

UC Santa Barbara

Other Recent Work

Title

Aqui estamos y no nos vamos! Global capital and immigrant rights

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2fj6c7ns>

Author

Robinson, William I.

Publication Date

2006-08-21

RACE & CLASS

SAGE Publications
New Delhi,
Thousand Oaks,
London

‘Aqui estamos y no nos vamos!’ Global capital and immigrant rights

WILLIAM I. ROBINSON

Abstract: The recent mass demonstrations by millions of Latino immigrant workers in the US, against planned legislation that could lead to the criminalisation and deportation of, literally, millions of workers shook the Bush administration and took commentators by surprise. The upsurge has been dubbed the new civil rights movement. It marks a new stage in globalisation and the phenomenon of mass, transnational migration that such globalisation has engendered. Unprecedented in size and scope, the movement challenges the structural changes bound up with capitalist globalisation and points to the necessity of transnational popular and democratic struggles against it.

Keywords: Great American Boycott, HR4437, labour, Latino, May Day, immigration, new civil rights movement, transnational, working class

William I. Robinson is Professor of Sociology, Global and International Studies, and Latin American and Iberian Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. His latest book is *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

Race & Class
Copyright © 2006 Institute of Race Relations Vol. 48(2): 77–91
10.1177/0306396806069525 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

A spectre is haunting global capitalism – the spectre of a transnational immigrant workers' uprising. An immigrant rights movement is spreading around the world, spearheaded by Latino immigrants in the US, who have launched an all-out fight-back against the repression, exploitation and racism they routinely face with a series of unparalleled strikes and demonstrations. The immediate message of immigrants and their allies in the United States is clear, with marchers shouting: '*aquí estamos y no nos vamos!*' (we're here and we're not leaving!). However, beyond immediate demands, the emerging movement challenges the very structural changes bound up with capitalist globalisation that have generated an upsurge in global labour migration, thrown up a new global working class, and placed that working class in increasingly direct confrontation with transnational capital.

The US mobilisations began when over half a million immigrants and their supporters took to the streets in Chicago on 10 March 2006. It was the largest single protest in that city's history. Following the Chicago action, rolling strikes and protests spread to other cities, large and small, organised through expanding networks of churches, immigrant clubs and rights groups, community associations, Spanish-language and progressive media, trade unions and social justice organisations. Millions came out on 25 March for a 'national day of action'. Between one and two million people demonstrated in Los Angeles – the single biggest public protest in the city's history – and millions more followed suit in Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Washington DC, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Tucson, Denver and dozens of other cities. Again, on 10 April, millions heeded the call for another day of protest. In addition, hundreds of thousands of high school students in Los Angeles and around the country staged walk-outs in support of their families and communities, braving police repression and legal sanctions.

Then on the first of May, International Workers' Day, trade unionists and social justice activists joined immigrants in 'The Great American Boycott 2006/A Day Without an Immigrant'. Millions – perhaps tens of millions – in over 200 cities from across the country skipped work and school, commercial activity and daily routines in order to participate in a national boycott, general strike, rallies and symbolic actions. The May 1 action was a resounding success. Hundreds of local communities in the south, midwest, north-west and elsewhere, far away from the 'gateway cities' where Latino populations are concentrated, experienced mass public mobilisations that placed them on the political map. Agribusiness in the California and Florida heartlands – nearly 100 per cent dependent on immigrant labour – came to a standstill, leaving supermarket produce shelves empty for the next several days. In the landscaping industry, nine out of ten workers boycotted work, according to the American Nursery and

Landscape Association. The construction industry suffered major disruptions. Latino truckers who move 70 per cent of the goods in Los Angeles ports did not work. Care-giver referral agencies in major cities saw a sharp increase in calls from parents who needed last-minute nannies or baby-sitters. In order to avoid a total shutdown of the casino mecca in Las Vegas – highly dependent on immigrant labour – casino owners were forced to set up tables in employee lunch-rooms and hold meetings to allow their workers to circulate petitions in favour of immigrant demands. International commerce between Mexico and the United States ground to a temporary halt as protesters closed Tijuana, Juarez-El Paso and several other crossings along the 2,000-mile border.¹

