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Authors

Higbie, Tobias
Rivera-Salgado, Gaspar

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Tobias Higbie, UCLA History and Labor Studies

Gaspar Rivera Salgado, UCLA Labor Center

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The Border at Work: Undocumented Workers, the ILGWU in Los Angeles and the Limits of Labor Citizenship

Tobias Higbie and Gaspar Rivera Salgado

“Amnesty is not a gift, but a right, for those who have contributed so much.”
–Bert Corona, 2000

In June of 2000, the veteran organizer Bert Corona came before a cheering audience of 20,000 immigrant workers and their families gathered by Los Angeles unions to show support for federal immigration reform. Speaking in Spanish, the octogenarian made the case that immigrants had earned the right to remain in the US by dint of their labor. “There is no mine, no bridge, not a row in the fields nor a construction site in all the United States that hasn’t been watered with the tears, the sweat and blood of immigrants,” Corona told his cheering audience. It was a turn of phrase he attributed to Luisa Moreno, the Guatemalan-born CIO organizer deported in the 1950s at the height of the Red Scare. But Corona added a contemporary political lesson: “Amnesty is not a gift, but a right, for those who have contributed so much.”¹ In the months preceding the rally, the AFL-CIO had reversed long-standing policies opposed by immigrant worker advocates and embraced the idea of a general amnesty for the undocumented. Just weeks before the rally, the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles waged a successful citywide

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¹David Bacon, “Amnesty!,” LA Weekly, June 14, 2000, <https://www.laweekly.com/amnesty/>; Bert Corona, “Unidad: No Deportaciones,” Corazon Del Aztlan, 1982, p. 6. On Corona’s life see, Mario T. Garcia, Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona (University of California Press, 1994).

strike that capped off a decade of persistent action by its largely immigrant membership. Turnout at the June rally surprised even the most hopeful organizers and allies. Victor Narro of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights Los Angeles told a reporter that organized labor's new policy on immigration, "has made a whole new discussion possible" around federal immigration law. Union leader Eliseo Medina imagined ambitious reforms that could address the poverty in Mexico that drove migration in the first place.² The rally's chief architect, Miguel Contreras of the County Federation of Labor predicted, "This is going to affect policy and politics in Los Angeles for years to come."³

The optimism voiced by Contreras and others signaled a remarkable turnaround for progressive labor organizers in Los Angeles. Just six years earlier a solid majority of California voters endorsed Proposition 187, a statewide ballot initiative that criminalized undocumented immigrants, while Republican governor Pete Wilson juiced his re-election campaign with anti-immigrant scare tactics. The fight against Proposition 187 was a bitter defeat for immigrant community activists in Los Angeles, but it was also a turning point.⁴ In 1996, Contreras became the first Latino to lead the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and he quickly transformed the organization into an effective political campaign machine that made the county's large multiethnic voter base key to winning local and statewide office.⁵ Under Contreras, the L.A. Fed

²Bacon, "Amnesty!"

³"Migrant Amnesty Urged," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2000. See also, "AFL-CIO Calls for Amnesty for Illegal U.S. Workers," *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2000; Shannon Gleeson, "From Co-optation to Radical Resistance: An Examination of Organized Labor's Response(s) to Immigrant Rights in the Era of Trump," in Jasmine Kerrissey, et al., eds., *Labor in the Time of Trump* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2019), 149-168.

⁴Araceli Martínez Ortega, "Gil Cedillo: con la proposición 187, fue la primera vez que los sindicatos lucharon por indocumentados." *La Opinión* accessed November 13, 2019. <https://laopinion.com/2019/11/06/gil-cedillo-con-la-proposicion-187-fue-la-primera-vez-que-los-sindicatos-lucharon-por-indocumentados/>.

⁵Ruth Milkman, Kent Wong, and Miguel Contreras, "L.A. Confidential: An Interview

leveraged its political muscle to win support from municipal leaders for union campaigns, coordinated opposition to regressive state policies, and backed a living wage ordinance that benefited thousands of nonunion low-wage workers. To achieve these goals, organized labor in Los Angeles made alliances with civil rights organizations, immigrant communities, worker centers, and progressive faith-based activists, creating what Ruth Milkman has called the “L.A. model of economic justice organizing and advocacy.”⁶

Bert Corona’s presence at the 2000 rally, however, suggests the “L.A. model” and organized labor’s turn to immigrant rights had roots in the 1970s and 1980s when capital remade the city and millions of newcomers arrived from Latin America and Asia. At a time when the leadership of organized labor was steadfastly nationalistic and anti-immigrant, a fractious coalition of grassroots organizers—some inside unions, others on the outside—experimented with new organizing and legal strategies and convinced an important set of local and regional union leadership to embrace the demand for amnesty for undocumented immigrants. The process was neither smooth, nor predetermined. Tensions within and between organized labor and the Mexican American and Mexican immigrant community frequently pitted would-be allies against each other. But pressures of the changing industrial economy pushed them back into coalition again and again. Activists with a vision of cross-border solidarity amplified immigrant workers’

with Miguel Contreras,” New Labor Forum, no. 10 (2002): 52–61; Larry Frank and Kent Wong, “Dynamic Political Mobilization: The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor,” Working USA 8, no. 2 (2004): 155–81.

⁶Ruth Milkman et al., eds, Working for Justice: the L.A. model of organizing and advocacy (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2010), 2. See also, Ruth Milkman, L.A. Story: immigrant workers and the future of the U.S. Labor Movement (New York: Russell Sage, 2006); Roger Waldinger et al., “Helots No More: A Case Study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign in Los Angeles,” in Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies, ed. Kate Bronfenbrenner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 102–19. On contemporary worker centers, see Janice Fine, Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2006).

own demands for justice and, along with rank-and-file immigrant workers, compelled reluctant Anglo union leaders to change while also creating opportunities for allies to gain influence and power in the movement.⁷ These developments ran parallel to the better-known “rank and file rebellion” of the 1970s in which, as Lane Windham argues, women and people of color who took jobs in industry became a force for expanded economic and social rights in the workplace and the community.⁸

Drawn together also by cross-movement mobilizations like the boycotts of table grapes and Coors Beer, Los Angeles activists challenged the economic marginalization of low-wage workers of color, women, and immigrants and generated new forms and styles organizing combining elements of social movements, service agencies, and labor unions.⁹ Some were radicals committed to working-class internationalism, some were Chicano militants promoting the rights of their communities, others were union partisans who mainly wanted to win elections.

⁷David Gutiérrez, Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark, Cities and Social Movements: Immigrant Rights Activism in the US, France, and the Netherlands, 1970-2015 (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017); George J. Sánchez, “A Community Decides Who Belongs: Local Democracy and Incorporating the Undocumented in Boyle Heights, 1970s–1990s,” Journal of American Ethnic History 39(2020): 60–74. See also, Max Krochmal, Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁸Lane Windham, Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide; Kim Moody, An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism; Brenner, Brenner, and Winslow, eds., Rebel rank and file: labor militancy and revolt from below during the long 1970s (New York: Verso, 2010); Naomi R Williams; “Sustaining Labor Politics in Hard Times: Race, Labor, and Coalition Building in Racine, Wisconsin” Labor 1 May 2021; 18 (2): 41–63.

⁹Allyson P. Brantley, Brewing a Boycott: How a Grassroots Coalition Fought Coors and Remade American Consumer Activism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Matt García, From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Vanessa Tait, Poor Workers’ Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2005).

Whatever the motivation, they agreed all workers, regardless of immigration status, had rights to workplace representation, decent conditions, and good wages. They saw unions as a vehicle for improving immigrant workers' lives, stabilizing neighborhoods, and building power for people of color in a deeply segregated city. They latched onto the progressive kernels of U.S. labor law and union culture, while challenging the many forms of corruption that left workers vulnerable. Unionization held the potential to make real the promise of citizenship for all workers, a kind of *labor citizenship* that displaced the question of formal citizenship granted by the state onto a claim of rights earned by workers as workers. To echo Bert Corona, the freedom to persist in a particular place is “not a gift, but a right, for those who have contributed so much.”¹⁰

The success of movements that could make labor citizenship more than a nice idea relied as much on U.S. laws and institutions as they did on the daily practices and networks that immigrants themselves created to survive as newcomers--what migration scholars call grassroots or vernacular citizenship.¹¹ As immigrant workers and their allies notched victories against the

¹⁰Bacon, “Amnesty!”; Jennifer Gordon has proposed *transnational labor citizenship* as “a sort of transnational union” that would allow free migration in return for recognition of local wage standards and organizing rights. See Jennifer Gordon, “Citizens of the Global Economy: A Proposal to Universalize the Rights of Transnational Labor.” *New Labor Forum* 20(2011): 56–64; Jennifer Gordon, “Towards Transnational Labor Citizenship: Restructuring Labor Migration to Reinforce Workers Rights,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, January 4, 2009). See also, Jennifer Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹¹Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, “From Hometown Clubs to Transnational Social Movements: The Evolution of Oaxacan Migrant Associations in California.” *Social Justice*, 42(2015), 121–139; Rachel Meyer and Janice Fine, “Grassroots Citizenship at Multiple Scales: Rethinking Immigrant Civic Participation,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 30, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 323–48; Roger Waldinger, *The Cross-Border Connection, Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homelands* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2015). William Vincent Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1997); Alyshia Gálvez, “Immigrant Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Immobility and the Vernacular Meanings of Citizenship,” *Identities* 20(December 1, 2013): 720–37.

