

Immigrants and the revival of May Day in the United States, and the future for a united working-class fightback

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The May Day strike/boycott of 2006 brought millions of immigrants out on the streets in cities and towns, large and small, from coast to coast to protest repressive legislation against undocumented workers. The largest ports in the country, in Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, were almost completely shut down. Meatpacking chains in the Midwest and South had to close. Businesses closed or had reduced staffs. School attendance dropped as students poured into the streets. The working class tide of immigrants, led by Latina/os, but including immigrant workers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, flowed through the streets of Los Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Houston, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Orlando, Tampa, Miami, and many other cities.

This was the largest mass political action by workers in the United States in recent history. It was a combination strike/boycott/demonstration. It was not only a protest against the attacks emanating from Congress and the right wing against undocumented workers, but a demand for expanded rights and an end to repression. The demonstrations were originated by grassroots organizers in Los Angeles and were called on May Day because it is International Workers' Day and because the millions of undocumented and documented immigrants come from countries where the May Day tradition is strong and class consciousness is high.

In centers of immigrant working class strength, such as California, and among unions with strong immigrant memberships, the local or statewide labor movement officially supported and participated in May Day. In almost all cases it was because of the weight of the immigrant workers in their organizations. In the United States now, immigrant workers, those without papers, play a decisive role in the following industries: restaurant, hotel, construction, meat-processing, agriculture, household services and child care.

This paper aims to describe the situation facing immigrants in the United States over the past two years, outline the renewed attack from the ruling class and its media against immigrants--with special attention to the CNN "star" immigrant basher Lou Dobbs--to look at the related struggle against NAFTA in Mexico, and to connect the struggle of the immigrants to that of the working class especially in the United States and Mexico.

The massive demonstrations of immigrants in the spring of 2006 were a phenomenal step forward for the class struggle in the United States. The spring mobilizations were a welcome development not least because there has been such a longstanding period of reaction. It had appeared that the capitalist ruling class and its representatives in the U.S. government had the upper hand completely, and that the mass struggle was dormant.

But then came the demonstrations of March, April and May. This development shook the ruling class. It frightened and deeply worried them. It gave a glimpse, even in the midst of periods of reaction, of the vast, crucial struggles that are on the horizon. This is the meaning of the actions carried out last spring by a vital and previously unheard-from section of the working class: that everyone who witnessed them knew that they were a glimpse of the future.

Bourgeois pundits in the mainstream media paid and are still paying close attention to the state

of the immigrant-rights movement. They are deeply interested. After all, when millions of workers demonstrate, and one of those demonstrations is on a weekday, May Day no less, and workers stay out of work to take to the streets, you can be sure the ruling class is monitoring the situation closely.

The reality is that, although the mass demonstrations had a huge impact, and succeeded in getting the repressive Sensenbrenner bill defeated in Congress, the reactionary anti-immigrant offensive is rolling forward. And it has a chilling effect.

For example, the Senate voted to allocate \$6 billion to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. This is one of the worst outrages.

At the same time, massive raids are being carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a branch of the Department of Homeland Security. In cities across the country, ICE is trying to push immigrant workers further underground and terrorize them away from organizing and fighting for their rights. These ICE sweeps are similar to the Palmer Raids of the 1920s that carried out an anti-communist hunt against all progressives who had immigrated to the U.S. from Europe .

In addition to the border wall and the ICE raids, local and state governments, most notably in Pennsylvania and Arizona but also elsewhere, have been passing vicious anti-immigrant legislation. So all in all, there is a calculated attempt to create a thoroughly intimidating and threatening climate for immigrant workers, especially the undocumented.

This is all a result of the immigrant-bashing sweeping the country. Lou Dobbs , U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado , the Minutemen—the diatribes from these forces create the conditions for these kinds of hateful racist acts.

But without immigrant labor, the economy would collapse. So why the witch hunt? To drive immigrants further underground. To further manipulate this reserve army of labor.