These protests have no precedent in the history of the US. The immediate trigger was the passage in mid-March by the House of Representatives of HR4437, a bill introduced by Republican representative James Sensenbrenner with broad support from the anti-immigrant lobby. This draconian bill would criminalise undocumented immigrants by making it a felony to be in the US without documentation. It also stipulated the construction of the first 700 miles of a militarised wall between Mexico and the US and would double the size of the US border patrol. And it would apply criminal sanctions against anyone who provided assistance to undocumented immigrants, including churches, humanitarian groups and social service agencies.

Following its passage by the House, bill HR4437 became stalled in the Senate. Democrat Ted Kennedy and Republican John McCain co-sponsored a 'compromise' bill that would have removed the criminalisation clause in HR4437 and provided a limited plan for amnesty for some of the undocumented. It would have allowed those who could prove they have resided in the US for at least five years to apply for residency and later citizenship. Those residing in the US for two to five years would have been required to return home and then apply through US embassies for temporary 'guest worker' permits. Those who could not demonstrate that they had been in the US for two years would be deported. Even this 'compromise' bill would have resulted in massive deportations and heightened control over all immigrants. Yet it was eventually jettisoned because of Republican opposition, so that by late April the whole legislative process had become stalled. In May, the Senate renewed debate on the matter and seemed to be moving towards consensus based on tougher enforcement and limited legalisation, although at the time of writing (late May 2006) it appeared the legislative process could drag on until after the November 2006 congressional elections.

However, the wave of protest goes well beyond HR4437. It represents the unleashing of pent-up anger and repudiation of what has been deepening exploitation and an escalation of anti-immigrant

repression and racism. Immigrants have been subject to every imaginable abuse in recent years. Twice in the state of California they have been denied the right to acquire drivers' licences. This means that they must rely on inadequate or non-existent public transportation or risk driving illegally; more significantly, the drivers' licence is often the only form of legal documentation for such essential transactions as cashing cheques or renting an apartment. The US-Mexico border has been increasingly militarised and thousands of immigrants have died crossing the frontier. Anti-immigrant hate groups are on the rise. The FBI has reported more than 2,500 hate crimes against Latinos in the US since 2000. Blatantly racist public discourse that, only a few years ago, would have been considered extreme has become increasingly mainstreamed and aired in the mass media.

More ominously, the paramilitary organisation Minutemen, a modern day Latino-hating version of the Ku Klux Klan, has spread from its place of origin along the US-Mexican border in Arizona and California to other parts of the country. Minutemen claim they must 'secure the border' in the face of inadequate state-sponsored control. Their discourse, beyond racist, is neo-fascist. Some have even been filmed sporting T-shirts with the emblem 'Kill a Mexican Today?' and others have organised for-profit 'human safaris' in the desert. One video game discovered recently circulating on the internet, 'Border Patrol', lets players shoot at Mexican immigrants as they try to cross the border into the US. Players are told to target one of three immigrant groups, all portrayed in a negative, stereotypical way, as the figures rush past a sign that reads 'Welcome to the United States'. The immigrants are caricatured as bandolier-wearing 'Mexican nationalists', tattooed 'drug smugglers' and pregnant 'breeders' who spring across with their children in tow.

Minutemen clubs have been sponsored by right-wing organisers, wealthy ranchers, businessmen and politicians. But their social base is drawn from those formerly privileged sectors of the white working class that have been 'flexibilised' and displaced by economic restructuring, the deregulation of labour and global capital flight. These sectors now scapegoat immigrants – with official encouragement – as the source of their insecurity and downward mobility.

The immigrant mobilisations have seriously threatened ruling groups. In the wake of the recent mobilisations, the Bush administration stepped up raids, deportations and other enforcement measures in a series of highly publicised mass arrests of undocumented immigrants and their employers, intended to intimidate the movement. In April 2006 it was revealed that KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton – Vice-President Dick Cheney's former company, which has close ties to the Pentagon and is a major contractor in the Iraq war – won a

\$385 million contract to build large-scale immigrant detention centres in case of an 'emergency influx' of immigrants.

