
Response More Systematic in Europe

The Immigrant Challenge to Labor Unions

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Today, millions of the industrialized world's blue-collar workers are recent arrivals from Asia, Latin America, and Africa who know little of labor unions. Most speak the host-country language poorly and feel constantly apprehensive about being sent home. To find out how and to what extent organized labor has set about drawing these immigrant workers into the labor movement, the Fund commissioned the American Labor Education Center to interview union leaders, immigrant workers, government officials, and representatives of churches and community groups in the United States, Britain, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Union programs targeted to immigrants are both more numerous and more systematic in the five European countries, according to this report by Debi Duke and Steve Early who, together with Muzaffar Chishti, conducted the interviews.

THE INFLUX OF IMMIGRANT workers into the United States and Western Europe in the last few decades has created challenges for the labor movement on both sides of the Atlantic. As more and more manual jobs in basic manufacturing, the service sector, and municipal government have been filled by the foreign-born, unions have felt pressures to develop new programs to serve, educate, and involve them.

Most of Western Europe's foreign workers arrived during the 1960s and early 1970s when unskilled jobs were plentiful and immigration was encouraged. Today, there are an estimated 12 to 15 million immigrants living legally in countries such as Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and Britain. Once homogeneous working-class communities and unions are now a multi-ethnic mix that includes West Indians, Finns, North Africans, Greeks, Turks, Yugoslavs, Indians, Pakistanis, and Southeast Asians. While most countries closed their border to non-EEC immigrants by 1975, illegal immigrants continue to arrive.

In the United States five to six million immigrants have been admitted in the last 10 years. Another three to six million persons are living here illegally.

On both continents, economic difficulties—including high unemployment—have led to tensions and divisions between immigrants and native-born workers, especially where the newcomers are seen as tax burdens or threats to jobs, wage-levels, housing, schools, or communities. Immigrants, for their part, complain of discrimination by employers, exploitation by landlords and merchants, harassment by police and

immigration authorities, sporadic acts of racist violence, and right-wing campaigns to have them expelled.

Both American and European labor organizations have responded to this complex situation by becoming increasingly insistent on immigrants' rights—even while continuing to support tighter restrictions on new immigration. Many unions are struggling to overcome language barriers so that they can recruit more immigrant members and encourage greater involvement in union affairs by those who already belong. Some have sought legislation or collective-bargaining provisions to meet the social, cultural, and economic needs of immigrants they represent. Others have set up programs to train immigrant workers for leadership positions and to defuse racial hostility, prejudice, mistrust, and intolerance.

Not all of these efforts have been successful, and some unions still ignore or contribute to the mistreatment of immigrants. But in the areas detailed below progress has been significant.

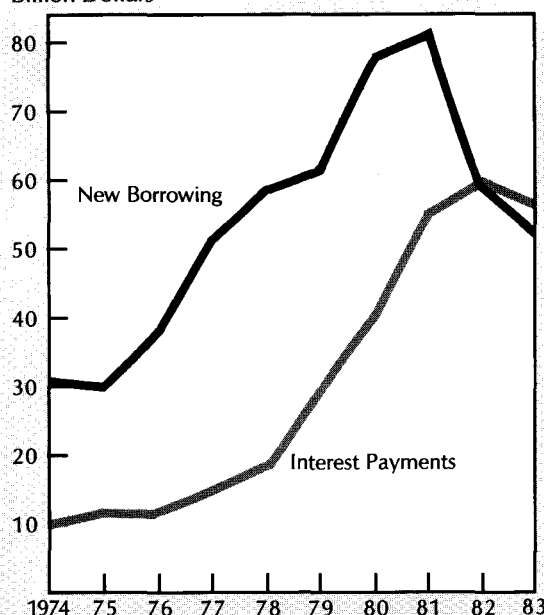
Overcoming Language Barriers

The most immediate problem unions face as they increase their contact with immigrants is communication. Besides hiring organizers and staff members who are multilingual, many unions publish special materials in workers' native languages. Some reserve sections in their regular publications for articles in other languages.

