

Labor Unions Now Recruiting Immigrant Workers

by Jennifer Ludden



All Things Considered, November 4, 2008 · Times are changing when it comes to labor unions and immigrant workers.

For more than a century, organized labor has had a wary attitude toward immigrant workers. The reasoning was that the more foreign workers in the labor market, the less bargaining power for unions — especially if those workers were undocumented and easily exploited.

But in recent years, some labor unions have made a dramatic shift: They're now recruiting immigrants, no matter their legal status.

Join The Union

In the mid-1990s, Gig Rittenauer was a roofer in Ohio and a loyal member of the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers. He was frustrated by the increasing number of immigrants he'd see staffing construction jobs. So Rittenauer and some colleagues started keeping cameras in their cars and paying random visits to work sites.

"We'd take pictures," says Rittenauer. "It really drives 'em off, because they know that they're illegal. And that was a ploy just to scare 'em really."

The ploy made Rittenauer feel like he was having an effect protecting his union job. But eventually he realized the immigrant workers weren't going away for good — and the federal government wasn't going to make them.

That's when Rittenauer decided that if an immigrant is here working anyway, it is best if he joins the union.

"If he doesn't, he's going to continue to do our work for much less wage and benefits, probably no benefits," he says. "And it's just the nature of the beast. You either rise people up, or you let 'em pull you down."

These days, Rittenauer travels the country recruiting for the roofers union.

Recruiting In Baton Rouge

On a recent trip to Baton Rouge, where Hurricane Katrina brought a rush of Hispanic workers and Hurricane Gustav has kept them there, Rittenauer and colleague Baldo Diaz find roofers on lunch break at a construction site.

The recruiters ask about a dozen Hispanic roofers how things are going. The roofers union does not check workers' legal status, but Rittenauer says the companies he sends them to likely will.

Diaz then launches into the benefits of union membership: better salaries, benefits, even a pension.

The men give him blank stares. A few look skeptical. Diaz says not all Latin American countries have unions in the construction industry.

And he says there are many challenges in recruiting recent immigrants.

"They want to send money to their families back home. And if there isn't always enough work to go around, they don't want to wait for the next union job," Diaz says.

Unorganizable?

Undocumented workers in particular have long been considered "unorganizable," according to Ruth Milkman, who heads UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

Milkman says that not only is it assumed these workers are here temporarily and therefore not interested in investing in a union, but that they're also too worried that if their legal status were discovered, they'd be fired.

Milkman says these are real concerns. And stepped-up federal immigration raids have probably heightened fears. But Milkman says recruiters have learned something else, too.

"As one immigrant worker I once interviewed told me, she said 'In [El Salvador], if you organize a union, they kill you,' " she says. "Here, you lose a job that pays the minimum wage."

In fact, Milkman says, studies show foreign-born workers are *more* receptive to joining a union than the native born.

And she's seen that eagerness grow since the spring of 2006. That's when immigrant workers flooded the streets of major cities, pushing Congress to overhaul immigration laws. Milkman says the labor movement took note.

"Here they are in a situation where union density is going down, down, down every year. And you see literally millions of people in the streets, demanding their rights, organizing

collectively," Milkman says. "Anybody in the labor movement who hadn't gotten it before that, about immigrant organizing, certainly did appreciate the potential."

But the notion of expanding union membership with undocumented immigrants does not sit well with everyone.

Pushback

In a company-provided trailer in Port Allen, La., a few members of the roofers union watch a Saints game. Andrew McIsaac moved here from Detroit. He loves his job. He does not think illegal immigrants should be allowed in the union.

"It's hard for our next generation, our kids, to come in here and to have illegal immigrants taking the jobs for our kids," McIsaac says.

His colleague, John Owczarski, agrees. He says both his parents were immigrants and came legally.

But what about wage and hour protections? Federal law applies them equally, regardless of legal status. Owczarski says that makes sense.

"If they're doing the same work and they're as skilled, yeah, they should get the same wages, 'cause you know why? If they're gonna do it for a dollar, I'm doing it for 15 bucks an hour, that's hurting me. Yeah, absolutely."

But should that same illegal immigrant be able to join the union?

"No," Owczarski says.

Even as recruiter Rittenauer tries to persuade immigrants to join the roofers union, he says he has more work to do persuading native-born members why this is a good thing. But he's clear in his mind who the enemy is.

"I think I see more contractors that take advantage of the immigrants because they know they can. So I think it's more the contractor that's taking the jobs from Americans than it is the immigrants," Rittenauer says.

Rittenauer figures the more immigrant workers who join unions, the fewer there will be for bad-apple contractors to exploit.