Latino immigration to the US is part of a worldwide upsurge in transnational migration generated by the forces of capitalist globalisation. Immigrant labour worldwide is conservatively estimated at over 200 million, according to UN data.² Some 30 million are in the US, with at least 20 million of them from Latin America. Of these 20 million, some 11–12 million are undocumented (south and east Asia are also significant contributors to the undocumented population), although it must be stressed that these figures are low-end estimates.³ The US is by far the largest immigrant-importing country, but the phenomenon is global. Racist attacks, scapegoating and state-sponsored repressive controls over immigrants are rising in many countries around the world, as is the fightback among immigrant workers wherever they are found. Parallel to the US events, for instance, the French government introduced a bill that would apply tough new controls over immigrants and roll back their rights. In response, some 30,000 immigrants and their supporters took to the streets in Paris on 13 May 2006 to demand the bill's repeal.

The global circulation of immigrant labour

The age of globalisation is also an age of unprecedented transnational migration.⁴ The corollary to an integrated global economy is the rise of a truly global – although highly segmented – labour market. It is a global labour market because, despite formal nation state restrictions on the free worldwide movement of labour, surplus labour in any part of the world is now recruited and redeployed through numerous mechanisms to where capital is in need of it and because workers themselves undertake worldwide migration, even in the face of the adverse migratory conditions.

Central to capitalism is securing a politically and economically suitable labour supply, and at the core of all class societies is the control over labour and disposal of the products of labour. But the linkage between the securing of labour and territoriality is changing under globalisation. As labour becomes 'free' in every corner of the globe, capital has vast new opportunities for mobilising labour power where and when required. National labour pools are merging into a single global labour pool that services global capitalism. The transnational circulation of capital induces the transnational circulation of labour. This circulation of labour becomes incorporated into the process of restructuring the world economy. It is a mechanism for the provision of labour to transnationalised circuits of accumulation and constitutes a structural feature of the global system.

While the need to mix labour with capital at diverse points along global production chains induces population movements, there are sub-processes that shape the character and direction of such migration. At the structural level, the uprooting of communities by the capitalist break-up of local economies creates surplus populations and is a powerful push factor in outmigration, while labour shortages in more economically advanced areas is a pull factor that attracts displaced peoples. At a behavioural level, migration and wage remittances become a family survival strategy (see below), made *possible* by the demand for labour abroad and made increasingly *viable* by the fluid conditions and integrated infrastructures of globalisation.

In one sense, the South penetrates the North with the dramatic expansion of immigrant labour. But transnational migratory flows are not unidirectional from South to North and the phenomenon is best seen in global capitalist rather than North-South terms. Migrant workers are becoming a general category of super-exploitable labour drawn from globally dispersed labour reserves into similarly globally dispersed nodes of accumulation. To the extent that these nodes experience labour shortages – skilled or unskilled – they become magnets for transnational labour flows, often encouraged or even organised by both sending and receiving countries and regions.

Labour-short Middle Eastern countries, for instance, have programmes for the importation (and careful control) of labour from throughout south and east Asia and north Africa. The Philippine state has become a veritable labour recruitment agency for the global economy, organising the export of its citizens to over a hundred countries in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, North America and elsewhere. Greeks migrate to Germany and the US, while Albanians migrate to Greece. South Africans move to Australia and England, while Malawians, Mozambicans and Zimbabweans work in South African mines and the service industry. Malaysia imports Indonesian labour, while Thailand imports workers from Laos and Myanmar and, in turn, sends labour to Malaysia, Singapore, Japan and elsewhere. In Latin America, Costa Rica is a major importer of Nicaraguan labour, Venezuela has historically imported large amounts of Colombian labour, the Southern Cone draws on several million emigrant Andean workers and an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 Haitians live in the Dominican Republic, where they cut sugar cane, harvest crops and work in the *maquiladoras* under the same labour market segmentation, political disenfranchisement and repression that immigrant workers face in the United States and in most labour-importing countries.