STEPPED UP REPRESSION

On June 24, 2007 , the Associated Press reported that during the height of the immigration debate last year, from April through June of 2006, the number of arrests of immigrants more than doubled over the same period in 2005.

Nearly 5,000 immigrants were arrested according to information obtained by the AP after filing a Freedom of Information request.

In 2006, almost 20,000 workers were deported. Agents from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency raided factories and communities across the country. They often beat down doors of people's homes in the early morning hours or entered factories with machine guns and face masks.

Adding to the fearful climate is news such as this: The Miami Herald reported on July 8 that there are 630,000 immigrants who are believed to be living in the U.S. and have been issued deportation orders.

These are mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, wives, husbands, and lovers—workers all—who are living in profound fear as the raids and deportations continue while the hope of obtaining legalization dims.

New laws signal more attacks on immigrant workers

In yet another blow to immigrants as well as a major concession to the right-wing agenda, the Bush administration announced last August significant measures related to immigration policy.

Then Department of Homeland Security officials announced on Aug. 10, 2007 a new package of immigration plans that the government stated would be backed up by increased raids at workplaces. (New York Times, Aug. 8, 2007)

According to the National Immigration Law Center the plans include:

- an increase in the militarization of the U.S./Mexican border (in July, the Senate added \$3 billion to a homeland security bill, most to be allocated to the border);
- expanded detention facilities with no review of current widespread human rights violations;
- a reduction in access to court hearings to challenge erroneous deportation orders;
- “streamlining” guest worker programs whose abuses have yet to be addressed; and
- expanding the list of so-called international “gangs” to deny admission in the U.S.

The announced measures—which totaled 26—were developed by an astounding multi-agency coordination that included the Departments of State, Labor, Commerce, Homeland Security, Education and Treasury as well as the Social Security Administration.

The principal spokespeople for the proposals, however, were Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.

Homeland Security’s predominance in the issue demonstrates the government’s punitive and repressive attitude towards today’s immigrant population.

While most of the recent proposals continue or expand current policies, they signal a ruthless attack not only against immigrant workers but also in reality all U.S. workers.

Two key components of the announced measures that are most touted in the press are related to Social Security policy and employer sanctions, which means increasing fines against bosses who knowingly hire undocumented workers.

These measures indicate that what is behind the recent announcements is the desire among the ruling class to not only drive immigrants further underground and to instill fear among the population but also put a freeze on organizing efforts.

Fearing a massive fight back among the population, the measures are meant to deal with the growing economic crisis.

The employer sanctions would require bosses to fire workers who may use false Social Security numbers. This enforcement is expected to begin in 30 days.

For decades, employers have ignored notices from the Social Security Administration stating that workers’ names and social security numbers did not match government records. This is called “no match.”

Employers will have a “fixed period,” possibly up to 90 days, to resolve discrepancies. If the workers’ documents cannot be verified, bosses will be required to fire the workers or risk up to \$10,000 in fines.

The new measures codify collaboration between the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration, ominously converting the SSA into a tool for immigration enforcement. The SSA is expected shortly to send out at least 140,000 “no match” letters, covering more than 8 million workers.

A detention center in Raymondville, Texas, one of the largest in the country, houses 2,000 immigrants who are inhumanely locked up for 22 hours a day and costs \$65 million. They not only house adults. They incarcerate children as well, and orange uniforms are issued, exactly like those in prisons around the country. It is a sign that today more and more incarceration or the military are the only options for the working class, while the rich, who are the real criminals, are free to do anything they want.

Over 230,000 people move through the detention system each year.

None of the legislation or any of the mainstream debates addresses the real issues.

IMMIGRATION IS AN INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON

The overwhelming majority of immigrants who come to the U.S. do not come because they want to. They come because they have to. They come risking their lives due to U.S. economic and political policies that have devastated their homelands. They come because of U.S.-sponsored terror in their homelands, like U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s and the coup in Haiti in the 1990s and the latter kidnapping of President Aristide in Haiti in 2004, the neo-fascist repression in Colombia under the Uribe regime.