INS and employers, the idea that unions contributed to immigrant belonging gained credibility in immigrant communities. Over time, thousands of workers and allies participated in marches, rallies, and civil disobedience while many more read about these actions in newspapers or watched them on TV news. Spanish-language media, recognizing its audience was overwhelmingly working class, often portrayed union struggles in a sympathetic light, especially when employers were Anglo-identified corporations, as political scientist Chris Zepeda-Millán shows.¹² In this context, unions became part of a broader movement culture that embraced and supported the aspirations of the region's multi-racial working class. Fighting and winning local battles strengthened the ties between discrete organizations and communities, drew allies to the fight, and constituted a movement that extended beyond organized labor.

In this way, immigrants of the late 20th century followed a path taken by those of 19th and early 20th centuries. They built churches, associations, and businesses that were both *immigrant* and deeply rooted in U.S. urban life. They consumed news in their own language that reported the details of both their homelands and their new home. And they joined unions aspiring to win what they perceived of as the “American standard of living” through collective bargaining.¹³ Each union victory added to the credibility of these progressive aspirations, putting pressure on reluctant union officials, and contributing to the sense that organized labor and the diverse, largely nonunion working-class communities of Los Angeles had common interests, goals, and

¹²Chris Zepeda-Millán, Latino Mass Mobilization: immigration, racialization, and activism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chapter 3.

¹³Lizbeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Lawrence Glickman, A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Dana Frank, Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); James R. Barrett, The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City (New York: Penguin, 2012).

adversaries. Commitment to this sense of common interest was by no means universal within the labor movement. Leadership positions in many unions remained in the hands of Anglo men who clung to the idea that immigrants could not or should not be unionized. But organizers and immigrant workers proved them wrong time and again. Their campaigns set the stage for a dramatic labor upsurge in the wake of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act that offered amnesty to millions of undocumented workers.

To understand this process at an organizational level, we focus on one union's effort to embrace new ways of organizing. The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) had a venerable history of militant strikes, progressive politics, and multi-ethnic membership, but by 1970 the union was in steep decline as employers forced concessions, moved production to nonunion shops, and hired large numbers of undocumented workers.¹⁴ To fight back, the union hired Spanish-speaking organizers—some of them linked to Bert Corona's organizing network—and challenged the legality of INS worksite raids with the help of a network of progressive lawyers. Working both inside and outside of the union, progressive organizers pushed union leaders away from their tradition of top-down negotiation and bureaucratic collective bargaining. They also cultivated allies among the clergy and university-based researchers to justify the morality and policy wisdom of their cause. Backed by the militancy of its immigrant members, the ILGWU carried out dramatic organizing campaigns that raised the union's profile among new immigrants, leading it to organize workers beyond the garment shops. Although the union

¹⁴Annelise Orleck, Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Daniel Katz, All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism (New York: New York University Press, 2011); John H. M Laslett, Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 132-137.

savored its share of victories, the unsettled environment of its core industry limited its ability to institutionalize gains. Nevertheless, these campaigns trained a network of seasoned organizers instilled with a desire to synthesize the institutional power of collective bargaining with the affective power of immigrant community solidarity. If legal residency and citizenship were the ultimate goals, union and immigrant community organizers also fought for immediate rights and benefits. They taught workers to claim what rights they could, explained to citizen and documented workers the ways anti-immigrant policies undermined the rights of all workers, and they defended immigrants in deportation proceedings. In a few cases they wrote protections against the INS into union contracts, creating a vehicle for immigrant workers to defend their own rights. Labor citizenship was precarious and limited. But it provided the lucky few with improved wages and benefits, limited protection from arbitrary deportation, and access to political power through organized labor.

“First from the base:” Organizing Traditions in a Borderland Community

The applause union leaders gave Bert Corona’s call for solidarity with immigrant workers in 2000 marked the political distance traveled over three decades by organized labor and the Mexican American community in Los Angeles. Although the boundaries of national belonging became more expansive in the Cold War years, the interests of U.S. citizens remained the dominant frame for conversations about social progress. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and women’s right organizers expanded who would have access to the benefits of U.S. citizenship, but as historian Mae Ngai writes, “immigration reform only hardened the distinction between citizen and alien.”¹⁵ Corona was no stranger to the American civil rights struggle. As a leader of the

¹⁵Mark Brilliant, [The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped](#)

International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) in the 1940s and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) during the 1960s, he built inter-racial coalitions to advance the interests of Black and Latinx workers, elect progressive representatives, and pressure white political allies to end racial segregation in the West. Corona drew inspiration from Mexican and Mexican American traditions of mutual aid, the left-led unions of the CIO, and the legal defense of foreign-born trade union and radical leaders like Luisa Moreno. As the numbers of undocumented Mexican immigrants grew during the late 1960s, Corona and his allies looked to *La Hermandad Mexicana*, a mutual aid society founded in San Diego by veterans of Popular Front organizing campaigns. As historian Jimmy Patiño explains, *La Hermandad* pioneered campaigns to provide undocumented workers with unofficial forms of identification, legal aid, and support for organizing regardless of immigration status. As Corona recalled years later, "I know one thing from my experiences with the CIO, and that is that you first form the base—and, even more important, you develop leadership out of that base, not apart from it."¹⁶

To advance this strategy, Corona launched the Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (Center for Autonomous Social Action, commonly known as CASA) in 1968 along with Humberto Camacho of the United Electrical workers, Rose Chernin of the Committee to Protect

Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 8; Shana Bernstein, Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2011); Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 229.

¹⁶Rachel Buff, Against the Deportation Terror: Organizing for Immigrant Rights in the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018); Alicia Schmidt Camacho, Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 115-119; Zaragosa Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican Workers in Twentieth-Century America, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 175-179; Adam Goodman, The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants (Princeton University Press, 2020); Jimmy Patiño, Raza Sí, Migra No: Chicano Movement Struggles for Immigrant Rights in San Diego (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 41-44; Mario Garcia and Bert Corona, Memories of Chicano History, 311.

the Foreign Born, and other leftists. In 1972, Corona was joined in leadership by Soledad “Chole” Alatorre, a Mexican-born organizer who grew up in a union household steeped in radical lore. Corona and Alatorre built CASA into an organizing and service center that claimed 8,000 dues paying members in Los Angeles, most of them undocumented Mexican immigrants. CASA’s unassuming two-story building in the Pico-Union neighborhood west of downtown Los Angeles became a hub of community organizing. Volunteers cooked a daily community meal, and members took advantage of the legal services offered out of a spartan office on the second floor.¹⁷ Following the model of *La Hermandad Mexicana*, CASA asserted a kind of movement citizenship that amplified and strengthened immigrants’ own community networks. Supported by a network of activist lawyers, CASA’s immigrant members challenged INS deportation tactics, but also gained more prosaic benefits of belonging. They learned how to acquire a California driver’s license, to navigate the public health system, and to advocate for their children within the public schools.¹⁸

¹⁷The organization was also known by a longer name, Centro de Acción Social Autónomo—Comité Nacional Hermandad General del Trabajadores (usually shortened to CASA-HGT or simply CASA. Documento sobre la Historia de CASA-HGT,” pp. 1-6, Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (CASA) Papers, M0325, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Library Box 1 Fold 5; Committee on Chicano Rights Organizational History (Summer Retreat, July 21-22, 1979), Herman Baca Papers, MSS 0649, Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego; Jesús Mena, “Bert Corona’s ‘Struggle Is the Ultimate Teacher,’” in *Latinx Writing Los Angeles*, ed. Ignacio López-Calvo and Victor Valle (University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 105–126; “‘Chole’ Alatorre una herencia con compromiso: ‘Luchas unido o te aplastan como hormiga,’” *Hoy LA*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.hoylosangeles.com/noticias/local/hoyla-loc-chole-alatorre-una-herencia-con-compromiso-o-luchas-unido-o-te-aplastan-como-hormiga-20170907-story.html>; “Soledad ‘Chole’ Alatorre, Pioneering Labor Organizer and Latina Activist, Dies at 94,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/obituaries/story/2020-03-30/chole-alatorre-soledad-dead>; Dick Eiden, *Paying the Rent: Adventures of a Left Coast Activist Lawyer from the Turbulent ’60s to the Era of Donald Trump. A Memoir* (Rainbow, CA: Garden Oak Press, 2019), 104-114; Interviews with Joel Ochoa and Gary Silbiger.

¹⁸Leila Kawar, *Contesting Immigration Policy in Court: Legal Activism and its Radiating effects in the United States and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29-32;

CASA's program of immigrant self-defense soon brought it into conflict with the mainstream of Mexican American and trade union leadership who blamed undocumented immigrants for growing unemployment and the increasingly difficult environment for union organizing. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican American civil rights organizations and unionists fought to end both the Bracero Program and undocumented migration from Mexico. The call for border enforcement grew louder after the Bracero Program ended in 1964, and undocumented immigration grew larger and more visible.¹⁹ With vocal backing of Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers and leaders of MAPA, California lawmakers passed the Arnett Act in 1971 making it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented workers. Corona and other immigrant rights advocates condemned the new law, charging that upon its passage employers "immediately began to fire workers indiscriminately, throwing thousands of families into a state of chaos." As Corona put it, "Many undocumented Mexicans are the sole bread-winners for their U.S. born children and sometimes for their U.S. born wives. The law has adverse effects against those it seeks to protect, the U.S. born citizens or the naturalized citizen because their spouses or sole bread-winners are deported and because all dark skinned 'latin types' are suspect."²⁰ Chavez and his liberal allies ridiculed CASA and other critics of the law as

"National Office Proposed to Begin a Major Offensive against INS," National Lawyers Guild Immigration Newsletter, March 1974, 3-5; Gary Silbiger, "Immigration Service Sued on Behalf of Lay Advocates," National Lawyers Guild Immigration Newsletter, March 1974, 1.