The German labor federation, Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), for instance, produces thousands of infor-

Interest Payments Relative to New Borrowing, Nonoil Developing Countries

Billion Dollars



Political Frustration Could Overwhelm Rationality

Despite the prospects for economic improvement, and even with the policy measures just enumerated, the risk remains that political intolerance to adjustment in debtor countries will cause a breakdown somewhere in the system. Through the 1970s developing countries were receiving two to three dollars in new borrowing for every dollar of interest they paid. But in 1982 interest payments actually exceeded new borrowing. From a narrow standpoint of resource flow, there was an incentive to default.

Debt management could fail if interest rates surge again. However, one percentage point in growth is seven times as powerful as one percentage point of interest in bringing improvement, so that policy attention should focus primarily on growth and only secondarily on reducing interest rates.

However, default would mean opting out of the international financial system. Private creditors could attach assets abroad and seize export shipments, even if governments took no reprisals. And a defaulting country's future credit reputation would be ruined. Not surprisingly, calls for a debtors' cartel to invoke an indefinite moratorium on interest and principal have gone nowhere, as shown by the mild results of the recent Caracas meeting of ministers.

Nonetheless, there is cause for concern about some major debtors. The opposition party in Brazil has formally called for a three-year moratorium on interest and principal, and the Brazilian congress initially rejected a crucial law limiting wage indexation. Political developments in Argentina have also been erratic, although the decisive electoral victory of the centrist Radical Party on October 30 holds promise for more effective economic policy and debt management.

In these and other cases, the underlying risk is that political patience will snap before the improvement from international recovery has time to materialize. The case of Mexico is encouraging, however. Dramatic adjustment has already been achieved, with remarkably broad public acceptance.

Case-by-Case Negotiation the Right Strategy

Fearing either political disruption or failure of a sufficient economic recovery, some analysts have proposed sweeping debt reforms that would transfer current loans to international agencies, force the banks to accept losses of at least 10 cents on the dollar, and stretch out the debt over decades. Such proposals misdiagnose the situation as one of insolvency, rather than illiquidity. In general, they constitute a counterproductive, panic-based action that would tend to turn good debt into bad debt. With their claims transferred to international agencies, banks would no longer have an incentive to make new loans to secure old ones. And large amounts of public capital would be required at a time when even modest funding is difficult to appropriate.

Contingency planning is nevertheless necessary. The general strategy should be something along the following lines. Debt problems should continue to be handled case by case. When a country gets into trouble there should be negotiations with its private and public creditors. Where conventional reschedulings and rescue packages prove insufficient, the first line of defense would be to repeat the package but with an additional round of support from the key participants: private banks, industrial-country governments (through such instruments as Federal Reserve swap loans, agricultural credits, and export agency loans), and the IMF. In even more extreme cases it may be necessary to have banks capitalize some portion of the interest otherwise due into additional principal due in future years. The central point is that the resolution of such contingency cases would be addressed in a negotiating context case by case without setting up international machinery that would cause perverse incentives for unnecessary default.

It is essential to this strategy that the creditor-debtor relationship remain in a cooperative mode and that official financing flows be as substantial as possible. A dramatic failure of major Western governments to play their role in the process could push the debtor-creditor relationship toward the conflict mode, with losses for all sides.

The debt crisis is a supreme challenge to international economic management. So far, the response to this challenge is encouraging. With effective management of the world economy, problems can continue to be resolved without major mishap.



mation sheets in six languages for monthly distribution to its immigrant members. The DGB's goal is to communicate important union policies and actions and to teach immigrants how the German labor movement functions.

Sometimes unions can reduce language barriers outside the workplace as well. Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), the largest of two Dutch labor federations, sees itself as an advocate for immigrant workers. After hearing reports of difficulties and misunderstandings at social service offices, the FNV convinced the Dutch government to provide interpreters and to make forms and other materials available in immigrants' languages.

Ineke Ketelaar, FNV staff member responsible for immigrant issues, believes such efforts are valuable but wonders if the FNV has done enough to help immigrants learn Dutch. "Public schools, social welfare agencies, everywhere Dutch is taught for nothing or nearly nothing, but people didn't take advantage of the opportunities. We didn't consider that most of the older people had two or three jobs and were too tired to learn. We didn't think it was the task of the unions to teach Dutch. Now we think we should have tried the Swedish plan."