The largest percentage of immigrants today comes from Mexico . Between 2000 and 2005, Mexico lost 900,000 rural jobs and 700,000 in industry, all because of the U.S. trade agreement NAFTA.

Immigration policy today represents a phenomenon way beyond the themes touched on nightly by fear-monger and racist Lou Dobbs. The productive forces of capitalism today and imperialist economic expansion are often referred to as “globalization.” Around the world, the masses on every single continent of the oppressed world have risen up to demand an end to globalization.

The anti-immigrant hysteria is a worldwide phenomenon that can be seen in all the developed capitalist countries. In France , for example, African or Turkish immigrants are also attacked and beaten.

Why is this an international phenomenon? Because there is a cross border flow of migrant labor that today has reached more than 200 million people around the world. It is a wave of movable labor, the forced migration of a huge portion of humanity that has reached epic proportions.

It is the result of the capitalist system, which is in deep and profound crisis. The ruling class of capitalists cannot stop the resistance of the Iraqi people who are heroically fighting their occupiers. It cannot stop the flow of humanity fighting against desperate conditions around the globe.

It is a crisis where the commodities it offers for sale more and more cannot be bought by the very workers that produce them.

It must count on racism to divide a multinational working class so that their anger and energy can be turned on one another instead of against the capitalist class. It must attempt to stop the “browning” of the U.S. , seen as a real threat because of the history of oppression against people of color.

What is the solution to the desperation and frustration gripping immigrant rights activists? To build an independent movement free of both pro-capitalist parties. They have shown time and time again for all of history that they will defend capitalist interests over the rights of the people over and over.

The immigrant rights movement must have confidence that there is power in the people united, and not by counting on the powers that be. Legalization and full rights for immigrant workers will not come from the lobbies in Washington , D.C. , but from the streets of this country.

The immigrant rights movement in the U.S. cannot advance without building the necessary connections with other struggles here at home. That means solidarity: with women, Katrina survivors, Delphi workers, with the movements against the war, against racism and sexism and LGBT oppression. As militant labor activists say again and again: immigrant rights are worker rights.

In the seeds of that struggle is the foundation to build a world with no borders, free of exploitation and war.

RESISTANCE IN MEXICO

Tens of thousands of peasants and farmers converged from all over Mexico with their tractorcades, motorcades and other vehicles on Mexico City on Jan. 31. They were joined by labor activists from prominent militant unions in a tremendous show of unity between workers in the cities and the fields. Their demand: Repeal the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

With this action, the Mexican peasants highlight a worldwide phenomenon that you will never hear described in the vicious diatribes of right-wing pundits like CNN regular Lou Dobbs or the Republican candidates who attempt to scapegoat immigrants for society's ills. More than 180 million workers around the planet have been forced out of their homelands in the recent period as a result of capitalist economic policies in one of the biggest mass migrations in human history.

This forced migration is cruel and torturous. People leaving their countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America risk life and limb in search of a livelihood. The superrich in the imperialist centers have used their cheap expendable labor to build up capitalism, the very system whose politicians campaign to deport migrants in record numbers.

As in an earlier epoch of capitalist growth with the genocidal and barbaric slave trade—that resulted in the massacre of tens of millions of Africans—laborers today are also treated as disposable commodities.

What is causing the unprecedented migration of workers from oppressed countries to economically dominant capitalist countries?

President Bill Clinton signed NAFTA into law in December 1993 and forced millions of Mexican workers and peasants off their lands, over the border and into the U.S.

Crossing that border—with or without documents—is nothing new for Mexican workers, who have a centuries-old relation with the Mexican/U.S. border. But NAFTA has heightened and intensified the Mexican people's dire situation.

From day one, Mexicans have protested NAFTA. The primarily Indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) burst into the world political scene exactly on Jan. 1, 1994 , the very day NAFTA was to be put in practice in Mexico, precisely to protest the agreement.

