

Immigration & Immigrants in US History

By the Stony Brook University Social Justice Alliance – www.sbusja.com

The United States has always been a country of immigrants, most of whom have been “undocumented.” From the English settlers who landed at Jamestown in 1607 to find millions of native peoples already living in North America, to the Salvadoran workers and families who arrived just yesterday, the nation’s history has been one of successive waves of immigration. Why, then, is there such resentment and fear about “illegal immigration” in our time? Why do so many US citizens get so angry about immigrants?

That resentment is nothing new. In fact, most immigrants—especially non-white immigrants—have encountered intense hostility upon arriving in the country. In the nineteenth century, the Irish and Italians (who today are considered “white,” but weren’t back then) were scorned, harassed, and even physically attacked by those who accused them of coming to take “their” jobs, use “their” resources, and commit crimes. The Chinese had it even worse: they suffered segregation and intense racism, and in 1882—the year of the first federal anti-immigrant law in the US—they were legally prohibited from entering the US altogether. Almost *all* non-whites were barred from entering by the 1924 **Johnson Immigration Act**, which Congress passed amidst a wave of anti-immigrant and anti-socialist hysteria.



When immigrants *have* been welcomed in, they have usually been allowed to enter only in order to serve as a cheap labor source. Hundreds or thousands of Chinese, Irish, and other foreign laborers died while building the country’s railroads in the nineteenth century, while almost all lived in poverty and worked for miserable wages. Since the mid-twentieth century, wealthy capitalists in the US have looked increasingly to Latin American immigrants for farm labor, janitorial work, and other low-wage jobs. Agro-industrialists convinced the government to start the famous **bracero** program (1942-1964) so they would have access to cheap Mexican labor on their farms (right). When they had completed their labor, though, the workers were forced to go back to Mexico. And they were of course still subjected to constant discrimination (back then, racists referred to Mexicans as “greasers” and “wetbacks”; every era, it seems, has its own vocabulary of racism and exclusion).



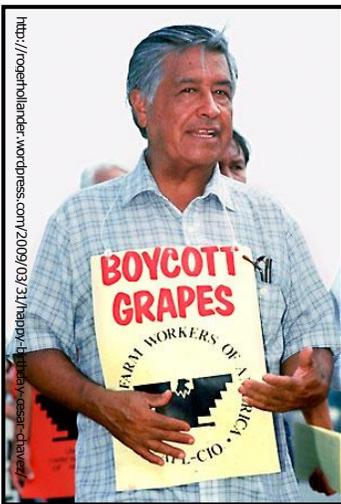
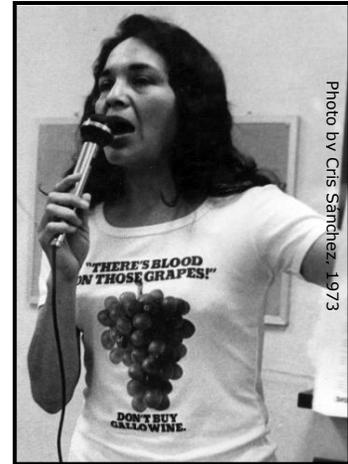
Mexicans in particular have long been a target of anti-immigrant sentiment. Today, border vigilantes and security agents routinely guard the US-Mexico border with loaded guns, ready to murder anyone they see trying to cross the border illegally. (Mexicans have in fact lived in what is now the southwestern United States longer than people of European descent. Between 1836 and 1854 the US seized about *half* of Mexico’s territory to form California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of several other states. Yet such facts usually go unmentioned in the ongoing debate over immigration.)

Also unmentioned is the systematic removal and extermination of North America’s indigenous population, a process that culminated only a little over a century ago. According to the popular nineteenth-century doctrine of “**Manifest Destiny**,” white people in the United States were chosen by God to expand their nation westward, “from sea to shining sea.” This doctrine served as a thinly-veiled justification for a ruthless campaign against indigenous populations that often amounted to outright genocide. After the Civil War, official US policy consisted of

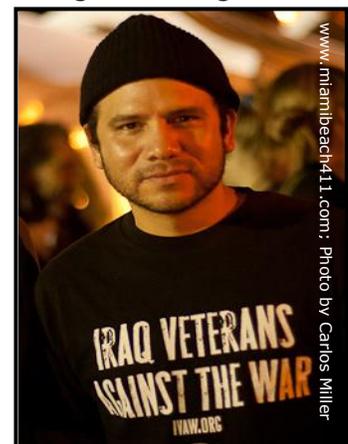
confining all such populations on ever-smaller reservations, forcing them to live in miserable conditions while white US settlers hungrily stole their land and natural resources. Numerous societies like the Cherokees, Navajos, Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Utes, Apaches—all fell victim to repeated broken treaties, frequent massacres, and vicious racism. This sad history is one of incredible brutality and hypocrisy on the part of the US government and business entrepreneurs. Most of the indigenous people left in the US today still live in terrible poverty. But although we might prefer to forget it, almost all of us who live in today's United States have profited from this history. Remembering such facts might make us think twice before claiming that we have the right to be here while those born outside US borders do not.

