



Day laborers, organized labor unite for workers' rights

MORNING after morning, in the downtown and suburbs of Oakland, in the muggy heat of summer and the chill of winter, day laborers gather by the tens of thousands in parking lots and on street corners in search of honest work and a decent day's pay. They are handy men, roofers, gardeners, construction workers. They are also the face of one of America's most vibrant movements for workplace rights.

Day laborers perform some of the most backbreaking work in our country. In a recent study by researchers from UCLA and the University of Illinois at Chicago, nearly half of day laborers surveyed said employers had cheated them out of wages. Forty-four percent said they were denied food, water or breaks during the workday and 20 percent said they had suffered injuries at the job site, most without receiving proper medical care.

Not only is this mistreatment wrong, it hurts us all. When standards are dragged down for any one class of workers, they are lowered for all workers.

Like previous generations of newly arrived immigrants, the presence of today's day laborers are a result of major economic changes -- in this case, the global demand for a flexible, self-starting workforce. And like the 19th century Irish, German and other immigrants who endured dangerous and inhumane conditions to build our country's magnificent bridges and buildings, today's day laborers work to provide a better future for their families. Yet while their labor is welcomed, their presence is not. They are shunned in their own communities. Their civil rights are routinely violated. They are attacked by vigilante militias and scapegoated by demagoguing politicians.

Day laborers, unfortunately, have become the public face of our nation's broken immigration system. The debate over reform is often harsh and divisive, mired in the politics of blame, pitting workers against workers and fragmenting communities with racist undertones antithetical to our notions of a free and fair society. But blaming day laborers for the failure of our national immigration policy makes as little sense as blaming coal miners for unsafe conditions in the mines.

That's why it is especially significant that despite these huge obstacles, day laborers are finding creative ways to struggle widespread abuse. They are employing the same formula at the root of the American union movement -- that collective action improves the lives of all working people. Day laborers on street corners have set a minimum wage for their labor. Together with other low-wage workers, day laborers have given birth to new institutions called worker centers, which have mushroomed over the last decade. Those centers, like unions, discourage exploitation by holding employers accountable. They aim to ensure that workers' most basic rights -- the right to fair pay and decent treatment -- are respected. Like unions, worker centers act on the core American belief that even the shunned and excluded can -- and should -- fight back, upholding labor standards for all.

Out of our common interests, the AFL-CIO and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network have formed a new partnership to work for workplace and national policy reforms. We believe workers -- regardless of race, gender, national origin or immigration status -- must come together to protect our rights and opportunities.

Bay Area workers who are part of the Day Laborer Program in San Francisco or the Worker Advocacy Project in Oakland will find new power and support in this partnership, as will union members whose boats will be lifted by the rising tide of living standards.

We need an immigration system consistent with the basic American values of fairness and equal treatment for all. We need an immigration policy that provides a real path to citizenship and political equality for workers already here, paying taxes and contributing to their communities, and that helps meet the future need for workers in a fair way. This requires rejecting so-called guest worker programs that keep some among us in an indentured, second-class status that lowers standards for all workers.

We also stand together against makeshift immigration policies that fail to protect even the most basic rights of immigrant workers and their families. By sidelining the issue of immigrant workers' rights, proposals such as those put forth by House Republicans further deepen the potential for abuse and exploitation of immigrants while undermining wages and labor protections for all.

The fight for workers' rights has never been as vibrant, varied and urgent. Whether these movements take the shape of organized unions or worker centers, the goal remains the same: to ensure the rights and freedoms of all workers. What is at stake is not visas, passports or work papers, but preserving the American dream.

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