

Labor's May Day Call from Both Sides of the Border

By Laura Carlsen | May 9, 2006

“May Day” is an international signal of distress. When millions marched in the streets of cities across the United States, and hundreds of thousands protested throughout Mexico on May 1, International Workers’ Day, they sent out an urgent message to end a system of global competition based on eroding labor rights.

The immigrants’ rights demonstrations and boycott in the United States galvanized a huge proportion of the estimated 12 million undocumented workers and 40 million-strong Latino population behind the simple concept of allowing workers and their families to live without the threat of imprisonment and deportation. The nationwide boycott that closed down everything from restaurants and port facilities in Los Angeles to meatpacking plants in the Midwest, proved the economic power of immigrant workers and revealed unexpected support among workers, church groups, African Americans, and other parts of society. In Mexico, the unusually large turnout for the May Day demonstrations resulted from the convergence of public outrage at the police repression of striking workers at a Michoacán steel mill, the recent death of 65 miners in a mine explosion, government intervention in internal union affairs, and the presence in Mexico City of the “Other Campaign” led by the Zapatistas. Waves of organized workers, human rights activists, farmers, punks, and students flowed into the central plaza, traditionally reserved for the orderly ranks of the government-controlled unions.

In both countries what happened on May 1 reflected social pressures that had become uncontainable. As in France and other parts of the world, the demonstrations were a response to governments that have adopted strict anti-labor policies to compete on a global market.

The North American Free Trade Agreement decimated the small and medium industries and subsistence farming in Mexico that provided most employment. Now, what is often referred to as “Mexico’s escape valve”—the emigration of the un- and under-employed northward—has become the United States’ pressure cooker.

Anti-immigration groups have sought to portray the issue as one of border security. But as the immigrants marched, they chanted “We are all Americans”—belying the fear mongering that immigrants are terrorists in disguise. The work stoppages illustrated that immigration is fundamentally a labor issue in the United States as well.

This has thrown the Republican Party into disarray—split between the demands of its socially conservative right for a return to Wonder Bread communities and the demands of its corporate backers for more stable access to cheap labor. It has confused the Democratic Party, which seems to be more interested in testing which way political winds are blowing than resolving a fundamental problem of national integration and labor rights.

In Mexico the escape valve has become a motor of the economy. At over \$20 billion a year, remittances bring in more money than foreign direct investment and are equivalent to 71 % of oil exports—at a time when oil revenues have soared. They help pay foreign debt, offset rural impoverishment, and gloss over regional disparities.

This has led some to question the Mexican government’s commitment to solving the immigration crisis within the framework of “co-responsibility,” as emphasized at the Cancun trilateral summit in late March. But if you ask migrants why they are leaving family and community possibly forever, they will not say it’s because the Mexican government failed to deter them. They will reply that they either do not have work or do not receive a wage that supports their families. Right back to the labor question.

Government policies over the past decade have willfully undermined the role of organized labor in defending



workers' rights. They have actively sought to control the working population routinely excluded from the bonanzas reflected in corporate annual reports. Whether it's keeping immigrant workers in a perpetual underclass by rejecting broader legal immigration and legalization, or refusing to respect the right to organize, these anti-labor practices are at the root of the contradictions that led to the May Day distress signal. In Mexico and the United States, broad sectors of the labor force are no longer even assured the security of a decent income, benefits, and legal status—despite working fulltime jobs.

The argument that unemployment and the working poor would gradually disappear under free trade regimes has proved false. The International Labor Organization recently issued a report on labor in Latin America that destroys any hope that the situation for workers is improving even in times of economic growth.

Fifty percent of the Latin American workforce cannot find jobs in the formal sector. Twenty-three million are unemployed, and 103 million work in the informal sector with no rights or benefits. The informal sector now employs 53% of the economically active population and generates six out of every 10 jobs created. As the economy goes underground, labor rights are buried.

Things get worse if you're a woman or young person. Female unemployment is 40% above male and monthly income is 66% below. According to the ILO report, youth make up 42% of the unemployed. Not surprisingly, the numbers of women and youth migrating to the United States have grown exponentially.

Lais Abramo of the International Labor Organization summed up the challenge. "A decent job means that it's not enough to create employment—we have to create conditions for a dignified life." Historically, an organized labor movement capable of demanding and enforcing its rights has been the only way to guarantee that a job assures dignified living conditions. It still is.

Mexicans working in the United States and workers in Mexico share more than a common language and culture. They both work under conditions that deny them basic human and labor rights. And this year, they were both in the streets to change that.

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