A major point of struggle in Mexico against NAFTA had been an amendment to a key and progressive article in the Mexican Constitution, Article 27. This article was won in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and forbade the sale of communal peasant lands called “ejidos.” The U.S. imperialist success adding the amendment ushered in a nightmare for Mexican peasants.

Today the struggle against NAFTA not only continues—it is escalating.

A major slogan of this burgeoning people’s movement that met Jan. 2 to call the Jan. 31 action is, “Sin maíz, no hay país” (Without corn, there is no homeland). The peasant groups, all members of the National Dialogue, demanded that the Mexican Congress as well as the Mexican Permanent and Agrarian Commissions repeal NAFTA.

The statement representing hundreds of groups reads in part: “During the 14 years of NAFTA, unemployment, immigration, the destruction of our agricultural activities, the concentration of resources into a few hands, the deterioration of purchasing power and wages, and extreme poverty have increased in an alarming manner.”

A Mexican institute in August 2007 noted that: “ Mexico has more than 6.4 million unemployed people, which represents 13 percent of the 49.35 million Mexicans of working age. During the six years of the presidency of Vicente Fox, 3.26 million people emigrated—that is, 500,000 on average per year.”

The statement continues: “According to statistics in October 2004, an estimated 1.5 percent of the total population of the country control about one-third of the total value of goods and services” and “The poorest families survive on 86 pesos a day, while the richest receive 1,296 pesos per day.”

The peasant organization also demands that NAFTA be replaced by a new model, one that “is based on respect and develops social ownership of the land and which provides a larger federal budget to aid the poor” and middle-income peasants.

It demands that “sovereignty and food self-sufficiency be the goals of the national transformation of the economy, because without corn and beans, there is no country.”

Another revolutionary demand is “to avoid the proliferation of GMO’s (genetically modified organisms), which are bad for our health.” Mexican farmers are documenting that homegrown seeds are beginning to disappear. Farmers are forced to use hybrid seeds which come from imperialist corporations such as Monsanto (U.S.) and Bayer (Germany). The plants grown from these seeds do not produce new seeds, furthering dependence on these corporations.

“The fields can take no more,” says one of the slogans in the protests.

Speaking at an anti-NAFTA rally, Lucha Castro, a prominent attorney and women’s activist, charged, “NAFTA and related government policies are responsible for expelling five million people from Mexico ’s countryside. Merely 2 percent of Mexico ’s agricultural production units benefit from the treaty, while 80 percent of Mexican farm exports are controlled by foreign capital.

“To compete with the U.S. all these years, the forests and soils have been devastated, and our aquifers have been overexploited,” Castro continued. “Mexican consumers haven’t benefited from better prices. In 1994, you could buy 20 kilos of tortillas and eight kilos of beans with a minimum wage salary. Nowadays, you can only buy six kilos of tortillas and three kilos of beans.”

Movement against NAFTA gathers force

These dire circumstances are arousing a militant fight back. A major newspaper in northern Mexico, *Frontera Norte-Sur*, writes that NAFTA is awakening “the ghost of Pancho Villa,” a leader of the Mexican Revolution, especially in northern Mexico.

On Jan. 18, on a frigid morning, workers and peasants from the Francisco Villa Campesino Resistance Movement (MRCFV) gathered in Ciudad Juárez to begin a tractorcade to Mexico City. The low temperatures had caused deaths from hypothermia and carbon monoxide poisoning, according to *Frontera Norte-Sur*.

The MRCFV was demanding that the Mexican government renegotiate NAFTA under the banner “No Corn! No Country National Campaign!”

The tractorcade followed the same route that Pancho Villa used on his march to Mexico City in 1914 and would meet up with other protesters on Jan. 31 in Mexico City.

One of the veteran leaders of the movement told the press that “the aging tractors on the motorcade are the cream of the crop in a countryside where oxen and mules still leave grooves in the land.” So very different from U.S. agribusiness.