The "Swedish plan" grew out of a law entitling immigrant workers to 240 hours of employer-subsidized Swedish-language instruction on work time. Most workers who take advantage of the plan study Swedish in programs set up by Landsorganisationen (LO), the Swedish central labor federation which together with its member unions was instrumental in securing passage of the law.

About 25 percent of eligible workers have enrolled in the plan, but union leaders believe response would be much greater if employers were required to contribute funds for language training regardless of how many of their employees took part. Because employers currently pay according to the number of employees participating, they shy away from hiring immigrants who refuse to forego their right to language instruction, union leaders say. With the Social Democratic Party again holding a parliamentary majority, LO hopes to win needed changes in the law.

In the United States, both the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated

Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) sponsor English-language classes—usually at the initiative of local unions. But, as in the Netherlands, classes are held after work or on weekends and are generally accessible only to those workers without heavy family responsibilities or a second job.

Developing Immigrant Leaders

Unions on both sides of the ocean have come to see that future gains depend to a considerable extent on catching the interest and tapping the leadership potential of a membership which includes an increasing number of immigrants with little understanding of unions. Merely adding an overlay of material for immigrants to regular trade-union studies programs has worked less well than tailoring separate classes to immigrant needs and issues.

Pat Hughes, a regional officer of the British Trade Unions Congress (TUC), and Steve Faulkner, a labor educator, were among the first English unionists to see the need for a targeted approach. Working with members of the Indian Workers' Association, they developed specialized courses to increase the number of Asian shop stewards in the Birmingham area. All tutors for the courses are Asians, and many materials have been translated into Punjabi. Political issues like racism in the community and immigration control are discussed.

Taj Mohamed, a former bus driver and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) steward, is one of many who have learned from Hughes and Faulkner's experience. With support from the Bradford College Labor Studies Program, the government's Commission for Racial Equality, and several unions, Mohamed is developing courses for immigrants in the north of England who want to be more active in their unions. While learning how to coordinate union activities and represent others with grievances, workers will at the same time be building their ease and competence in English.

"For some immigrants, it's not enough to send them to the same education program that other workers go to and expect them to understand everything and speak their minds,"



Mohamed said. "We will bring immigrants up to the same level of understanding, so they can participate in the union as equals."

Programs designed to teach large numbers of immigrants the fundamentals of unionism would require far greater resources than are available to most local unions in the United States. But a few unions, such as the ILGWU and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have begun to develop special education programs, including classes on workers' rights under federal immigration laws.

Contractual Rights

Another way that unions are beginning to meet special needs of their immigrant members is through the negotiation of contract provisions. Most often the language negotiated pertains to additional time off or religious observances. Some FNV contracts, for instance, allow Dutch workers to take a month off without pay in addition to annual vacation time. While native-born workers also use the provision, it is especially valuable to immigrants who need to return to their homelands to attend to family matters.

Unions in Germany, the Netherlands, and Britain have negotiated contract clauses relating to religious practice. Typical are FNV contracts permitting Moslems to pray five times daily, as required by religious law, and giving them the right to light duty during Ramadan and other periods of fasting.

Similar demands made by Arab auto workers in France—supported by the General Confederation of Labor (CGT)—have met stiff resistance from employers, some native-born workers, and even officials of France's socialist government, who have criticized "Islamic fundamentalists" for strikes over such issues, insisting that "religion has no place in factories." The CGT has, however, won demands for greater foreign-worker access to interpreters during workplace meetings.

Building Unity and Understanding

Language training, leadership development, and other special programs have helped integrate many foreign-born workers into the ranks of organized labor. But cultural dif-

ferences and what is perceived as competition for jobs still breed fear, mistrust, and resentment of immigrants among some union members.

In their most extreme form, anti-immigrant feelings are expressed through membership in racist or extreme right-wing groups such as neo-fascist "National Fronts" formed in England and France. But, according to Ineke Ketelaar, a more frequently expressed attitude is simply, "Yes, we want them to be union members, but it can't cost too much. The priority is not the position or needs of foreigners, but the problems they may cause for the mainstream Dutch." Ketelaar, like many union leaders and staff members, opposes this view, arguing that immigrants and native-born workers must be unified in order to protect the labor movement's hard-won gains in wages and working conditions. These unionists are trying to build unity by developing workers' understanding of and appreciation for other cultures and by stressing the pragmatic need for solidarity.