¹⁹Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 158-166; David Gutiérrez, Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 175-209; Vernon M. Briggs, "Illegal Aliens: The Need for a More Restrictive Border Policy," Social Science Quarterly 56(1975): 477-84.

²⁰Letter from Father Mark Day, et al., February 3, 1972; CASA Press Release, December 22, 1971; La Voz de MAPA, February 1972, Herman Baca Papers, Box 22, Folder 1. See also, Bert Corona, Bert Corona Speaks on La Raza Unida Party and the "Illegal Alien" Scare (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1972), 18-19. On the UFW, see Bardacke, Trampling Out the Vintage, 488, 492; Frank del Olmo, "Chavez Union Does Turnabout, Opposes Alien Worker

“pseudo revolutionaries in the cities” who were out of touch with the problems of real workers. Peter Chacon, a Latino state legislator representing San Diego, said the law protected Chicano workers and that opposition was being orchestrated by the Republican party and agribusiness employers.²¹ In 1974, the California Supreme Court ruled the Arnett Act unconstitutional on the grounds that it infringed on the federal government’s role in regulating immigration, but CASA continued to criticize the UFW’s position on undocumented immigrants, calling it “a serious tactical error” because immigration agents would also deport undocumented union members and turn farmworkers against the UFW.²² Facing the reality that the agricultural workforce was dominated by undocumented workers by the mid-1970s, the UFW toned down its hostile messaging and began organizing undocumented workers.²³ But the conflict over so-called “employer sanctions” remained a central fault line between organized labor and the immigrant rights movement culminating with a federal version of the penalty in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).

By 1975, CASA had branches across the southwest and as far east as Chicago. In effect, it was a network of what we would today call “worker centers,” providing social services, legal aid, and community organizing. Corona and Alatorre left CASA as leadership passed to a group of young militants more focused on developing radical cadre. Declining membership and

Bill,” Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1973; Richard West, “State Measure to Ban Hiring of Illegal Aliens Signed into Law,” Los Angeles Times, November 9, 1971.

²¹Peter R. Chacon, “Statement on the Illegal Aliens Law—What’s Good and What’s Bad About It,” February 10, 1972, Herman Baca Papers; Frank del Olmo, “Why Citizen Chicanos Fear Fresh Turmoil,” Los Angeles Times, February 23, 1975; see also, Ruben Salazar, “The ‘Wetback’ Problem Has More Than Just One Side,” Los Angeles Times, April 24, 1970.

²²“CASA and UFW,” El Inmigrante Militante (CASA San Jose, August 24, 1974), 8.

²³Bardacke, Trampling Out the Vintage, 504-506. Frank del Olmo, “Chicanos Divided by Sympathy for Aliens, Fear for Own Jobs,” Los Angeles Times, March 25, 1972; Frank del Olmo, “Chavez Union Does Turnabout, Opposes Alien Worker Bill,” Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1973; Gutierrez, Walls and Mirrors, 190-202.

political infighting within the Los Angeles CASA and between L.A. and CASAs in other cities eventually led to the organization's demise by the late 1970s.²⁴ At the same time, some CASA activists continued efforts to organize undocumented workers, forming El Comité Obrero en Defensa de los Indocumentados en Lucha (CODIL, the Committee in Defense of Undocumented Worker in the Struggle) in 1976 to coordinate the work of factory committees of undocumented workers. CODIL activists rallied in support of strikes and urged unions to defend the rights of undocumented workers. Like trade union activists from other ideological perspectives, CODIL activists challenged union leaders who failed to take on employers' power while also blaming immigrants "for unemployment, the lack of being organized into unions and the freezing of wages."²⁵ CASA activists associated with CODIL used localized fights over work conditions and immigration raids to educate workers and connect them to a wider struggle. As one rank-and-file activist reflected on a failed strike campaign, "It was like a school, and we learned what it is all about."²⁶ As we will see in our case study of the ILGWU in Los Angeles, members of the CODIL and CASA networks were keen to influence trade union policy on undocumented workers, and they would find allies within the union who recognized the need for change.

²⁴Juan Gómez-Quiñones, Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 150-152; Ernesto Chávez, "Mi Raza Primero!" (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Patiño, Raza Sí, Migra No, 67-89; Marisela Rodriguez Chavez, "Despierten Hermanas y Hermanos! Women, the Chicano Movement, and Chicana Feminisms in California, 1966-1981" (Ph.D., Stanford University, 2005), 205-210; David Gutiérrez, "CASA in the Chicano Movement: Ideology and Organizational Politics in the Chicano Community, 1968-1978," Stanford Center for Chicano Research, Working Paper Series, no. 5 (August 1984).

²⁵Committee in Defense of the Undocumented Workers in the Struggle, "Brothers and Sisters," CASA-HGT Papers, Box 32, Folder 4, Stanford University Library. See also, Adam Goodman, The Deportation Machine, chapter 5; Laura Pulido, Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Gutierrez, Walls and Mirrors, 190-193.

²⁶"Pottery Workers Lose Strike," Sin Fronteras, March 1976, 2.

Meanwhile, Corona and Alatorre continued organizing immigrant workers through a revived *Hermanidad Nacional Mexicana* and with various trade unions.²⁷

“Put this into union contracts”: collective bargaining in service of immigrant rights

Organizing campaigns by the ILGWU in Los Angeles during the 1970s and 1980s are a portrait of the postwar labor system in crisis, and the slow, halting, and partial transformation of one union from a bureaucratic to a social movement orientation. The California economy experienced a series of economic recessions in these years that pushed unemployment over 9% in 1976 through early 1977, and over 10% in 1982-1983.²⁸ Employers aggressively utilized non-union subcontractors, who could more easily lower wages and lay off workers in a downturn. By 1990, many of the region’s large, unionized manufacturing plants had closed, erasing the livelihood of entire communities and depriving unions and civil rights organizations of resources and seasoned activists. Construction had been nearly fully unionized in the 1950s; by the 1980s that was cut in half. Manufacturing union membership dropped from 38% union in 1955 to less than 20% in 1985, with garment unions taking the biggest hit and dropping below 10% of the workforce. Faced with declining wages and working conditions, many citizens and documented workers shifted into a few remaining protected job enclaves: the growing public sector, the ports, and (for a time) military contracting.²⁹ In their place, employers recruited new immigrants from

²⁷“Que Puede Obetener uno nuevo miembro de la Hermanidad Mexicana?” Herman Baca Papers, 21/11/22; Victor M. Valle, “Veteran Latina Activist in a New Battle: Blocking Simpson-Mazzoli,” Los Angeles Times, July 19, 1984.

²⁸U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate in California [CAUR], retrieved from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CAUR>, April 10, 2022.

²⁹See Milkman, L.A. Story; Michael Mahdesian, et al., eds., A Report to the Coalition to Stop Plant Closings (Los Angeles: School of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of California, 1981); Gilda Haas and Holly Sklar, Plant Closures: Myths, Realities, and Responses (Boston, Mass: South End Press, 1985).

Mexico, Central America, and Asia, many without authorization to work in the U.S. The number of immigrants in Los Angeles County jumped from fewer than 800,000 (11%) in 1970 to nearly 3 million (33%) in 1990. High levels of immigration paired with industrial restructuring, according to a team of UCLA urban planners, “radically altered the local labor market by introducing a peripheral workforce and working conditions that approximate those existing in the huge export processing zones of East Asia or in the Mexican maquiladoras.”³⁰ Some unions responded with creative campaigns to fight plant shutdowns, repurpose old industries, and organize new workers.³¹ A few of these drives resulted in victories, but unions more often lost—sometimes dramatically—as the scale of industrial and demographic change swamped even their most innovative and vigorous efforts.

[Image 1: View inside a garment shop, 1977]

Given the declining fortunes of organized labor, undocumented workers would seem to have little reason to risk their already-precarious hold on life in the U.S. by joining unionization campaigns and striking. But they did so regularly in the 1970s and 1980s, forcing unions to embrace new leaders and new modes of organizing that set the stage for later developments. Organizers learned three key lessons from these campaigns that became hallmarks of the union upsurge of the 1990s. First, like unions across the country they learned that the NLRB system was no longer a vehicle of worker empowerment. Employers became more adept at exploiting the NLRB’s bureaucratic processes to delay union victories over course of the 1970s and 1980s.

³⁰Milkman, L.A. Story; U.S. Census 1980 and 1990; Edward W. Soja, Goetz Wolff, and Rebecca Morales, Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles (Los Angeles, Calif.: Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983), p. 47 <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/101845649>.

³¹ Eric Mann, Taking on General Motors: A Case Study of the Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Labor Research and Education, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987).