Opposition to NAFTA continued to grow. Elected officials from both major parties backed the movement’s call. State legislatures approved resolutions in support of the demands. Several prominent bishops have signed on to the campaign. Peasant organizations that initially approved NAFTA now demand revisions.

Farmers from various states have brought charges that NAFTA violates the Mexican Constitution, which may force the Mexican Supreme Court to review NAFTA’s constitutionality.

Fourteen years of NAFTA-based hardship have forced Mexican people to cross the border. But their continuing struggle shows that repression breeds resistance, and that imperialist decrees like NAFTA can and must be repealed and defeated.

LOU DOBBS, XEOPHOBIA AND THE ATTEMPT TO DIVIDE THE WORKERS

For some time now, many in the immigrant rights and anti-racist movement have been warning about the danger of Lou Dobbs, a CNN news anchor and the host of “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” who uses part or all of his show to blame immigrants—especially those without legal papers—for all the ills of U.S. capitalist society.

Let us take a close look at Dobbs and what he represents.

A Harvard graduate with a working-class background, in 1980, after many jobs in the news industry, Dobbs was recruited to join CNN when it was first launched. He served as its chief economics correspondent and host of "Moneyline." In June 2003, "Moneyline" became "Lou Dobbs Tonight," where he has been the managing editor ever since.

The mainstream press repeatedly characterizes Dobbs as a populist. This characterization is based much on Dobbs' many nightly programs on the loss of jobs as a result of "outsourcing." Many workers who have lost their jobs or whose jobs are insecure might find this approach appealing. Mother Jones magazine, usually considered progressive, printed a friendly interview on this subject in 2005.

But make no mistake about it, Dobbs is dangerous for the workers and poor. At a time when an ugly economic crisis is rearing its head, at a time when countless homes are being foreclosed, when Citicorp announces thousands of layoffs, Dobbs' rants against immigrants are not only detrimental, they are exceedingly dangerous.

Populism a la Dobbs is a slippery road that has similarities to fascism. Like the classical fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s, Dobbs mixes an appeal to workers' suffering with a vicious scapegoating of "others"—and in Dobbs' case the others are the mostly Latin American immigrants.

The nightly rants on his show are undeniably geared to working people. But his views absolutely do not represent their interests. Dobbs' rants are meant to divide people, disarm the masses as well as foster divisions among the working class.

They are meant to derail the struggle of the workers against those very people he claims to harangue against: the rich and powerful.

Dobbs is in fact a demagogue in the worst sense—his appeals to the public are based on prejudice and racism. His claim to defend "America's working people," the unprotected "middle class," is a lie. His harangues and views benefit one class and one class only: the ruling capitalist class, which stands to gain a great deal from Dobbs' success.

A working class fighting among itself is a class that cannot fight its real enemy: U.S. imperialism.

Why is Dobbs carrying out such a hateful, repulsive and racist campaign against immigrants? Because, trained at Harvard, Dobbs sees the writing on the wall. On the horizon looms a serious economic crisis. More homes will be foreclosed, Home Depot will make less profit, more jobs will be lost.

Isn't it more convenient to blame immigrant workers than the bosses? Isn't it easier to point the finger at one of the most vulnerable sectors of the working class?

Also on the horizon, however, is the struggle of the workers and oppressed. Sooner rather than later, even some of those workers who are being taken in by Dobbs' view of the world will come to realize it is not immigrant workers who are carrying out the layoffs. It is not immigrant

workers who are foreclosing on their homes. It is not immigrant workers who destroyed the levees in New Orleans or hung the nooses in Jena .

It is the capitalist class and the capitalist system and all its infrastructure—the banks, the government, the military—that are to blame for all of society's ills.

