

In Critical Solidarity

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's
Section on Labor and Labor Movements

Volume 8, Number 2

July 2008

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Message from the Chairs

Race and racism have obviously affected the development of working-class movements in the United States. From its inception, this country depended on the theft of land from the indigenous population and the employment of an enslaved African population for the production of its commercial raw materials. The free wage-labor force, almost synonymous with "white labor," suffered from exploitation in the developing capitalist economy and formed trade unions to fight for rights and decent treatment. But white workers faced a special challenge in deciding how to respond to slavery and to the racism that accompanied it and that spread its effects to free blacks as well as to other groups of color.

We all know that the labor movement's handling of the race question in the past is not something we can be proud of, with a few scarce exceptions. Certainly progress has been made on many fronts, but there are still large sore spots. Our Section reflects this problem in our membership. We tend to be heavily white, and while we have reasonable Asian and Latino membership levels, given their general underrepresentation in the ASA, a number of these members have international backgrounds and interests, while the number of local minorities remains small. African Americans are especially underrepresented in the Section.

Continued on page 2

In this Issue

Action Alert: Convention Workers	2
Opinions	2
ASA Information	14
Book Reviews	23
Publications and Announcements	29

Also, the Employee Free Choice Act would require employers to recognize unions when a majority of workers have signed cards in support of the union. Under the current law, employers can force workers to endure a sham election even after a majority have signed cards, effectively dictating the way workers should organize. Finally, the bill would allow workers to request federal mediation if they can't negotiate a first contract within 90 days of bargaining, in order to avoid employers' attempts to bargain in bad faith and indefinitely delay the contract process.

Labor has made the passage of this bill its top priority as a critical way to address workers' economic standing and America's broken labor law. Research by the Center for Economic Policy Research indicates that unionization raises the wages of the typical low-wage worker by 20.6 percent. And unions give the biggest boost to low-wage workers because these are the workers that have the least bargaining power in the labor market. The effort to pass this legislation has been gaining momentum, with numerous members of the progressive community signing on and making the Employee Free Choice Act part of the new agenda for the country. As we go back to our campuses and classrooms this fall, let's consider what we can teach our students and colleagues about the historic opportunity we have to achieve meaningful labor law reform in the United States.

For more information on the Employee Free Choice Act and for a cache of research on labor law, please visit www.americanrightsatwork.org or contact Velina Petrova, Ph.D., Research Analyst, at 202-822-2127 x115 or vpetrova@americanrightsatwork.org.

*"Freedom is never granted; it is won.
Justice is never given; it is exacted."*

- A. Philip Randolph

Election 2008: The Presidential Campaign and the Irony of NAFTA

Kathleen C. Schwartzman
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Some assert that the North American Free Trade Agreement has a "blowback" (unintended negative consequences of earlier government actions) and that it is American job loss. Perhaps the real NAFTA blowback is illegal immigration.

The first NAFTA blowback

In the face of rolling job losses, critics of NAFTA have identified that treaty as the cause of factory flight. In one recent case, the link is apparent. On May 31, 2008, Ford Motor Company announced its intent to invest \$3 billion in a new plant in Mexico and to eliminate a shift and extend summer shutdowns in each of its American truck plants. In other cases, such as the recent announcement by General Motors of its plan to close several plants, the link is not clear. While there does not seem to be a political will to prevent factory flight, some have called for a treaty "renegotiation." NAFTA supporters, in contrast, conclude that protectionist policies would be a disaster for the global economy. According to Investor's Business Daily (Feb 28, 2008), this focus on shuttered American factories is nothing more than demagoguery and a failure of Democratic leadership on trade issues. The next president will most likely address the problems of the economy without reference to NAFTA or this blowback.

The second NAFTA blowback

The real blowback is the rise in illegal immigration. Take the case of poultry. It is a cruel irony of NAFTA that the United States exports tons of poultry to Mexico, while Mexico exports thousands of migrants to the United

States, some of whom find jobs in American poultry plants.

In the first half of 2008, "Operation Streamline" was in full swing. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested thousands of immigrants. In March alone, there were over 9,000 immigration prosecutions. In crackdowns from California to Virginia, agents found document fraud and immigration violations in private homes, restaurants, employment agencies, and factories. Poultry plants figured prominently among these raids, and Mexican immigrants were a significant percentage of those found in the plant raids at Pilgrim's Pride Corp. and Tyson.

Tyson had been the target of an earlier ICE (formerly INS) undercover action referred to as "Operation Everest." This massive undercover operation resulted in a 2001 Department of Justice federal indictment that charged Tyson with racketeering and immigration law violations. Managers were accused of a 7-year scheme (1994 to 2001) to recruit and hire hundreds of illegal immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala for their plants. No Tyson executives were convicted, but a former employee was. According to the investigators, as many as one third of the workers at some Tyson plants were illegal immigrants.