They fired organizers with impunity, filed bad faith objections to union elections, and stalled contract negotiations hoping workers would give up in frustration.³² Top leaders of U.S. garment unions were steeped in liberal anticommunism, wary of rank-and-file demands, and confident in their ability to manage industrial relations through the levers of the collective bargaining system. They perceived imported goods, runaway shops, and undocumented immigrants as equal threats to American workers. Within a decade, however, the Los Angeles ILGWU transformed into an innovative union of new immigrants working not only in garment shops, but in urban industry generally.

Confronting hostile employers and a weakened labor board generated a second lesson for unions: the need for more creative and free-wheeling campaign tactics. With less reliance on the timing and tempo of the NLRB election process, union organizers began to develop a wider repertoire of action, drawing from the farmworker movement, the Chicano rights movement, and the political styles of Mexican and Central American workers.³³ Young Spanish-speaking organizers circulated the lessons learned from these campaigns to others who were eager to deepen their ties to organized labor for ideological and practical reasons. Workers launched boycotts, consumer pressure campaigns, and unpredictable strikes that disrupted production. With the aid of union and social movement lawyers, workers dragged employers and the government into court, winning temporary victories and creating more space for organizing. Unions continued to use the NLRB system, of course, but labor in Los Angeles expanded organizing into workers' communities, built bridges to the immigrant rights movement, and put

³²Windham, Knocking on Labor's Door, 65-76.

³³ For a full account of how the farmworker and Chicano movements shaped labor in Los Angeles during the 1970-1980s see chapter 7 (165-192) in Randy Shaw, Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)

pressure on the investors, clients, and customers with boycotts, picketing, and public demonstrations. Over the 1980s and 1990s, the NLRB continued to stymie unions while community-based strategies led to some significant victories.³⁴

Unions learned a third crucial lesson in these years that brought them into closer alignment with Chicano and immigrant worker militants: deportation campaigns against undocumented workers undermined the civil and labor rights of all workers. Already by the mid-1960s, the ILGWU in Los Angeles had a sizable Spanish-speaking membership base, and the union showed little reluctance to organize them alongside their Black and Euro-American co-workers. But for the most part, union leaders and the wider progressive community viewed these workers as U.S. citizens—Chicano/as and Puerto Ricans, or immigrants who would soon be citizens. The *Sentinel*—LA’s major Black newspaper—captured the context in a report about the 1970 campaign at the Chic Lingerie company: “Black Power and La Raza--for lack of better descriptive terms--have joined forces in one segment of the minority economic movement.”³⁵ The growing number of immigrants in the garment factories did not fit easily in this multi-ethnic, civil rights era organizing context. In the early 1970s, the ILGWU and other unions encouraged undocumented workers to unionize, but also considered deportation as a legitimate tool in support of unionization. That view would change as the union faced the deportation of its own members and militants brought internationalism into union practices. Organizers associated with CASA spread the concept of immigrant defense through unionization at national meetings during

³⁴Jeff Hermanson, “Organizing for Justice: ILGWU Returns to Social Unionism to Organize Immigrant Workers,” *Labor Research Review* (April 1, 1993): 53-61; Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich, “It Takes More than House Calls: Organizing to Win with a Comprehensive Union-Building Strategy,” in Bronfenbrenner, et al., eds., *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1996).

³⁵Marshall Lowe, “Black, Brown Workers Join Hands for Battle in Underwear War,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 15, 1970.

the 1970s. Attending one of these meetings in 1978, Chicago CASA activist Rudy Lozano scribbled in his note pad, “MIGRA OUT OF THE FACTORY—Put this into union contracts. Only by way of warrant can immigration enter—and they should not be allowed to search in areas not specified in the warrant.” Shortly afterward, Lozano took a job as an organizer with the ILGWU in Chicago leading a series of strikes that mirrored the Los Angeles campaigns.³⁶

Between 1972 and 1977, the ILGWU evolved into one of the more progressive unions on immigrant rights issues, challenging the practices of the INS and embracing the demand for immigrant amnesty. In 1974, the Western States Region of the ILGWU hired Phil Russo as the organizing director who was, according to historian John Laslett, “a progressive ILGWU official from Pennsylvania who had been active in the anti-Vietnam war movement.”³⁷ Russo hired a number of Spanish-speaking organizers, some of whom were CASA activists, and over the next three years the union engaged in a series of organizing drives that forced union officials to embrace—if somewhat reluctantly—the call for immigrant amnesty. Miguel Machuca, the Mexican-born son of a leftist organizer, was a leader of a rank-and-file organizing drive at the California Swimwear company in 1972, although not part of CASA. Fired from his job after the union lost the election, he was one of Russo’s earliest hires. Mario Vázquez became a key link between CASA and the union. He moved to the U.S. at age 15 and was politicized by his military service in Vietnam. Making the most of his GI Bill benefits, Vázquez attended college

³⁶“Labor Workshop,” hand-written notes, Rudy Lozano Papers, Box 3 Folder 21, University of Illinois at Chicago, Library Special Collections. Also present were Los Angeles activists Mario Vázquez and Jose Jacques Medina, as well as activists in the UE, FLOC, the Shoeworkers union, and community organizations across the Midwest.

³⁷Laslett and Tyler, The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 93-95; “Cristina Vázquez,” in Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong, eds., Voices from the Front Lines: Organizing Immigrant Workers in Los Angeles (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2000).

and law school at UCLA where he saw an ILGWU recruitment flyer and was quickly hired.³⁸ Cristina Ramirez grew up in a union household in Ecuador. She came to the U.S. at age 16, began working in garment shops soon after, and was part of the failed campaign at California Swimwear. Russo tried to recruit her, but she thought the union was inept, so she continued working in shops. But Russo didn't give up and eventually she joined Machuca and Vázquez in the organizing department even though it paid less than she could make as a skilled garment worker. While participating in a delegation of women organizers to Mexico City, Ramirez met Maria Elena Durazo, the daughter of immigrant farmworkers who had connected with CASA members in college and moved to Los Angeles to organize immigrant workers. Ramirez recommended her to Russo who soon hired her on the ILGWU organizing staff. As Durazo later told an interviewer, to be paid to organize immigrant workers was “a dream come true.”³⁹

Urged on by Russo, these progressive organizers fanned out across the city often using contacts from CASA and other progressive organizations, and sometimes working as “industrial salts” to organize shops from the inside. The tension between their engagement with immigrant workers and union leaders' ambivalence was quickly apparent and burst into public view during a campaign at the High Tide Swimwear plant in early 1975. As the central Los Angeles swimwear factory headed into its busy season at the end of 1974, organizer Danny Perez took a

³⁸John H. M. Laslett and Mary Tyler, The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988 (Inglewood, Calif.: Ten Star Press, 1989), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015018504616>; Interview with Cristina Vázquez; “Workers Resist Factory Abuses,” Sin Fronteras, December 1975, 3.

³⁹Cristina Vázquez and Maria Elena Durazo, in Milkman and Wong, eds., Voices from the Front Lines; María Elena Durazo, interview by Vivian Rothstein, May 3, 2016 transcript and recording, UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, UNITE HERE Local 11 Oral History Project, <http://calisphere.org/collections/27173/>; María A. Gutierrez de Soldatenko, “ILGWU Labor Organizers: Chicana and Latina Leadership in the Los Angeles Garment Industry,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies 23, no. 1 (2002): 46–66; Chavez, “Women, the Chicano movement, and Chicana feminisms in California,” 208.

job in the plant and found the immigrant workers there eager to unionize. But when the NLRB scheduled an election for February 14, 1975, the company fired Perez and other union supporters. A large group of workers walked out on January 21st demanding immediate recognition of the union.⁴⁰ The strike caught the attention of the young *Los Angeles Times* reporter Frank del Olmo because nearly all of the workers at High Tide were undocumented Mexican immigrants. The decision by the union to organize undocumented workers, del Olmo wrote, “marks one of the first breaks in the heretofore united stand U.S. labor unions have taken against the employment of illegal aliens by American industry.” When the company hired undocumented workers as strikebreakers, however, ILGWU regional director Cornelius Wall fell back on an older strategy: he called the INS to see if they might raid the plant and deport the strikebreakers. The INS demurred citing a lack of personnel and warned, “we would also survey the picket lines outside to see how many illegal aliens might be there.”⁴¹ Union organizers soon prevailed upon the strikers to return to work pending the NLRB election, but a week later the INS raided High Tide arresting 17 workers all of whom were union supporters. Union officials complained that anti-union undocumented workers “were conspicuous by their absence” on the day of the raid. The union put up bail for the arrested workers, but the INS prohibited work as a condition of the bail, disqualifying them from voting in the union election.⁴² INS district director

⁴⁰“High Tide Hit by Immigration Inquiry,” *California Apparel News*, February 7, 1975; Barbara Friedman, “Deportation hearing delayed,” *California Apparel News* [n.d.], ILGWU Western States Region Box 49 Folder 14, page 57.

⁴¹Frank del Olmo, “Illegal Aliens Target of Union Organizers: Garment Workers Break Labor Ranks, Blame Immigration and Hiring Policies,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1975. The novelty of the moment was indicated by his parenthetical note to readers, “(‘Undocumented workers’ is the phrase used by Mexican-American activists to refer to illegal aliens. They claim the term ‘illegal alien’ carries negative connotations.)”

⁴²Cornelius Wall, “Neutrality, Negligence or Connivance?” ILGWU Western States Region 91/30/111-117; Gary Silbiger, “Undocumented Workers Organize,” *National Lawyers Guild Immigration Newsletter*, April 1975, p. 1.