ECONOMIC CRISIS INSIDE THE UNITED STATES

This is also deeply connected to the economic crisis workers face in this country. The Million Worker March Movement wrote in a piece directed to the immigrant-rights struggle that “the corporations want to super-exploit immigrant workers. They just don't want to be responsible for paying them the value of their labor or to provide social services and basic democratic rights. They are using the anti-immigrant legislation to mask the truth about the massive unemployment and the crisis facing U.S. workers and the huge financial debt of the government.” The MWMM said the bosses are “trying to make immigrants the scapegoats for the crisis. This criminalization is also aimed at creating a xenophobic hate of foreigners against the rising tide of change developing throughout Latin and South America that challenges U.S. global policies.”

This perspective focuses on immigrant workers as part and parcel of the class struggle in this country. And this is right on, and a real contribution to the debate. It says that attacks against immigrants must be seen as attacks on all workers. Otherwise the ruling class can pit immigrants and U.S.-born workers against each other to the detriment of all except the bosses.

The Bush administration launched a new wave of attacks against immigrant workers on Aug. 10, 2007 . Not able to get the legislation it wanted earlier in Congress, the Bush administration sidestepped Congress by announcing a new round of policies.

Specifically, the Department of Homeland Security in conjunction with the Social Security Administration launched a major escalation of the “no-match” policy. No-match refers to the inconsistencies of Social Security numbers in the government data base with the numbers submitted by workers.

The government announced that it would penalize bosses monetarily if they continued to employ workers whose Social Security numbers did not match government records. Fortunately the AFL-CIO, along with immigrant rights groups, filed a lawsuit against this policy. In an Aug. 31 ruling, a federal judge temporarily barred the Social Security agency from sending out massive numbers of no-match letters to employers.

Obviously, the U.S. government does not mean to shut down the countless industries whose profits depend on immigrant labor. Instead, what the government and the capitalist class aim to do is make immigrant labor more manageable and more controllable and therefore more profitable.

David Bacon, a well-known progressive journalist who has written on the immigration issue for decades, comments on this current policy: “The impact [of the Department of Homeland Security announcement] will be catastrophic.” Bacon documents how this no-match policy has been used to bust up union drives such as the horrible terrorist attack raids by Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE) teams at the Smithfield pork slaughterhouse factory in Tar Heel, N.C., and the Woodfin Suites campaign in California.

Bacon also illuminates what is behind the escalation of the no-match policy. The journalist writes, “Employers worried about the loss of their workers, Commerce Secretary Gutierrez said, could avail themselves of existing guest worker programs, which allow corporations to recruit workers outside the U.S. and bring them in on visas tied to employment.”

The immigrant-rights movement has to do its part as well, reaching out to the African-American community, building unity. Links should especially be made to the survivors of Katrina and the activists who are fighting on their behalf. It would be a powerful movement if these two struggles genuinely linked up and marched forward hand in hand.

The ruling class goes out of its way to foster divisions between the Latin@ and Black communities, because the bosses know that if the Black and Latin@ communities unite they are a powerful force, a mighty force, one that can unite the struggle of all the immigrants from Asia, the Pacific, Africa and all over the world. And it can exert a strong pull on workers of all nationalities, including white North Americans.

Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party and the Russian Revolution, turned much of his energy into resolving the contradictions among nationalities in Russia, that prison-house of nations, and later in the Soviet Union. He especially focused on the responsibilities of the working class in the Russian nation, which was the oppressor nation, toward the other nationalities.

Following this example, Marxist activists within the United States must also be passionately working to win over U.S.-born workers of all nationalities to come out in solidarity with immigrants. We need to call on the labor movement to step forward. We need anti-war forces to join up with us, progressive clergy, other social forces—we have to make this a movement in which the immigrants are not on their own, but are buttressed on all sides by allies who stand with them and refuse to be divided.

The great May Day outpouring of 2006 and the smaller but still impressive outpouring of 2007 showed that the campaign by the bosses to spread wage competition, worldwide and in the U.S., has begun to backfire on the ruling class. It has brought renewed energy, primarily in the immigrant sector of the labor movement, that is bound to spread to all sectors of the workers as the crisis deepens.

And it will count on the Marxist activists and their parties to organize in a spirit of internationalist solidarity for a united struggle of the working class.

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