that at every juncture and with no exception prior to the 1990s, the American labor movement either directly instigated or strongly endorsed every legislative initiative by the U.S. Congress to regulate and to restrict immigration. It also supported all related efforts to strengthen enforcement of these policies. Labor leaders intuitively sensed that fluctuations in union membership were inversely related to prevailing immigration trends. When immigration levels tend to decline, union membership tends to increase (as they both did from the early 1930s through to the mid-1960s). When immigration levels tend to rise, union membership levels tend to fall (as they both have done since the mid-1960s up to the present). Subsequent empirical research has validated their supposition.

But in the early 1990s, with immigration levels soaring and union membership floundering, the labor movement at the leadership level began to waffle on its historic position of putting the economic interests of American workers ahead of those of would-be immigrants. By mid-decade, organized labor [as represented by the actions of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)] actively opposed the thrust of major reforms offered at the time by the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (chaired by Barbara Jordan) seeking to render the nation’s immigration system accountable for its economic consequences and to address in more effective ways the on-going massive abuse of existing policies by illegal immigrants. There was no mention of any desire to enact another amnesty for those illegal immigrants in the country.

Among its important findings, the Jordan Commission found that the level of legal immigration was too high and recommended that it be reduced by about 35 percent. In order to reduce the heavy emphasis placed on family reunification as the principle criterion for immigrant admissions, it recommended limiting family eligibility to the nuclear family as opposed to the open-ended current system giving preference to extended family considerations. Also, the Commission recommended ending all admission of unskilled foreign workers in the employment-based admission categories.

Startlingly, the AFL-CIO joined forces with business interests, agricultural employers and the “immigrant rights community to oppose all of these changes when Congress unsuccessfully sought to enact these reforms in 1996.

Not long afterward, the metamorphosis was complete. The AFL-CIO Executive Committee in 2000 it proclaimed that it is now “on the side of immigrant workers.” It announced that it favored repeal of the sanctions on employers who hire illegal immigrants as well as another generous amnesty for illegal immigrants currently in the country.

The historic reversal in its stance on immigration was due to the fact that organized labor was keenly aware that its membership rolls were falling. In response, major changes were made in the leadership of the AFL-CIO as well as in that of many national unions in the 1990s. These new leaders pledged to reverse this trend. With illegal immigrants flooding into the country and, largely for political reasons, the federal government unwilling to take any meaningful steps to combat the phenomenon, labor could either stick to its traditional position; or they could switch sides. They chose to become part of the “pro-immigrant” political coalition and hope that these new immigrant workers (and their supporters) will reward these efforts by fighting to become union members and for pro-labor causes. Unions, after all, do not hire workers; employers do. If employers are going to hire available illegal immigrants (who they often prefer over citizen workers) and the federal government refuses to keep them out of both the work force and the country, they concluded that they had to become immigrant friendly.

But by abandoning the insightful recommendations of the Jordan Commission and joining the “pro-immigrant” political lobby, there are real risks for organized labor.

First, it endangers the prospects that they will be able translate their imagined gains in new members into any real ability to win tangible wage and employment benefits for their rank and file members (since illegal immigration and the flow of unskilled legal immigrants will both continue and another mass amnesty will only legitimize the presence of millions of illegal immigrants already here). Secondly, the policy shift runs the risk of alienating the millions of low-skilled American workers (both native-born and foreign-born) who are not union members but who must continue to compete with this ongoing wave of immigrant job seekers. And thirdly, since the labor movement would be seen as being just another special interest group that is

quite willing to trade the national interest for its own self-interest agenda, it raises the real prospect that the broader populace will cease believing in the moral credibility of the labor movement.