Joseph Sureck told the *Los Angeles Times*, “There was absolutely no collusion between us and the company. We merely made arrangements ahead of time to go in and check their records and employees.” In any case, the raid was prompted by the union’s complaint in the first place, Sureck explained.⁴³ The union was loathe to take the blame, especially after the INS arrested rank-and-file activists and family members at their homes, suggesting the INS acquired their addresses from the company.⁴⁴ When the election finally came at High Tide, the union lost by a wide margin and company officials, who denied they knowingly employed undocumented workers, declared it a “vote of confidence” in management. The union’s lead organizer Danny Perez complained bitterly, “We didn’t lose this vote, the strikebreakers won it.”⁴⁵

Anger at immigrant “scabs,” however, exposed the clashing legal and organizing strategy considerations pulling the union in different directions. Could the union claim to be the defender of undocumented union supporters while also deploying the INS against non-union strikebreakers? Danny Perez seemed to think so. Less than a month after the defeat at High Tide, he was picketing with striking workers at the family-owned Cowan Belt Company. According to Perez, when the company recruited undocumented workers to maintain production, “a committee of workers” called the INS to report the “illegal use of undocumented workers as strikebreakers.” Agents tried to raid the factory without a warrant, but company officials denied entry. While the agents were acquiring a warrant, the son of the owner loaded about 20 workers into a van and drove out of the company parking lot with Perez and another union organizer in hot pursuit.

⁴³Frank Del Olmo, “Tipoff on Raid Denied by Immigration Service,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1975.

⁴⁴“INS visited the home of another striker,” handwritten note, ILGWU Box 49 Folder 14 page 77.

⁴⁵Frank Del Olmo, “Garment Workers Turn Down Union,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1975; Tally of Ballots, March 7, 1975, Frank del Olmo Collection, Box 93 Folder 15 Page 15, Special Collections and Archives. California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

Perez flagged down a nearby police officer who detained the van and called the INS, resulting in the detention of the workers and the younger Cowan.⁴⁶ It was an example of the union taking the fight to the bosses, according to an account in the counter-cultural weekly, *Los Angeles Free Press*. But when the detained workers languished in the county jail for want of \$5,000 bail their cause seemed to align with the demands of immigrant and civil rights campaigners.

Congressman Edward Roybal threatened to open an investigation into whether their civil rights had been violated. Even an unnamed ILGWU organizer, perhaps Perez, complained to reporter Frank del Olmo, “you’d think the least [Cowan] could do would be to bail out just one of them. They went to the wall for him, they went to jail because of him and they’re gonna be deported because of him.... That’s why we’re trying to organize these people, to save them from bosses like Cowan.”⁴⁷

The messy aftermath of the High Tide and Cowan Belt campaigns raised doubts about the union’s ability to help undocumented workers as well as the ability of CASA and progressives within the union to influence union policy. The ILGWU initially coordinated legal defense of High Tide workers detained by the INS with the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) while CASA organized large protests outside the INS building and courtrooms to put pressure on judges to release the workers. In bail hearings, the union argued that collusion between the company and the INS violated workers’ rights and sought permission from the judge to take depositions. Union leaders appealed to state and federal elected officials, who in turn put pressure on the

⁴⁶Frank del Olmo, “23 Illegal Aliens in Van, Driver Seized,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1975; Frank del Olmo, “Jury Indicts Father, Son in Alien Case,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1975. See also, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 49 Folder 14 Pages 99-101, 104-105.

⁴⁷Frank del Olmo, “Industrialist’s Son May Be Held in Alien Case: Grand Jury Will Hear Evidence Concerning Driver of Van Carrying 24 Seized by Immigration Agents,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1975; David Edwards, “International Garment Worker’s Union Tries to Organize Undocumented Workers,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 18, 1975.

INS.⁴⁸ But after the judge denied the defendants request to investigate the raid, union lawyers backed away from challenging the INS in court. Still facing charges at the NLRB, the company agreed to rehire the workers it fired during the strike with back pay, Phil Russo told *L.A. Times* reporter Frank del Olmo. Off the record he added, “the arrested aliens, if they come clear w[ith the] INS, are to be taken back too, and get some money.”⁴⁹ The outcome was a win for workers, if not the union, Russo thought. For progressive organizers and lawyers hoping to challenge INS deportation practices, the resolution looked like a sellout. A Lawyers Guild report blamed “pressure from the International union, the Immigration Service and other forces,” for the union’s failure to follow through on the case.⁵⁰ Danny Perez, the organizer who facilitated the deportation of strikebreakers at Cowan Belt, was shunned by CASA and other progressive organizers for his “collaboration with a repressive arm of the government.” Shortly after he quit the ILGWU.⁵¹

The garment union’s mixed record on immigrant rights reflected common division between union organizing departments and top leadership. As Bert Corona told Frank del Olmo in a background interview, nearly every industrial union in Los Angeles had been organizing undocumented workers in recent years, but they were reluctant to challenge the immigration policy of the AFL-CIO leadership. Trinidad Flores of the Mexican American Labor Council told del Olmo that unions “wear two hats,” attacking undocumented workers publicly while quietly

⁴⁸John V. Tunney to Edward Levi, March 7, 1975, ILGWU Box 49 Folder 14 Page 93.

⁴⁹ILGWU March 13 (typed notes), Frank del Olmo Collection, Box 93 Folder 16 Pages 10-11, CSUN.

⁵⁰Gary Silbiger, “Undocumented Workers Organize,” National Lawyers Guild Immigration Newsletter, April 1975, p. 1. Gary Silbiger interview.

⁵¹Joel Ochoa interview; Comite Primero de Mayo to Perez, March 29, 1975, CASA-HGT Papers, Box 39 Folder 5 Page 6.

organizing them out of necessity.⁵² The publicity surrounding the High Tide campaign made this approach less tenable and heightened the tensions between Phil Russo and the union's local leadership, Cornelius Wall Max Wolf. Perhaps unknown to Russo, CASA activists mobilized others progressive activists to attend community meetings and speak out in favor of immigrant amnesty with the aim of softening what an internal CASA report called Wall and Wolf's "chauvinist positions."⁵³ Slow to fully embrace immigrant amnesty, ILGWU leaders did frequently appeal to the INS to steer clear of factories with active organizing campaigns, but with little success.

CASA activists and Russo also found common cause in opposing the October League, another radical group with a base among workers in one of union's the largest plants, Southern California Davis Pleating. Like CASA, the October League criticized union bureaucrats who "refuse to defend the rights of all members, with or without papers," just as they "refuse to enforce the contract, taking the company's side more than ours."⁵⁴ But CASA was more willing to work within unions, particularly where they felt they had some inroads. Although CASA's newspaper *Sin Fronteras* was harsh in its criticism of corrupt and anti-immigrant union leaders, its writers more frequently urged readers to work with unions as long as possible. "The struggle for unionization, is not only a right, but it is a moral obligation," *Sin Fronteras* instructed,

⁵²Bert Corona (typed notes), Trini Flores (typed notes), Frank del Olmo Collection, Box 93 Folder 16 Pages 35-36.

⁵³Report of ROPAJE, April 11, 1976, CASA-HGT Papers, Box 20 Folder 5 Pages 10-12, Stanford University Library.

⁵⁴"Trabajadores—A Defender Nuestros Derechos. Workers—Let's Fight for Our Rights!" See also, "To All Garment Workers and ILGWU Members" (September 14, 1976), both ILGWU Western States Region, Box 97 Folder 19. On the conflict between the August Twenty-ninth Movement/October League and CASA, see Gutierrez, "CASA and the Chicano Movement," 18-19; Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*; Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2020), 572.

because the rights that do exist in the U.S. were won by previous generations of workers who were often “immigrants like ourselves.”⁵⁵ Through the summer of 1976 and into the spring of 1977 while the ILGWU moved deeper into immigrant organizing, October League militants in ILGWU Local 482 grew more critical of the union’s position on immigrant workers. Calling union officials “sell-outs” and “dues eaters,” one militant filed an unfair labor practice charge against the union and was later expelled after a physical altercation with union leaders. Without naming the October League, an editorial in *Sin Fronteras* warned readers about the negative influence of “super-revolutionaries who confuse, divide, split and mislead the movement.” In contrast, CODIL “does not want separation from the trade unions of which they are a part. Rather, it seeks to strengthen the rank-and-file movements that have become organized in the struggle for the democratization of the unions.”⁵⁶

These dynamics came to a head in January of 1977 when in quick succession INS agents raided Southern California Davis Pleating and another plant where the union was preparing for an election. During the fall of 1976, rank-and-file organizer Jesse Haro began organizing with his brother at the Lilli Diamond Originals plant, building on workers’ dissatisfaction with low wages and the abusive behavior of supervisors.⁵⁷ After the company refused to raise its lowest wage to match the new state minimum wage, the Haro brothers began circulating union cards. Half of the union’s supporters were undocumented workers, but a large group of Asian workers who were also undocumented refused to sign, demonstrating the limits of the union’s organizing campaign.

⁵⁵“La Chispa,” *Sin Fronteras*, May 1977, p. 4.

⁵⁶ILGWU Western States Region Box 97 Folder 19 Pages 8-37; “Who are Friends? Who are Enemies?” *Sin Fronteras*, April 1977, 8; Jose Jacquez Medina, “Organization and Resistance,” *Sin Fronteras*, June 1977, 10.