The division of the global working class into 'citizen' and 'non-citizen' labour is a major new axis of inequality worldwide, further complicating the well-known gendered and racialised hierarchies

among labour, and facilitating new forms of repressive and authoritarian social control over working classes. In an *apparent* contradiction, capital and goods move freely across national borders in the new global economy but labour cannot and its movement is subject to heightened state controls. The global labour supply is, in the main, no longer coerced (subject to extra-economic compulsion) due to the ability of the universalised market to exercise strictly economic discipline, but its movement is juridically controlled. This control is a central determinant in the worldwide correlation of forces between global capital and global labour.

The immigrant is a juridical creation inserted into real social relations. States create 'immigrant labour' as distinct categories of labour in relation to capital. While the generalisation of the labour market emerging from the consolidation of the global capitalist economy creates the conditions for global migrations as a world-level labour supply system, the maintenance and strengthening of state controls over transnational labour creates the conditions for immigrant labour as a distinct category of labour. The creation of these distinct categories ('immigrant labour') becomes central to the global capitalist economy, replacing earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labour worldwide.

But why is this juridical category of 'immigrant labour' reproduced under globalisation? Labour migration and geographic shifts in production are alternative forms for capitalists to achieve an optimal mix of their capital with labour. State controls are often intended *not to prevent* but to *control* the transnational movement of labour. A *free* flow of labour would exert an equalising influence on wages across borders whereas state controls help reproduce such differentials. Eliminating the wage differential between regions would cancel the advantages that capital accrues from disposing of labour pools worldwide subject to different wage levels and would strengthen labour worldwide in relation to capital. In addition, the use of immigrant labour allows receiving countries to separate reproduction and maintenance of labour, and therefore to 'externalise' the costs of social reproduction. In other words, the new transnational migration helps capital to dispose of the need to pay for the reproduction of labour power. The inter-state system thus acts as a condition for the structural power of globally mobile transnational capital over labour that is transnational in actual content and character but subjected to different institutional arrangements under the direct control of national states.

The migrant labour phenomenon will continue to expand along with global capitalism. Just as capitalism has no control over its implacable expansion as a system, it cannot do away in its new globalist stage with transnational labour. But if global capital needs the labour power of transnational migrants, this labour power belongs to human beings

who must be tightly controlled, given the special oppression and dehumanisation involved in extracting their labour power as non-citizen immigrant labour. To return to the situation in the US, the immigrant issue presents a contradiction for political and economic elites: from the vantage points of dominant group interests, the dilemma is how to deal with the new 'barbarians' at Rome's door.

Latino immigrants have massively swelled the lower rungs of the US workforce. They provide almost all farm labour and much of the labour for hotels, restaurants, construction, janitorial and house cleaning, child care, gardening and landscaping, delivery, meat and poultry packing, retail, and so on. Yet dominant groups fear a rising tide of Latino immigrants will lead to a loss of cultural and political control, becoming a source of counter-hegemony and instability, as immigrant labour in Paris showed itself to be in the late 2005 uprising there against racism and marginality.

Employers do not want to do away with Latino immigration. To the contrary, they want to sustain a vast exploitable labour pool that exists under precarious conditions, that does not enjoy the civil, political and labour rights of citizens and that is disposable through deportation. It is the *condition of deportability* that they wish to create or preserve, since that condition assures the ability to super-exploit with impunity and to dispose of this labour without consequences should it become unruly or unnecessary. The Bush administration opposed HR4437 not because it was in favour of immigrant rights but because it had to play a balancing act by finding a formula for a stable supply of cheap labour to employers with, at the same time, greater state control over immigrants.

The Bush White House proposed a 'guest worker' programme that would rule out legalisation for undocumented immigrants, force them to return to their home countries and apply for temporary work visas, and implement tough new border security measures. There is a long history of such 'guest worker' schemes going back to the *bracero* programme, which brought millions of Mexican workers to the US during the labour shortages of the second world war, only to deport them once native workers had become available again. Similar 'guest worker' programmes are in effect in several European countries and other labour-importing states around the world.

