

## LABOR'S GREAT OPPORTUNITY (8/01)

U.S. unions could very well be poised on this Labor Day for growth as great – or greater – than that of their boom days of the 1930s and their formative years at the turn of the century.

Just as then, organizers are targeting immigrant workers, then as now the fastest growing and most abused segment of the workforce.

There are millions of them, more than at any time in history – many here legally, many here illegally as undocumented workers. The immigrants work in virtually every industry, most notably in agriculture, construction and garment manufacturing, in hospitals, hotels and restaurants, meat processing plants and laundries, as janitors in those and a wide variety of other industries, and as domestics, gardeners and child care workers.

Theirs are generally essential but poorly paid jobs with few fringe benefits, often dangerous and often what AFL-CIO official Linda Chavez-Thompson calls "the hottest, stinkiest, dirtiest, lowest paying jobs there are." What's more, the immigrants' legal rights "are routinely violated."

Undocumented workers face the worst treatment, but many legal immigrants also aren't treated much better than were the notoriously exploited immigrants in the factories that once dominated the economy.

Thanks to lax enforcement by state and federal authorities, many of the immigrants' employers openly violate the laws guaranteeing workers a minimum wage, the opportunity to vote for union representation and such other basic rights as safe working conditions.

Workers who complain of violations, demand better conditions or support union organizing campaigns risk being fired or otherwise disciplined. The undocumented face the added threat of being reported to the government for deportation to their poverty-stricken countries where work under any conditions is scarce. Most dare not even report employer violence done against them or any other mistreatment, including sexual harassment.

Many workers here legally also dare not complain or demand their legal rights, lest they be replaced by more compliant undocumented workers.

Unions nevertheless have begun organizing the immigrant workers, legal and undocumented alike, and so far winning union contracts for thousands of them.

The unions, which now represent less than 15 percent of the country's workers, have been driven by a great need to expand. Given the steady growth of the workforce, they will have to sign up more than 400,000 new members per year just to keep even.

"Labor made its greatest gains when it organized immigrant workers, and we intend to build on that tradition," promises John Wilhelm, president of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union and head of the AFL-CIO's Task Force on Immigration Policy.

Immigrants, in any case, will continue pouring into the country for at least the next few years, primarily from Mexico and Central America. Unions will need to recruit them not only to increase membership numbers and re-energize the labor movement, but also to keep current members from having to compete with masses of highly exploited non-union workers.

New organizing campaigns are only a part of labor's drive to unionize immigrant workers. The AFL-CIO also is putting its considerable political clout behind legislation to grant legal status to more than five million of the immigrants who are here illegally.

For many years the labor federation adamantly opposed illegal immigrants, arguing that they took jobs away from U.S. workers and enabled employers to cut back the workers' pay, benefits and working conditions. It supported the current law calling for sanctions against employers who hire undocumented workers.

But the AFL-CIO came to realize that undocumented immigrants are here to stay and that the rarely enforced sanctions simply allow employers to threaten to disclose to immigration authorities the illegal status of workers demanding better treatment.

The AFL-CIO knows that if the undocumented workers are not unionized, they will continue undercutting other workers, but that unionizing them will be very difficult unless they are granted the legal rights and protections granted others -- above all the right to unionize.

It's also clear, as the AFL-CIO notes, that although the undocumented workers hold vital jobs, "pay taxes, support their families and contribute to their communities," their lack of such rights forces them "to live and work in fear of harassment, deportation and abuse." They are not even eligible for the unemployment and welfare benefits, health care, education and other public services they help finance.

Corporate employer lobbyists and their congressional allies are attempting to counter the AFL-CIO legislation legalizing the immigrants with bills that would create new "guest worker" programs that would subject them to even greater exploitation than they already suffer. The bills would allow employers to hire as many immigrants as they wished and at pay and under conditions they alone would set. The immigrants could remain in the country only as long as the employer who hired them wanted them here. They could not change employers.

It would amount to what the AFL-CIO calls "little more than the involuntary servitude that is outlawed in the Constitution."

Immigrant workers undoubtedly would much prefer the AFL-CIO's approach and, given the chance, eagerly opt for unionization. Labor's challenge, its greatest opportunity for badly needed growth, for revitalization, is to guarantee immigrants that choice.