German unions and churches sponsor an annual "Week of the Foreign Fellow Citizen" to help overcome prejudices about religion, eating habits, and other cultural differences that fuel antagonism toward Turkish workers. The theme for last year's celebration, "Overcome fears—become neighbors," assumed special significance in the wake of several violent incidents and a spate of right-wing propaganda directed at immigrants.

England's General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU) has a week-long course during which immigrant and native-born shop stewards discuss the beliefs and customs of their respective cultures, explore the roots of racism and ethnocentrism, learn about the legal rights of immigrants, and brainstorm about ways to make the union more responsive to the needs of immigrants and minorities. John Ball, a GMWU regional education director, says he developed the course because it is so difficult to "represent people when you don't understand much about who they are and how they live."

In the United States, far less effort has been directed toward encouraging workers to explore cultural differences and the issue of job competition. One reason is that a number of U.S. labor officials believe that immigrants are a threat to the job security of American workers. However sympathetic they may be toward the individual immigrant, they



fear a backlash from the union majority if they devote resources to workers "who don't really belong here." Other American union leaders believe that integration of immigrants into the ranks of organized labor is a natural process that does not require much active assistance. As in the past, they argue, time and the experience of working together will gradually reduce barriers and hostility between immigrants and the native-born.

This view ignores important differences between today's immigrants and those of previous generations. Europeans who came to the United States 75 or 100 years ago often had previous involvement in labor organizations or labor-based political parties that enabled them to influence the structure, direction, and leadership of the American unions they joined or, in some cases, formed.

Most recent immigrants, on the other hand, are by no means candidates for automatic assimilation into the labor movement. Many have experienced unions only as impotent appendages of repressive regimes or as highly politicized organizations dangerous to join. Some who are anti-communist refugees associate unions with the left-wing governments they are fleeing.

In addition, today's multi-racial and multi-ethnic workforces provide the ideal setting for employers to divide and conquer. U.S. electronics firms are among those employers who have deliberately filled their assembly lines with production workers from several immigrant groups. Vietnamese refugee Ngoc The Phan, a one-time Saigon labor lawyer now assisting unions in California, says employers "take advantage of our people's ignorance of their rights, the language barriers that exist, and the rivalries between different nationalities. They try to turn one minority against another—Chinese against Vietnamese, Vietnamese against Laotians, Mexicans against the Southeast Asians, and the American workers against all of them."

Working with Community-Based Advocacy Groups

European and American unions have been most successful in overcoming such obstacles to workplace unity and union organizing when they use a community-based approach. Most often this means supporting and working with inde-

pendent advocacy groups. For example, in Northern California's Santa Clara County, where thousands of immigrants from Asia and Latin America work in the booming non-union electronics industry, the local AFL-CIO central labor council has helped a group of Vietnamese form an organization called the League for Southeast Asian Labor Advocacy. The League offers employment counseling, teaches immigrants about U.S. labor law and unions, helps them fight unfair labor practices and minimum-wage violations, and provides translations so that immigrants can participate more actively in union organizing and community affairs. Unionists and labor educators involved with the League see it as a long-term organizing strategy that will make the community more aware of and sympathetic to unions.

British trade unionists have developed similar ties to existing organizations of Indian and Turkish workers. In the London borough of Hackney, a garment industry center, the local TUC Support Unit has worked closely with the Turkish Workers' Association to organize education meetings conducted in Turkish, translate union materials, and support strike activity by area garment workers. England's largest union, the TGWU, has organized immigrants employed by London's hotels and restaurants into a special international branch with separate foreign-language sections for Turkish, Greek, Filipino, and Latin American workers.

In France, both the CGT and the Democratic French Labor Confederation (CFDT) are organizing immigrants in previously unorganized sectors using a similar strategy. CFDT organizing efforts among Turks in the garment industry and Malian workers employed on the Paris Metro relied heavily on community organizations and leaders cultivated or supported by the unions involved. CGT's increasingly successful organizing of North African immigrants at Paris-area auto plants operated by Citroen and Talbot began with contacts made outside the workplace during union-supported struggles for better conditions in immigrant-worker dormitories and housing projects.