Forms of Resistance

Historically immigrants have resisted discrimination and exploitation in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most common way has been to form labor unions to fight for their rights in the workplace. In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of Latino farm laborers formed the **United Farm Workers union (UFW)**, and launched successful boycotts against a number of fruit companies in order to obtain livable wages and working conditions. Today those workers, including leaders like Dolores Huerta (right) and César Chávez (below, left) are revered by millions of people around the country. These struggles have not ended, however. Organizations like the **Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW)** in Florida continue to fight for the basic human rights and dignity of poorly-paid immigrant laborers.



Another immigrant strategy has been military enlistment. Throughout modern US history, immigrants and blacks have enlisted in the military thinking that military service would earn them respect and equality. This strategy may have worked for some, but many others have come to realize that the politicians and industrialists who send them to war see them as nothing more than cannon fodder in the quest to dominate other countries and their resources. Camilo Mejía (below, right), a Nicaraguan immigrant who enlisted in the US Army at age 19, [says](#) that his views of war and the military "changed radically" after several years in the Army. He came to feel that the military "preyed on the vulnerability of people, exploiting their lack of options to get them to sign up, and subsequently tied them into service with the promise of benefits." In 2004 Mejía refused to re-deploy to Iraq, [saying](#) that the war was "just for oil or money and geopolitical position for the empire," and is now a famous activist against war and militarism.



Why Do Immigrants Come Here?

In recent decades the immigrant population of the United States has skyrocketed. Between 1970 and 2000 the number of Mexican immigrants living in the US increased from 800,000 to almost eight million. Yet in the newspapers there is rarely much discussion of *why* foreigners leave their homes and come to the US in the first place.

Personal reasons vary, of course, but some general trends are apparent. The recent acceleration in Latino immigration to the US corresponds quite closely with the implementation of **neoliberal** economic policies during the last thirty years. **Neoliberalism** refers to a set of economic policies adopted almost everywhere, but particularly in Latin America, since the 1970s, usually at the behest of the United States and international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These institutions, in cooperation with ruling elites in Latin America, have required the following policies:

1. Reductions in government spending on education, health care, and other public services, and the **privatization** of many of those services—meaning that basic goods (even water) have been sold to private companies, which are then free to raise prices and deny service to poor areas
2. The **liberalization** of markets, meaning that cheap goods from wealthy nations like the US pour into poorer countries and devastate farmers and small businesses who cannot compete with the lower prices (lower prices and more consumer goods may seem like a good idea, but these policies have hurt millions of people)
3. Tax breaks, subsidies, and other forms of assistance—including lax labor and environmental laws—in order to attract foreign corporations who come to set up sweatshops and other businesses in Latin America, even though those corporations tend to repatriate, or take away, almost all of their profits rather than reinvesting money in the local economy
4. An emphasis on providing **cheap labor** for the textile, mining, and other export industries—rather than investing in education, industrial development, and production for the domestic consumer market

These policies have led to greater poverty and inequality all around the world (except for a very small fraction of the world's population, which has benefited quite nicely). The North American Free Trade Agreement (**NAFTA**) among the US, Canada, and Mexico, in place since 1994, is a particularly notorious example of neoliberalism. Despite promises of increased job opportunities for Mexicans, the rate of employment actually declined **9.4 percent** due mainly to the loss of jobs in small- and medium-sized businesses. Despite promises of lower prices for the consumer, the retail price of basic necessities rose by **257 percent** in NAFTA's first eight years. The effects on the rural sector have been particularly devastating, due to the flood of cheap imported corn from the US which has ruined many small farmers. The overall **poverty rate** in Mexico climbed by almost 20 percent between 1994 and 2000, with rural poverty reaching 86 percent. NAFTA is not the only cause of Mexico's economic woes, but it has exacerbated them and undoubtedly led to more emigration. (For more on the effects of NAFTA, see www.epi.org.)