⁵⁷An Open Letter to Jerry Salk, January 3, 1977, ILGWU Western Region Box 26 Folder 6; Quien llamo la migra! CASA-HGT Papers Box 39 Folder 5 Page 4.

When the union filed a request for an election with the NLRB, the company fired three pro-union workers, interrogated union supporters, and held captive audience meetings in which officials offered to help workers with their immigration status.⁵⁸ While the campaign at Lilli Diamond was off to a rocky start, the INS raided Southern California Davis Pleating on January 4, 1977, arresting 78 union members. Armed with a warrant for “certain property, namely persons, namely illegal aliens,” agents entered the plant and questioned only those they thought likely to be undocumented based on “facial appearance, hair coloring and styling, demeanor (i.e., anxiety or fright), language and accent.”⁵⁹ Shortly afterwards, the city’s oldest Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinion*, published an article harshly criticizing the ILGWU for its failure to defend undocumented workers. Management at Lilli Diamond quickly made copies and distributed the article throughout the plant. Russo noted in an internal report to union leaders, “this article was like manna from heaven” for management and “devastating” for the union.⁶⁰ The day before the election at Lilli Diamond, INS agents detained two women who were union supporters in front of the factory. ILGWU organizers Miguel Machuca and Mario Vásquez went to the INS office to aid the arrested workers, but to no avail.⁶¹ Back at the plant, management

⁵⁸“The Election Day Immigration Raid at Lilli Diamond Originals,” 1-4, ILGWU Western States Region; “An Open Letter to Jerry Salk,” ILGWU Western Region Box 26 Folder 6.

⁵⁹United States Court of Appeals and Ninth Circuit, *ILGWU, Delgado, et al. v. Sureck, et al.* (681 F2d 624) (9th Circuit July 15, 1982), note 6; Affidavit of Gail Richard Key, Jr., December 29, 1976; “Exhibit B,” ILGWU Western States Region Collection, Box 49 Folder 4.

⁶⁰“The Election Day Immigration Raid at Lilli Diamond Originals” [Alternate version, February 1977], 4-6, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 26 Folder 6. A version of this report without the section on the October League appears in Antonio Jose Rios-Bustamante, ed., *Immigration and Public Policy: Human Rights for Undocumented Workers and Their Families. Chicano Studies Center Document No. 5.*, Chicano Studies Center Document 5 (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Center, 1977), 369-374.

⁶¹“The Election Day Immigration Raid at Lilli Diamond Originals”; Affidavit of Miguel Machuca, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 26 Folder 6.

held a captive audience meeting of all employees except those in the cutting department where many of the strong union supporters worked.⁶²

The next morning, January 14, was the day of the union election at Lilli Diamond Originals. As workers arrived at the plant, they were greeted by a solidarity picket line organized by the County Federation of Labor. A little after 9 AM, “demonstrators broke for breakfast and they proceeded to a nearby cafe.” With the observers out of the way, a team of 6 INS agents arrived with vans and entered the plant with a list of workers to question. Machuca and Vasquez were at the INS detention center where they encountered the worker Maria Herrera leaving with her lawyer who told them about an ongoing raid at the plant.⁶³ Agents carried a list of more than 15 workers, among them the union leader Jesse Haro and nine others arrested that day. The union charged that supervisors told reliably anti-union workers to come to work after noon on the day of the election. The union lost the election by about 10 votes.⁶⁴

Stung by another election defeat involving the INS, the ILGWU first sought relief through the NLRB, charging Lilli Diamond Originals with discriminating against union activists. When that failed, the union began working with immigration attorneys to investigate the warrants used by the INS to gain entry to factories and the actions of INS agents within the plants.⁶⁵ In February 1978, the ILGWU filed suit “on behalf of employees who are members of

⁶²Affidavit of Jesus Haro, January 18, 1977, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 26 Folder 6.

⁶³“The Election Day Immigration Raid at Lilli Diamond Originals and the Response of the I.L.G.W.U.” Report to the General Executive Board of the I.L.G.W.U. by the Western States Region Organizing Department, February 1977; Affidavit of Miguel Machuca, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 26, Folder 6; “INS Raid to Halt to Halt Union Drive,” *Sin Fronteras*, 2.

⁶⁴Affidavit of Jesus Haro, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 26 Folder 6; “Entrevista con Miguel Machuca,” in Arturo Santamaría Gómez, *La Izquierda Norteamericana y los Trabajadores Indocumentados* (Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 1988), 216; “INS Raid to Halt Union Drive,” *Sin Fronteras*, February 1977, 2.

⁶⁵In 1975, the ACLU of Illinois won a sweeping injunction against the INS in a case

the ILGWU working in Union Shops” with the aim of “establishing that Latin workers have the same rights under the U.S. and California Constitutions as all other workers, regardless of nationality.”⁶⁶ Hailed by immigrant rights advocates, the lawsuit did not signal a complete change of heart by international officers of the ILGWU who paired their call for “full, permanent amnesty to all undocumented aliens now in this country” with support for a national identification system, “strengthened border controls,” and federal sanctions against “unscrupulous employers who knowingly employ illegal aliens.”⁶⁷ Despite these mixed messages from national union officials, the ILGWU’s Los Angeles lawsuit signaled the union’s participation in a wider legal campaign to challenge INS practices that encouraged people to challenge the INS factory raids.

The ILGWU and other unions in Los Angeles were learning how to take on the INS with the help of immigrant rights advocates, and advocates were testing strategies for rapidly responding to almost daily worksite raids. In the spring of 1978, the ILGWU joined with other

stemming from a series of INS raids on factories and worker housing in two central Illinois towns. The court ruled agents had violated workers’ Fourth Amendment right to be free of unreasonable searches purely based on workers’ “Latin appearance.” See Illinois Migrant Council v. Pilliod (540 F2d 1062) (US Court of Appeals, 7th Circuit August 17, 1976). The injunction applied to the INS Midwest region but caused the INS to scale back its worksite and neighborhood raids in other regions to avoid similar litigation. On similar strategies in Arizona see Ana Raquel Minian, Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁶⁶Fenton to Strongin, February 1, 1978, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 49 Folder 4 Pages 21-22.; Press Release, February 22, 1978, ILGWU Western States Region, Box 49 Folder 4 Page 24. Robert Rawitch, “Union Sues to Curb INS Raids on Aliens,” Los Angeles Times, February 25, 1978; The case became ILGWU vs. Sureck, then INS vs. Delgado at the Supreme Court. See “Press Release, February 22, 1978” ILGWU Western States Region Box 49 Folder 4. Plaintiffs in the original suit included the ILGWU and four union members: Herman Delgado and Ramona Correa (both U.S. citizens), and Francis Labonte and Maria Miramontes (both documented immigrants).

⁶⁷Statement on Immigration and Naturalization Policy by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union [c. June 1978], ILG Western States Box 49 Folder 4 Pages 2-3.

progressive unions, lawyers, and activists to support the Labor and Immigration Action Center in Los Angeles.⁶⁸ Along with the CASA-linked CODIL, this new group jumped into action to stop the deportation of 120 workers at the Sbicca shoe plant who had recently voted down unionization by a narrow margin. The surprising legal victory reversing their voluntary deportation orders energized the immigrant right community and once again demonstrated to potential value of collaboration between unions and progressive organizers.⁶⁹ Coordinated legal action slowed the pace of deportations and provided a positive example of what could happen when unionists allied with progressive lawyers and community activists. In 1979, for instance, the ILGWU faced a familiar scenario during a campaign at Hollander Home Fashions in Los Angeles. The company fired key union activists, and the NLRB found no wrongdoing by the company. When the INS raided the firm ahead of the union election, the union claimed to have proof of collusion between the agency and the employer. Unlike previous cases, however, the union won the election at Hollander and then negotiated a contract with explicit protections for undocumented workers in the plant. The contract required Hollander management to notify the union and shop stewards when INS was active at the plant, refuse entry to agents except under specific circumstances, and withhold workers' names. Deported workers had the right to reclaim their jobs if they returned within five days.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Goodman, Deportation Machine, chapter 5; "INS Raids Sbicca Shoes—Mass Defense and Action Center Organized," reprinted in Immigration Newsletter (November-December 1987), 6-7.

⁶⁹Bruce Bowman, "Sbicca Workers Winning—INS Reshuffling Deck," Immigration Newsletter (February 1979), 5-7; Jerry Ruhlow, "Unionist Promises to Assist Illegal Aliens: Organizer would Fight Deportation If Workers Sign Contract," Los Angeles Times, March 11, 1979; Gary Silbiger interview.

