

COMMENTARY

Getman: Organized labor wants full rights for all employees - documented or not

Jack Getman, LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

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The alliance between organized labor and immigrant rights groups proved very powerful during the presidential election, helping to deliver Nevada, Florida and Virginia for President-elect Barack Obama. Perhaps that is why some conservative writers are trying to divide the two groups. An example of this tactic is the claim Ruben Navarrette Jr. made in a recent column that President-elect Obama has sidetracked the issue of immigration reform because of opposition from the labor movement. He wrote, "As has always been the case with the immigration issue, what Democrats worry about most is antagonizing their sponsors in organized labor."

The claim is bogus. Since 2000, organized labor has made clear its strong support for immigrant rights. The official policy of the AFL-CIO adopted by its executive committee states, "The AFL-CIO proudly stands on the side of immigrant workers.

Undocumented workers and their families make enormous contributions to their communities and workplaces and should be provided permanent legal status through a new amnesty program. Immigrant workers should have full workplace rights in order to protect their own interests as well as the labor rights of all American workers."

At the AFL-CIO convention, which overwhelmingly adopted this policy, John Wilhelm, president of the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Union, spoke forcefully in favor of the report. He said, "Those who came before us, who built this labor movement in the great depression, in strikes in rubber and steel and hotels, they did not say, 'Let me see your papers' to the workers in those industries. They said, 'Which side are you on?' And immigrant workers today have the right to ask of us the same question. Which side are we on?" The convention erupted in applause.

Wlhelm, currently a leader of the Change to Win Federation, which recently left the AFL-CIO, has said, "The twin problems of immigrant rights and the economic plight of African Americans (which I see as indivisible, meaning to deal successfully with either one we need to deal with both) are the most important human rights, political, and organizing issue we face."

In 2003, the labor movement organized the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a program headed by Maria Elena Durazo, executive leader of the politically powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO. The IWFR, as it was called, was a bus trip by immigrant workers intended to parallel the Freedom Riders of 30 years earlier. The ride was supported by the hotel workers, the service workers, the teamsters, the farm workers and the leadership of AFL-CIO. It took place in September 2003 when 900 immigrant workers and their supporters in 10 U.S. cities boarded buses and traveled across the country to Washington, D.C.

At every stop, the immigrants were greeted by local supporters, veterans of the civil rights movement including several of the Little Rock 9 and local labor leaders. The labor movement arranged for the workers who made the trip to meet with members of Congress and the press. At one rally, John Sweeney of the AFL-CIO stated, the "struggle of immigrant workers is our struggle." In 2005, the AFL-CIO established the Immigrant Workers Project to help train immigrant workers and to teach them about unions.

The truth is that immigrant workers are the future of the labor movement and labor's top leaders know this and are prepared to fight for their rights.

Getman, a law professor at the University of Texas, wrote 'The Betrayal of Local 14.'

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