The contradictions of 'immigrant policy reform' became apparent in the days leading up to the May 1 action, when major capitalist groups dependent on immigrant labour – especially in the agricultural, food processing, landscaping, construction, and other service sectors – came out in support of legalisation for the undocumented. Such transnational agro-industrial giants as Cargill, Swift and Co, Perdue Farms, Tyson Foods and Goya Foods, for instance, closed down many of their meat-packing and food processing plants and gave workers the day off.

Neoliberalism in Latin America

If capital's need for cheap, malleable and deportable labour in the centres of the global economy is the main 'pull factor' inducing Latino immigration to the US, the 'push factor' is the devastation left by two decades of neoliberalism in Latin America. Capitalist globalisation – structural adjustment, free trade agreements, privatisations, the contraction of public employment and credits, the break-up of communal lands and so forth, along with the political crises these measures have generated – has imploded thousands of communities in Latin America and unleashed a wave of migration, from rural to urban areas and to other countries, that can only be analogous to the mass uprooting and migration that generally takes place in the wake of war.

Just as capital does not stay put in the place it accumulates, neither do wages stay put. The flip side of the intense upsurge in transnational migration is the reverse flow of remittances by migrant workers in the global economy to their country and region of origin. Officially recorded international remittances increased astonishingly, from a mere \$57 million in 1970 to \$216 billion in 2005, according to World Bank data. This amount was higher than capital market flows and official development assistance combined, and nearly equalled the total amount of world FDI (foreign direct investment) in 2004. Close to one billion people, or one in every six on the planet, may receive some support from the global flow of remittances, according to senior World Bank economist Dilip Ratha.⁵ Remittances have become an economic mainstay for an increasing number of countries. Most of the world's regions, including Africa, Asia, Latin America and southern and eastern Europe report major remittance inflows.

Remittances redistribute income worldwide in a literal or geographic sense but not in the actual sense of *redistribution*, meaning a transfer of some added portion of the surplus from capital to labour, since they constitute not additional earnings but the separation of the site where wages are earned from the site of wage-generated consumption. What is taking place is a historically unprecedented separation of the point of production from the point of social reproduction. The former can take place in one part of the world and generate the value – then remitted – for social reproduction of labour in another part of the world. This is an emergent structural feature of the global system, in which the site of labour power and of its reproduction have been transnationally dispersed.

Transnational Latino migration has led to an enormous increase in remittances from Latino ethnic labour abroad to extended kinship networks in Latin America. Latin American workers abroad sent home some \$57 billion in 2005, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.⁶ These remittances were the number one source of

foreign exchange for the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica and Nicaragua, and the second most important source for Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Surinam, according to the Bank. The \$20 billion sent back in 2005 by an estimated 10 million Mexicans in the US was more than the country's tourism receipts and was surpassed only by oil and *maquiladora* exports.

These remittances allow millions of Latin American families to survive by purchasing goods either imported from the world market or produced locally or by transnational capital. They allow for family survival at a time of crisis and adjustment, especially for the poorest sectors – safety nets that replace governments and fixed employment in the provision of economic security. Emigration and remittances also serve the political objective of pacification. The dramatic expansion of Latin American emigration to the US from the 1980s onwards helped to dissipate social tensions and undermine labour and political opposition to prevailing regimes and institutions. Remittances help to offset macroeconomic imbalances, in some cases averting economic collapse, thereby shoring up the political conditions for an environment congenial to transnational capital.

Therefore, bound up with the immigrant debate in the US is the entire political economy of global capitalism in the western hemisphere – the same political economy that is now being sharply contested throughout Latin America with the surge in mass popular struggles and the turn to the Left. The struggle for immigrant rights in the US is thus part and parcel of this resistance to neoliberalism, intimately connected to the larger Latin American – and worldwide – struggle for social justice.