⁷⁰Cristina Vázquez interview; Gomez, La izquierda norteamericana y los trabajadores indocumentados, 201-202; "Immigration Raids in the Workplace," National Immigration Project, p. 28, Herman Baca Collection, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb6895549q>. The 2016-2019 contract at Hollander retained these protections and added the right to return to work under a

Progress at the grassroots, however, was matched by retreat at the national level. In 1980, ILGWU President Sol Chaikin introduced a proposal to change AFL-CIO policy in favor of amnesty for undocumented workers and opposed to employer sanctions. But with no chance of success among the other heads of America's trade union movement, Chaikin withdrew his proposal and embraced the federation's call for a national identification card, stiff penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers, and a targeted amnesty for those who "demonstrated attachment" to the U.S. by long residence. Chaikin cast himself as a "pragmatist," telling reporters his union's "idealistic" proposal "would not be accepted by other unions."⁷¹ A year later, Chaikin cut off the national union's financial support of the Los Angeles organizing campaign. Over five years, the union had netted fewer than 1,000 new members at a cost of \$5 million, he told reporters. He didn't consider the organizing drive a failure, "because over the years we have been educating workers about their rights, but we certainly cannot call our campaign a success."⁷²

The end the national union's support for the immigrant organizing drive in Los Angeles left a mixed legacy. On the one hand, the ILGWU's public embrace of employer sanctions was sure to alienate immigrant workers and their advocates who opposed the measure as intensely as they supported amnesty. On the other hand, the ILGWU was at the center of a flurry of action and publicity that contributed to a wider sense of unrest among immigrant workers and began to link unions with the aspirations of immigrant workers. Organizing networks of immigrant workers, unionists, and legal advocates (rather than official union institutions) were the conduits

different name or identity. Document in authors' possession.

⁷¹Harry Bernstein, "AFL-CIO Rejects Easing Alien Stand: Garment Workers Approve of Policy Despite Union Efforts in Southland," Los Angeles Times, February 26, 1980.

⁷²Harry Bernstein, "Garment Workers Say Bid to Organize Aliens Failed," Los Angeles Times, August 7, 1981.

for this nascent process of identification. More people felt affinity to a sense of movement than were actual members of unions. As Bert Corona and others had predicted, careful organizing led immigrant workers to shake off their deference to American authorities and reject their subordinate place in L.A.'s culture and economy. Workers also learned about the American system of labor relations, warts and all, and became more skilled advocates for themselves.

The ILGWU's long-shot case against INS raids played out dramatically in the courts during the 1980s, first in the union's favor and later in a victory for the INS. The federal district court in Los Angeles quickly dismissed the 1978 lawsuit, and the union appealed. Then in 1982, with Ronald Reagan in the White House and amidst a renewed INS campaign of factory raids known as "Operation Jobs," the US Court of Appeals overturned the lower court decision and found INS factory raids were a "seizure of the workforce" that violated workers' Fourth Amendment rights. "The surrounding and securing of exits," the court found, "the obvious function of which is to produce a captive workforce, in combination with the element of surprise, directly lead to many of the desired apprehensions." Whether or not the INS had reasonable evidence of the presence of undocumented workers in the factories, the agency did "not provide sufficient justification for the execution of the surveys in a manner which effectively detains an entire workforce."⁷³ The National Lawyers Guild, the ACLU, and others quickly spread the news about the new standard, gaining class action status for a case brought by the Molder's union in northern California at the end of 1983.⁷⁴ Before this case could gather momentum, however, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the ILGWU in a lopsided decision. Writing for the majority,

⁷³International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union v. Sureck, U.S. Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit, July 15, 1982; Charles Maher, "Court Rules Raids by INS Violate Rights: Says Searches Amount to Improper Seizure of All Factory's Workers," Los Angeles Times, July 16, 1982.

⁷⁴International Molders' & Allied Workers' Local Union No. 164 v. Nelson (US District, No Calif December 19, 1983).

Justice William Rehnquist dismissed the notion that workers felt constrained by the presence of INS officers throughout their plant. After all, he wrote, “when people are at work their freedom to move about has been meaningfully restricted, not by the actions of law enforcement officials, but by the workers' voluntary obligations to their employers.” Workers’ confinement by law enforcement officers was only a variation on their normal condition of confinement as workers, according to Rehnquist. The dissent written by Justice William Brennan noted the “studied air of unreality” pervading the majority decision. “The success of the Court's sleight of hand turns on the proposition that the interrogations of respondents by the INS were merely brief, ‘consensual encounters,’” despite testimony from each of the defendants that they were intimidated by and fearful of INS agents. The Court deflected its responsibility, Brennan wrote, because of the difficulty “justifying these seizures on the basis of reasonable, objective criteria as required by the Fourth Amendment.”⁷⁵

[Insert Image #2: Southern California Davis Pleating Strike Flyer]

Despite this disappointing outcome at the Supreme Court and the withdraw of financial support from the national union, the ILGWU expanded its organizing in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. As ILGWU organizer Cristina Vázquez recalled, “A lot of people saw us as the one union that organized immigrant workers, and we would get calls or referrals from workers about potential hot spots.”⁷⁶ Even in the difficult economic times of the early 1980s, organizers celebrated election victories. For instance, Vázquez took a job on the line at Glydon’s High Fashion Intimate Apparel leading to lead a campaign resulting in a 149-10 election victory for

⁷⁵Immigration and Naturalization Service, et al. v. Delgado, et al. (U.S. Supreme Court, 1984); Glen Elsasser, “Shop Raids for Illegal Aliens OKd,” Chicago Tribune April 18, 1984.

⁷⁶Cristina Vázquez, Voices from the Front Lines, 6.

the union.⁷⁷ In 1983-84, workers at Davis Pleating waged a remarkable year-long strike against a demand for a 40% wage cut that ended with the firm's closure, but also a large payment by the company to the union's pension fund. "We didn't want to accept what the company was offering," said Berta Barrazzo a 12-year veteran in the plant, "a job paying minimum wage you can find on any corner."⁷⁸ Following up organizing leads circulating in the community, the ILGWU also won elections in warehouses and manufacturing. An eight-month organizing drive at the Somma waterbed plant began at soccer games in East Los Angeles leading to an overwhelming election victory in early 1985, company retaliation, and a statewide boycott while the case wound through the NLRB.⁷⁹ At Manny Industries in 1986, the union beat back a 20% pay cut and other concessions with a strike, boycott, and dramatic public demonstrations with labor and religious allies, including what one observer called a "solidarity mass." In the end, the company signed a contract with a small wage increase and better seniority.⁸⁰ And in the industrial suburb of South Gate, the union won an important legal precedent when the U.S. Court of Appeals ordered reinstatement with backpay for three undocumented workers who were laid off in violation of the contract.⁸¹ These and other contests demonstrated not only that immigrant

⁷⁷Cristina Vázquez interview; photo of Glydon's workers, ILGWU Justice Photographs, Cornell University Library.

⁷⁸Henry Weinstein, "Strike Becomes Survival Test for Firm: Meet Demands or Close, L.A. Clothing Company Told by Union," Los Angeles Times, March 12, 1984; Henry Weinstein, "Garment Workers' Union Gets Its Way, Struck Company Closes," Los Angeles Times, August 11, 1984; Peter Olney interview; Mike Maloney, "Garment strikers oppose givebacks," The Militant (October 21, 1983): 8.

⁷⁹"Fired Workers Push Waterbed Boycott," California AFL-CIO News, October 11, 1985; Harry Bernstein, "Illegal Alien Issue Raised in East L.A. Dispute" Los Angeles Times, September 18, 1985.

⁸⁰Seth Galinsky, "L.A. Garment Unionists Hold Solidarity Rally," The Militant, November 28, 1986; Seth Galinsky, "L.A. Garment Workers Beat Back Concessions," The Militant, April 24, 1987. Cristina Vázquez interview; Gomez, La izquierda norteamericana y los trabajadores indocumentados, 200-201; ILGWU Western Region 26/25/169-170.

⁸¹William Overend, "Court Rules Aliens Have Full Union Protection," Los Angeles

workers wanted unions, but also that they were often more militant than citizen workers. In retrospect, however, Cristina Vázquez thought the pursuit of “hot shops” beyond its core industry was a mistake. With a note of disappointment she concluded, “we were building a union of immigrant workers more than a garment workers union.”⁸² Nevertheless, the ILGWU campaigns opened the door for more organizing in the years to come. As more unions recognized the possibility of organizing immigrant workers, especially after 1986, the lessons of the ILGWU campaigns filtered across the landscape of local organizing even if the garment sector itself remained stubbornly nonunion.

Conclusion: Remembering Labor’s Long Game

Activists and scholars have rightly celebrated iconic Los Angeles union campaigns of the 1990s like Justice for Janitors and hotel workers with UNITE HERE Local 11. These pioneering efforts broke through to victory in an era of declining fortunes for labor by taking advantage of the creativity and community networks of their members, whether immigrants, women, Black, Brown, or LGBTQ. Along with worker centers, immigrant rights organizations, and allies in faith communities, the union movement helped to forge what Ruth Milkman calls the “L.A. model of economic justice organizing and advocacy,” a hybrid of union and community organizing traditions that has generated persistent and deep ties across different sectors of civil society and supported progressive political action. These achievements stand on their own. But their notoriety has obscured the longer process of leadership and organizational development that

Times, July 23, 1986; see also, Local 512, Warehouse and Office Workers’ Union, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union v. National Labor Relations Board, U.S. Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, 1986). The Supreme Court in the 2002 Hoffman Plastic Compounds decision overturned the protections won in the Felbro case.

⁸²Vázquez, Voices from the Frontlines, 10.

preceded them. The prologue to the upsurge of the 1990s was shaped by the strategic vision of activists like Bert Corona, Chole Alatorre, and Humberto Camacho, driven forward by the energy of young radicals of the 1970s, and amplified by the aspirations of immigrant workers and their communities.