Since the mid-1990s, immigrants have increasingly found jobs in the poultry industry. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimated that in 2003, 42 percent of the nation's workers in the meat and poultry industry were Hispanic. We may agree that these are "jobs that nobody wants" but prior to the mid-1990s Hispanic migration to the Southeast, Anglo and African-Americans filled these jobs.

"Operation Streamline" targeted a wide range of industries and locations. The mention of poultry serves to point to an irony of NAFTA. As expected, U.S. poultry exports to Mexico increased following NAFTA. The U.S. exported 5.74 times more poultry to Mexico in 2006 than it did in 1989. U.S. producers benefitted from the treaty because they were technologically more

advanced and could meet a rising Mexican demand.

Where is the NAFTA blowback? The case, already argued for imported sugar and corn, can be made for poultry. The volume of U.S. poultry entering Mexico contributed to the transformation of the industry and the countryside. Mexican medium and large producers, represented by the National Union of Poultry Producers (UNA), anticipated the negative effect of NAFTA on their industry and in 2003, persuaded the Mexican government to undertake a partial tariff rescheduling. In 2003, Mexico negotiated a five-year extension, protecting its market from U.S. chicken legs and quarters. This protection expired on January 1, 2008, some fourteen years after NAFTA. Poultry now enters Mexico duty-free. Medium and small producers have had a difficult time competing. In 1994, following the peso devaluation and NAFTA, many medium producers were absorbed by larger ones or went bankrupt. Small producers discontinued their backyard subsistence production.

From a purely theoretical point of view, this is an applaudable economic advancement. Mexican consumers benefitted from the U.S. capacity to produce more efficiently and cheaply. In signing NAFTA, Mexico announced its commitment to modernize the countryside. Then President Carlos Salinas de Gortari said "Mexico wants to export goods, not people," we should export tomatoes, not tomato pickers. In contemplating a rural modernization, the government held that – if farmers cannot be efficient, they should stop being farmers. Many, in fact, have embarked on that path and only stopped after they crossed the U.S.-Mexico border.

Authors estimate that the rural population is around 20 million, and constitutes somewhere between from one-fifth and one-fourth of the total population. According to official sources, in 2002, 80 percent of rural farmers were poor and half of Mexicans who lived in rural zones lived in extreme poverty. In 2001, the Mexican government passed a five-year plan (*El Plan*

Nacional de Desarrollo Sostenible 2000-2006 which acknowledged the condition of poverty in the countryside and continued the work of the 1995-2000 Program for Agriculture, livestock, and rural development. It established a primary emphasis on livestock. The laws, plans and programs (often in response to petitions from livestock producers) designed credits and other means at the disposal of the government to try to reinstate some livestock producers who were driven out of production due to marginal profit.

The current Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fish, and Nutrition (SAG-ARPA) expresses concern about the high rates of poverty in the countryside. In 2007, SAGARPA promoted a Special Program for Food Security. It offers technological assistance for subsistence family production, which would include diverse livestock and vegetables. SAGARPA views small scale poultry production as one option for addressing the financial and nutritional poverty of rural inhabitants. They even produced pamphlets describing how to construct chicken coups! PROCAMPO, another Mexican program to assist rural inhabitants, was extended by President Calderón beyond its initial expiration date of January 1, 2008, until 2012. Who knows if Mexico can reconstruct the scaffolding of rural survival that predated NAFTA.

When rural subsistence is precarious, and when urban areas no longer offer sufficient industrial jobs to absorb those displaced, where do inhabitants go? They migrate! The incoming U.S. president will most likely address the problem of the immigration but without reference to NAFTA or this blowback.

Conclusion

Did the North American Free Trade Agreement lead to the unanticipated flow of migrants? Undermined poultry production is an infinitesimal part of an enormous economic crisis for Mexican farmers. However, the irony—the presence of illegal Mexican immigrants working in the U.S. poultry factories and the rise of U.S.

poultry exports to Mexico—highlights some troublesome linkages that need to be revisited.

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Journalists Give Workers the Business

How the Mainstream Media Ignores Ordinary People in Economic News Coverage

David Madland

Center for American Progress (CAP)

A CAP Study finds that mainstream media coverage of a range of economic issues is biased toward business over workers.

The mainstream media has a profound impact on politics, helping everyday Americans determine what topics people think are important, shape how they feel about issues, and even how they vote.

Alternative media outlets such as blogs and social networking sites have proliferated in recent years, yet most people still receive their news from the mainstream media, which is especially true for economic news. This report focuses on how the mainstream media covers the economy, a subject where fundamental political questions arise about how income is generated and allocated among individual Americans and the businesses and companies they work for and sometimes invest in. Specifically, in its coverage of economic issues, does the media provide a balanced