To the extent that some British, Dutch, French, and American unions have become more active and aggressive in opposing deportations, they have also been able to reduce the widespread fear of employer retaliation that inhibits union organizing among immigrants. U.S.-based unions, such as the ILGWU, SEIU, and the Retail, Wholesale, and



Western European Trade Unions Insist Upon Equal Rights For Foreign Workers

So many foreign workers were recruited between 1960 and 1973 that they came to comprise 10 percent of the work forces of France and Germany and 25 percent of Swiss workers. While opposed to the scale of government-sponsored recruitment, major trade unions in these countries have gradually emerged as staunch defenders of foreign-worker interests. Mark Miller and Philip Martin describe the evolution of union commitment in this excerpt from Administering Foreign-Worker Programs (Lexington Books, 1982).

WESTERN EUROPEAN UNIONS have supported equal economic and, to a lesser extent, social rights for foreign workers since the advent of postwar immigration policies. Although unions deserve much of the credit for seeing that foreign workers got their rights, it would be inaccurate to say that the foreign worker-Western European trade union relationship has been easy or exemplary. The trade unions did not pay much attention to the specific needs of foreign workers until the late 1960s and early 1970s, and this inattention, at times exacerbated by the prejudices of some rank-and-file unionists, resulted in a certain foreign-worker disaffection from the unions, manifest in foreign-worker wildcat strikes with antiunion overtones. This situation began to change only as the numbers of foreign workers grew enormously in the late 1960s and as union leaderships realized the consequences of not integrating foreign workers into union structures. Consequently the union's indifference toward foreign workers gave way to union efforts to organize foreign workers and to articulate their specific interests. . . .

Foreign workers can create their own autonomous unions, but no significant such unions exist. In France, an autonomous union as an association of aliens would require special police authorization which would likely prove difficult to obtain because French employers and unions would oppose it. There are, however, significant

foreign-worker cultural and national associations, which affiliate with or encourage their members to join existing unions and thus exert a somewhat autonomous influence in union affairs. These include the 60,000-member Amicale des Algériens en Europe (AAE) in France and the Federazione Colonie Libere Italiane (FCLI) and Association des Travailleurs Emigrés Espagnols en Suisse (ATEES) with 15,000 and 5,000 members, respectively, in Switzerland.

Foreign-worker participation in unions reflects prevailing unionization patterns in the respective host countries. The overall unionization rate in Germany is comparatively high (around 40 percent) and so is that of guest workers (around 35 percent). Estimates of foreign-worker unionization rates in Switzerland and France are 20 and 10 to 15 percent, respectively, compared to 30 and 23 percent for the two work forces as a whole. . . . All indications are that the foreign-worker unionization rate will equal or exceed that of indigenous workers in the near future. In the German steelworking industry, the unionization rate of foreigners (52.7 percent) exceeded that of German workers (52.3 percent) by 1975. . . .

As union members, foreign workers can vote in union elections, and, except for [a few] lingering French restrictions, can be elected to shop steward and union leadership positions. They also can vote for and be elected to works councils in all three countries. Especially in Germany, works councils have significant influence in determining work hours, production tempos, hiring, vacation times, disciplinary proceedings, layoffs, and other employment-related matters. French and Swiss systems of industrial democracy are much less developed, and their works councils correspondingly are less influential.

The growing importance of foreign workers in trade unions and union efforts to become more responsive to foreign workers have resulted in a significant increase in foreigners' being elected to union and works-council positions. While still underrepresented, foreign-worker stewards in Germany increased from 642 in 1967 to 2,487 in 1970 and 5,719 in 1973. Currently, about three percent of Germany's 195,000 works council members are migrants.

Department Store Union (RWDSU) vigorously protested the roundup of immigrant workers conducted in 1982 by the Immigration and Naturalization Service as part of Operation Jobs. In France and England, the assistance of CFDT- and TUC-affiliated unions in "legalization" campaigns involving groups of immigrant workers targeted for deportation has markedly increased their stature and appeal in immigrant communities.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the labor movement is finding that these closer ties with immigrant communities can eventually be translated into union memberships. "Unions have to show immigrants that they understand their cultural patterns and are willing to help them with their immediate problems," says labor educator Jim Potterton, an advisor to the League of Southeast Asian Labor Advocacy. "That's the foot in the door."