The campaign to organize undocumented garment workers helped to change organized labor's approach to federal labor law and to the broader working-class community of Los Angeles. During the Cold War era, most unions were fully committed to the NLRB framework of collective bargaining. Compelled to seek exclusive representation for particular groups of workers, they also faced a legal minefield around boycotts, mass picketing, and financial management. Unions often relied more on the power of the federal bureaucracy and contractual rights than on the community networks of the members and allies. The breakdown of the NLRB and the deportation campaigns of the INS compelled unions to seek community allies and mount dramatic public actions designed to move stakeholders in the wider political sphere. In the process, organized labor once again became a site of immigrant belonging, much as it had been in the early 20th century. Union organizers forged strategic links into immigrant communities and used their collective bargaining agreements to codify the rights of immigrant workers here in the U.S. The movement-based belonging of labor citizenship drew on and supported broader networks of belonging nurtured and sustained through immigrant hometown associations, churches, families, and clubs. Community networks helped workers win their union contracts by supporting strikes and boycotts, and victorious union members brought higher wages and better benefits back to their communities that had sustained their struggle. As unions gained immigrant members, they had greater incentive to support immigrant community interests through political lobbying. The fruits of this virtuous circle would be harvested years later, but the process began

in the inauspicious context of the 1970s.

[Insert Image #3: ILGWU Soccer Team]

The incomplete success of ILGWU organizers, alongside promising campaigns like the Coors Boycott and other union drives among new immigrants, prepared organized labor in Los Angeles to take maximum advantage of the changes wrought by the amnesty provisions in the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). As the ILGWU's Phil Russo put it in 1978, "There's a powder keg out there waiting to go off. When this amnesty goes through, that will be the fuse to light it."⁸³ IRCA's amnesty provisions and the expansion of the Special Agricultural Worker program allowed a large cohort of undocumented workers to come out of the shadows. Many of these immigrants would, in time, become naturalized citizens and voters who were able to sponsor family members for legal permanent residency.⁸⁴ The regional AFL-CIO office, with Coors boycott leader David Sickler in the lead, partnered with local unions and the County Federation of Labor to create service centers in union halls that helped eligible immigrants regularize their status. As that program generated thousands of new contacts between organized labor and immigrants, Sickler launched the California Immigrant Workers Association (CIWA) as a general organizing body in 1989. Sickler hired veteran organizers to work for CIWA, including Joel Ochoa who had served as CASA's Secretary of Propaganda in the early 1970s and helped to organize CASA chapters in Colorado and Illinois.⁸⁵ Described as a "holding tank" for

⁸³Doug Smith and Don Synder, "Illegal Aliens Greeted with Open Arms or Cries of Rage," Los Angeles Times, September 3, 1978.

⁸⁴ Milkman, L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Victor Narro, "Si Se Puede: Immigrant Workers and the Transformation of the Los Angeles Labor and Worker Center Movements," Los Angeles Public Interest Law Journal 1 (2009 2008): 65–106.

⁸⁵Ochoa worked in CASA under the name Enrique Flores. "Documento sobre la Historia de CASA HGT," 19; Joel Ochoa interview. Victor Narro, "Immigrant Worker Organizing," in From Coors to California: David Sickler and the New Working Class (Los Angeles: UCLA

immigrant workers with no union in their workplace, CIWA had many of the functions of contemporary worker centers. According to Sickler, CIWA “provided assistance with wage and hours violations, school fraud, landlord abuse, immigration law, family unity, representation before the school board and city agencies including city hall, the Los Angeles City Council, Board of Supervisors and California State Legislature.”⁸⁶ The ILGWU, still struggling to organize garment workers, opened a service center in downtown Los Angeles in partnership with CIWA.⁸⁷ CIWA drew thousands of nonunion immigrant workers into the orbit of organized labor, helped unions identify new leaders, and built relationships of trust between trade unions and immigrant activists. Its impact on the garment industry was limited, but CIWA organizers were key to the success of major strikes in auto parts and construction.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the AFL-CIO withdrew financial support for CIWA, and the organization folded in the spring of 1994 just months before unions and immigrant rights activists mobilized against Proposition 187.⁸⁹

Unionization could bring real, immediate gains to immigrant workers and their families, giving organized labor the potential to serve as a vehicle for immigrant belonging—what we are

Labor Center, 2019.

⁸⁶California Immigrant Workers Association (CIWA) memo from David Sickler and Jose DePaz to All Unions and Councils, March 30, 1994, UNITE HERE Local 11 papers, Box 17 Folder 6. “‘New Boldness’ Moves Immigrant Workers,” AFL-CIO News, November 13, 1989; “Hispanics Respond to Intensified CIWA Effort. CIWA Staff Member Harassed during INS Sweep, Suit Charges,” AFL-CIO News, May 28, 1990; “CIWA Helps IAM Gain Major Unit,” AFL-CIO News, January 21, 1991.

⁸⁷Bob Baker, “Union Targets Sweatshop Operators,” Los Angeles Times, April 27, 1990.

⁸⁸Tina Griego, “800 Workers Walk Off Their Jobs at Wheel Factory,” Los Angeles Times, August 2, 1990; “Macario Camorlinga,” in Milkman and Wong, eds., Voices from the Front Lines: Organizing Immigrant Workers in Los Angeles (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2000), 31-38; Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong, “Organizing Immigrant Workers: Case Studies from Southern California,” pp. 99-128 in Lowell Turner, Harry Katz and Richard Hurd, eds., Rekindling the Movement: Labor’s Quest for 21st Century Relevance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁸⁹Sickler and DePaz to All Unions and Councils, March 30, 1994; Joel Ochoa interview.

calling *labor citizenship*. But in both theory and practice the labor citizenship was limited in scope. Unions like the ILGWU organized workers regardless of their immigration status, but their vision of power and redistribution focused largely on immigrants as American workers. And while union-sponsored legal action against factory raids and employer abuses deflected the most zealous application of INS deportation policies for a time, the U.S. Supreme Court under Ronald Reagan sided with the INS, giving the green light to factory raids that have continued to bedevil union organizing. As Bert Corona and his allies predicted, IRCA's federal ban on hiring undocumented workers had little effect on employers, but profoundly undermined workers' collective rights and the power of the NLRB to enforce the right to organize.⁹⁰

These strategic and legal setbacks, however, left organizers with valuable lessons and relationships they would carry into new campaigns. Just as the United Farm Workers was an "incubator for activist talent," in Randy Shaw's words, the ILGWU was a schoolhouse for new union leaders, one that was firmly embedded in the urban industrial setting.⁹¹ Cristina Ramirez, who married fellow organizer Mario Vázquez remained an organizer with garment unions until her recent retirement. Rocio Saenz, who would later join Justice for Janitors campaign and is now an Executive Vice President of SEIU, began her career in labor organizing at the ILGWU in Los Angeles. Jono Shaffer, another key Justice for Janitors organizer, got his first union job with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers during a brief period when Cristina Vázquez

⁹⁰Catherine L. Fisk & Michael J. Wishnie, "The story of Hoffman Plastic Compounds, Inc. v. NLRB: labor rights without remedies for undocumented immigrants" in Laura J. Cooper and Catherine L. Fisk, eds., Labor Law Stories (New York: Foundation Press; Thomson/West, 2005).

⁹¹Randy Shaw, Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Miriam Pawel, The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

worked for the union.⁹² Maria Elena Durazo left the ILGWU to attend the People’s College of Law, then took a job as an organizer with HERE Local 11. She ran her successful campaign for local leadership of Local 11 out of rented offices the basement of the ILGWU’s union hall. More recently, as a California state senator she was the driving force behind a new law banning piece rate payment for garment workers.⁹³ These and many others carried their experience and knowledge into organizations across California, creating human network inclined to action and solidarity.

As historian James Gregory notes in his reassessment of 20th century social movement history, the U.S. left “has consisted solely of shifting constellations of social movements without the anchoring presence of competitive left-wing electoral parties.”⁹⁴ New movements often grow through their contentious relationships with rivals and the memory of past campaigns. They gain followers by differentiating themselves from others, arguing, and articulating compelling messages for supporters. But the schisms that typically dominate the narrative of left history have not always been the stark separations we imagine. Nor has the failure of one organization necessarily ended its brand of organizing. Like other leftist organizations, CASA fell apart in the late 1970s. But the personal networks and ideas forged there remained, providing support to new organizations and new generations of organizers. The ILGWU failed to thoroughly organize the garment industry in Los Angeles, but it served as an effective link between committed young

⁹²Interview of Jono Shaffer by Andrew Gomez, UCLA Center for Oral History Research; Rocio Saenz in Milkman and Wong, eds., Voices from the Frontlines; Cristina Vázquez Interview.

⁹³Marita Hernandez, “Organizer Wins Post of President Latina Leads Takeover of Union from Anglo Males” Los Angeles Times, May 6, 1989. Suhauna Hussain and Brittny Mejia, “Wage theft is a problem for L.A. garment workers. A California bill aims to fix it. Again,” Los Angeles Times, September 3, 2021.

⁹⁴James N. Gregory, “Remapping the American Left: A History of Radical Discontinuity,” Labor 17, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 11–45.

activists and a labor movement in need of new ideas. Immigrant worker organizing in 1970s and 1980s forged overlapping networks of activists that survived longer than the organizations that created them. The relative success of progressive politics and organized labor in Los Angeles and the creative approach of local organizers to coalition and movement building was nurtured by this deeper legacy of struggle and the relationships it has created and sustained.

* * *