No wonder protests and boycotts took place throughout Latin America on May 1 in solidarity with Latino immigrants in the US. But these actions were linked to local labour rights struggles and social movement demands. In Tijuana, Mexico, for example, *maquiladora* workers in that border city's in-bond industry marched on May 1 to demand higher wages, eight-hour shifts, an end to 'abuses and despotism' in the *maquila* plants and an end to sexual harassment, the use of poison chemicals and company unions. The workers also called for solidarity with the 'Great American Boycott of 2006 on the other side of the border' and participated in a protest at the US consulate in the city and at the main crossing, which shut down cross-border traffic for most of the day.

The nature of immigrant struggles

Labour market transformations driven by capitalist globalisation unleash what McMichael calls 'the politics of global labor circulation'⁷

and fuel, in labour-importing countries, new nativisms, waves of xenophobia and racism against immigrants. Shifting political coalitions scapegoat immigrants by promoting ethnic-based solidarities among middle classes, representatives of distinct fractions of capital and formerly privileged sectors among working classes (such as white ethnic workers in the US and Europe) threatened by job loss, declining income and the other insecurities of economic restructuring. The long-term tendency seems to be towards a generalisation of labour market conditions across borders, characterised by segmented structures under a regime of labour deregulation and racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies.

In this regard, a major challenge confronting the movement in the US is relations between the Latino and the Black communities. Historically, African Americans have swelled the lower rungs in the US caste system. But, as African Americans fought for their civil and human rights in the 1960s and 1970s, they became organised, politicised and radicalised. Black workers led trade union militancy. All this made them undesirable labour for capital – ‘undisciplined’ and ‘noncompliant’.

Starting in the 1980s, employers began to push out Black workers and massively recruit Latino immigrants, a move that coincided with deindustrialisation and restructuring. Blacks moved from super-exploited to marginalised – subject to unemployment, cuts in social services, mass incarceration and heightened state repression – while Latino immigrant labour has become the new super-exploited sector. Employers and political elites in New Orleans, for instance, have apparently decided in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to replace that city’s historically black working class with Latino immigrant labour. Whereas fifteen years ago no one saw a single Latino face in places such as Iowa or Tennessee, now Mexican, Central American and other Latino workers are visible everywhere. If some African Americans have misdirected their anger over marginality at Latino immigrants, the Black community has a legitimate grievance over the anti-Black racism of many Latinos themselves, who often lack sensitivity to the historic plight and contemporary experience of Blacks with racism, and are reticent to see them as natural allies. (Latinos often bring with them particular sets of racialised relations from their home countries.)⁸

White labour that historically enjoyed caste privileges within racially segmented labour markets has experienced downward mobility and heightened insecurity. These sectors of the working class feel the pinch of capitalist globalisation and the transnationalisation of formerly insulated local labour markets. Studies in the early 1990s, for example, found that, in addition to concentrations in ‘traditional’ areas such as Los Angeles, Miami, Washington DC, Virginia and Houston, Central

American immigrants had formed clusters in the formal and informal service sectors in areas where, in the process of downward mobility, they had replaced 'white ethnics', such as in suburban Long Island, the small towns of Iowa and North Carolina, in Silicon Valley and in the northern and eastern suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area.⁹

The loss of caste privileges for white sectors of the working class is problematic for political elites and state managers in the US, since legitimisation and domination have historically been constructed through a white racial hegemonic bloc. Can such a bloc be sustained or renewed through a scapegoating of immigrant communities? In attempting to shape public discourse, the anti-immigrant lobby argues that immigrants 'are a drain on the US economy'. Yet, as the National Immigrant Solidarity Network points out, immigrants contribute \$7 billion in social security a year. They earn \$240 billion, report \$90 billion, and are only reimbursed \$5 billion in tax returns. They also contribute \$25 billion more to the US economy than they receive in health-care and social services.¹⁰ But this is a limited line of argument, since the larger issue is the incalculable trillions of dollars that immigrant labour generates in profits and revenue for capital, only a tiny proportion of which goes back to them in the form of wages.