Over the past century (especially), the policies of the "advanced" countries have had a very negative impact on economic development and well-being in the so-called Third World. In short, the rich countries have reaped the enormous benefits of cheap land, labor, and resources from the Third World, while at the same time impeding (and often formally restricting) economic development there. The exploitation of labor, goods, and resources from poorer and technologically-disadvantaged nations has brought benefits to us all. For example, consumers in industrialized nations who buy foreign-made products (i.e., all of us) benefit from the cheaper prices that are possible in part because workers overseas are paid so little, and often also derive a psychological benefit from feelings of superiority in relation to immigrants

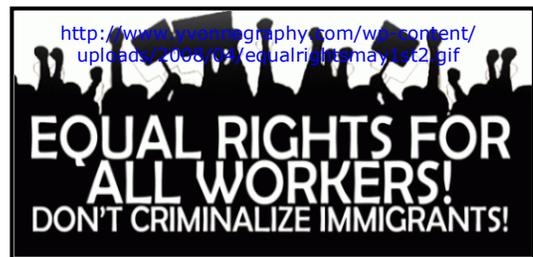
and foreigners. From this observation, one could reasonably conclude that we owe poor laborers in Mexico at least as much as *they* owe us.

But at the same time, workers in the US and Latin America share many common interests. The real beneficiaries of "free trade," corporate globalization, and anti-immigrant hysteria are not the average person in the US, but the rich and powerful who watch their profits soar as both US and foreign laborers suffer declining wages, working conditions, and job security.

Ordinary people in both Mexico and the United States have been hurt by NAFTA. By 2003 [almost 900,000 US workers](#) had lost their jobs since NAFTA began. For many of the workers who have *not* lost their jobs to outsourcing, the threat of job loss has become increasingly pervasive. Of course, workers with a low sense of job security are far less likely to organize and make demands upon their employers. As noted above, the results for the Mexican workforce have been even more disastrous. NAFTA is one of the clearest examples of how powerful corporations try to manipulate national labor forces by playing them against each other. The results are unprecedented profits for big business and a noticeable decline in the average living standards of working people in all countries involved. The capitalist class in the United States has historically had remarkable success in preventing the development of class consciousness among workers and immigrants, particularly in recent decades as the labor movement has declined. From 2001 to 2006 corporate profits in the US rose 123 percent, while as journalist Jack Rasmus notes, "the real median take home pay of the American worker is around [\\$1 an hour less](#) today than in 1982."

The border vigilantes with their shotguns are understandably angry over their decline in living conditions and the increased economic uncertainty of recent years. They have been squeezed and exploited by those at the top for a long time now. But while anti-immigrant attitudes among whites in the US may be a reflection of this frustration, they only promote greater inequality and exploitation for all workers while obscuring the real causes and culprits of that exploitation. Directing that anger against immigrants only serves the interests of those who are actually to blame for economic oppression. As historian Rodolfo Acuña has [pointed out](#), "it is not Mexican labor that limits the number of jobs for domestic labor or depresses wages, but the owners of production, who profit from playing them off against each other."

Only when immigrants and the native-born unite will we be able to build a strong movement for peace, justice, and human understanding in this country. These groups may not have precisely the same interests and concerns, but do share enough in common to participate in a common struggle. Working together to end prejudice and discrimination is the only course of action that makes sense. And after all, we are all immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.



For online links to all references, visit www.sbusja.com

Further Reading Suggestions:

- David Bacon, *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants* (Beacon, 2008)
- Aviva Chomsky, *"They Take Our Jobs!": And 20 Other Myths About Immigration*, second edition (Beacon, 2007)
- Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, sixth edition (Pearson Longman, 2007)
- Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present*, revised edition (HarperPerennial, 2005) (Available in Spanish as *La otra historia de los Estados Unidos: Desde 1492 hasta hoy*, traducido por Toni Strubel [México, DF: Siglo XXI, 1999])
- Website of the National Council of La Raza: www.nclr.org. This website contains lots of good information on immigrants in the United States. One info sheet, for example, [points out](#) that "[o]n average, immigrants will pay \$80,000 more in taxes per capita than they use in government benefits over their lifetime (in 1996 dollars)."
- *Democracy Now!* (www.democracynow.org). A great source for daily news. Daily headlines are also available in Spanish. Daily broadcasts air in the NYC area on WBAI 99.5 FM every weekday from 8-9am.