Moreover, it has been demonstrated that there is no correlation between the unemployment rate among US citizens and the rate of immigration. In fact, the unemployment rate has moved in cycles over the past twenty-five years and exhibits a comparatively lower rate during the most recent (2000–2005) influx of undocumented workers. Similarly, wage stagnation in the United States appeared, starting with the economic crisis of 1973 and has continued its steady march ever since, with no correlation to increases or decreases in the inflow of undocumented workers. Instead, downward mobility for most US workers is positively correlated with the decline in union participation, the decline in labour conditions and the polarisation of income and wealth that began with the restructuring crisis of the 1970s and accelerated the following decade as Reaganomics launched the neo-liberal counterrevolution.¹¹

The larger backdrop here is transnational capital's attempt to forge post-Fordist, post-Keynesian capital-labour relations worldwide, based on flexibilisation, deregulation and deunionisation. From the 1970s onwards, capital began to abandon earlier reciprocities with labour, forged in the epoch of national corporate capitalism, precisely because the process of globalisation allowed to it break free of nation state constraints. There has been a vast acceleration of the primitive accumulation of capital worldwide through globalisation, a process in which millions have been wrenched from the means of production, proletarianised and thrown into a global labour market that transnational

capital has been able to shape.¹² As capital assumed new power relative to labour with the onset of globalisation, states shifted from reproducing Keynesian social structures of accumulation to servicing the general needs of the new patterns of global accumulation.

At the core of the emerging global social structure of accumulation is a new capital-labour relation based on alternative systems of labour control and diverse contingent categories of devalued labour – subcontracted, outsourced, casualised, informal, part-time, temp work, home-work, and so on – the essence of which is cheapening and disciplining labour, making it ‘flexible’ and readily available for transnational capital in worldwide labour reserves. Workers in the global economy are themselves, under these flexible arrangements, increasingly treated as a subcontracted component rather than a fixture internal to employer organisations. These new class relations of global capitalism dissolve the notion of responsibility, however minimal, that governments have for their citizens or that employers have towards their employees.

Immigrant workers become the archetype of these new global class relations. They are a naked commodity, no longer embedded in relations of reciprocity rooted in social and political communities that have, historically, been institutionalised in nation states. Immigrant labour pools that can be super-exploited economically, marginalised and disenfranchised politically, driven into the shadows and deported when necessary are the very epitome of capital’s naked domination in the age of global capitalism.

The immigrant rights movement in the US is demanding full rights for all immigrants, including amnesty, worker protections, family reunification measures, a path to citizenship or permanent residency rather than a temporary ‘guest worker’ programme, an end to all attacks against immigrants and to the criminalisation of immigrant communities. While some observers have billed the recent events as the birth of a new civil rights movement, clearly much more is at stake. In the larger picture, this goes beyond immediate demands; it challenges the class relations that are at the very core of global capitalism. The significance of the May 1 immigrant rights mobilisation taking place on international workers’ day – which has not been celebrated in the US for nearly a century – was lost on no one.

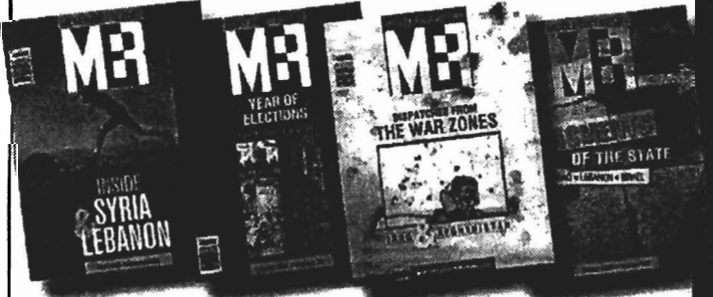
In the age of globalisation, the only hope of accumulating the social and political forces necessary to confront the global capitalist system is by transnationalising popular, labour and democratic struggles. The immigrant rights movement is all of these – popular, pro-worker and democratic – and it is by definition transnational. In sum, the struggle for immigrant rights is at the cutting edge of the global working-class fight-back against capitalist globalisation.

References

- 1 For these details, and more, see, inter alia, summaries of press reports from around the US compiled by *CIS-DC Info Digest* (Vol. 41, no. 17), 'Tally of plant closings and demonstrations', available by request at < <http://www.mutualaid.org> > .
- 2 Manuel Orozco, 'Worker remittances in an international scope', *Working Paper* (Washington, DC, Inter-American Dialogue and Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank, March 2003), p. 1.
- 3 For this and more data and links to different academic and foundation reports and government census agencies, see the University of California at Santa Barbara web site < <http://aad.english.ucsb.edu> > .
- 4 On migration and globalisation, and more generally on capitalism and migration, see, among others, Peter Stalker, *Workers Without Frontiers* (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 2000); Robin Cohen, *The New Helots: migrants in the international division of labour* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1987); Nigel Harris, *The New Untouchables: immigration and the new world worker* (London, I. B. Tauris, 1995); Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: international population movements in the modern world* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Lydia Potts, *The World Labor Market: a history of migration* (London, Zed, 1990). For discussion of current topics and new directions in the sociology of migration, see Alejandro Portes, 'Immigrant theory for a new century: some problems and opportunities', *International Migration Review* (Vol. 3, no. 4, 1997), p. 799-825. See also Alejandro Portes and Jozsef Borocz, 'Contemporary immigration: theoretical perspectives on its determinants and modes of incorporation', *International Migration Review* (Vol. XXIII, no. 3, 1990), pp. 606-30.
- 5 For these details, see Richard Boudreaux, 'The new foreign aid: the seeds of promise', *Los Angeles Times* (14 April 2006), p. 1A.
- 6 Inter-American Development Bank, *Remittances 2005: promoting financial democracy* (Washington DC, IDB, 2006).
- 7 Philip McMichael, *Development and Social Change: a global perspective*, (Thousand Oaks, CA, Pine Forge Press, 1986), p. 189.
- 8 In a commentary observing that mainstream Black political leaders have been notably lukewarm to the immigrant rights movement, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes: 'The displacement of Black workers is a real problem – but not a problem caused by displaced Mexican workers . . . if the state is allowed to criminalize the existence [of] immigrant workers this will only fan the flames of racism eventually consuming Blacks in a back draft of discrimination. How exactly does one tell the difference between a citizen and a non-citizen? Through a massive campaign of racial profiling, that's how . . . In fact, the entire working class has a stake in the success of the movement.' She goes on to recall how California building owners and labour contractors replaced Black janitors with largely undocumented Latino immigrants in the 1980s. But after a successful Service Employees International Union drive in the 'Justice for janitors' campaign of the late 1980s and 1990s, wages and benefits went up and the union's largely Latino members sought contractual language guaranteeing African Americans a percentage of work slots. See Taylor, 'Life ain't been no crystal stair: Blacks, Latinos and the new civil rights movement', *Counterpunch* (9 May 2006), downloaded 18 May 2006 < <http://www.counterpunch.org/taylor05082006.html> > .
- 9 See the special issue of *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 'On the line: Latinos on labor's cutting edge' (Vol. 30, no. 3, November/December 1996).
- 10 For this data, further information and links, see the Network's website at < <http://www.immigrantsolidarity.org> > .
- 11 For these details see < <http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/econimpacts.html> > .
- 12 In drawing on migrant workers, dominant groups are able to take advantage of a global reserve army of labour that has experienced historically unprecedented

growth in recent years. For instance, the entry of China, India and the former Soviet bloc into the global economy led to a doubling of the global labour market, from 1.46 to near 3 billion workers by 2000, which resulted in a decline in the global capital/labour ratio to just 55–60 per cent of what it otherwise would have been. See Richard Freeman, 'China, India and the doubling of the global labor force: who pays the price of globalization', *The Globalist* (3 June 2005), posted at *Japan Focus*, 26 August and downloaded on 13 October 2005, <<http://www.japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=377>>.

Hard-hitting. Clear-headed.



Middle East Report.
Get the story from the magazine that takes on all the players—no exceptions.

Subscribe online now at www.merip.org.

Published by Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), Washington, DC.