

Building Understanding Creating Change

Defending the Rights of Immigrant Workers

What Union Members Should Know About . . .

Unions and Immigrant Workers

Immigration is an issue for unions

Throughout the history of this country, immigrants have played an important role in building our nation, our communities and our unions. We are, to a large degree, a country of immigrants with a rich and diverse culture that continues to expand and grow. And as new arrivals join the workplace, our unions must build understanding among all workers to create the change necessary for unity and solidarity.

Whether immigrants or nonimmigrants, all workers face many of the same workplace problems and concerns: employer interference with our rights to improve wages and working conditions through unionization, discrimination and abuse at the hands of unscrupulous employers and the enduring struggle for dignity and respect both as workers and human beings. Unions play an important role in the workplace by providing a voice for all workers regardless of where they were born or to where they trace their roots. When one worker's rights are abused, all workers are impacted. It is only through unions that workers can stand together against employers who often attempt to pit workers against each other.

Immigrant workers are building the union movement

In countless instances, immigrant workers and activists are leading the way for unions and community groups in the struggle for justice by challenging employers, organizing and building broad-based alliances. For example, immigrant workers are organizing to enact real improvements

for workers in various industries—among them, roofers in Arizona, janitors in Los Angeles, poultry workers in the mid-Atlantic area, hotel workers in Minnesota, laundry workers in Massachusetts and more.

It's about fighting for rights and protections for all workers. During the Immigration Forums sponsored by the AFL-CIO in 2000, Maria Petrosova, who immigrated from Slovakia in 1995, said it best: "The union changed my life." She was able to learn English, improve her skills and gain a higher-paying job in asbestos removal. The union movement is stronger and more energized because of the hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers like Petrosova.

Julio Garcia also symbolizes the passion and energy immigrant workers bring to the union movement. The 23-year-old Las Vegas construction worker and his two brothers were among the 130 workers who walked out on their own in July 1998 to protest nonunion Kukurin Concrete's unfair labor practices. When some of his co-workers returned to work, Garcia refused. "I wanted to go union. I told them I would make this company go union by myself." He volunteered to work 18 hours a day to organize. Now a member of Plasterers and Cement Masons Local 79, Garcia says he would do it again. "Whatever I lost during the strike, I won back when I got the chance to join a union."

When immigrants join unions, as millions have done, they join the fight for better wages and working conditions, thereby improving the working conditions and increasing the bargaining power of all

unionized workers at their job, in their industry and throughout the economy.

Unions can benefit immigrant workers

America's 16.3 million union members represent a cross-section of people—women and men of all ages, races and ethnic groups. They work in hospitals and nursing homes, auto assembly plants and on construction sites, trains, buses and airplanes. They are health care workers, security guards, musicians, electricians, communications workers, postal workers, janitors and more. Union membership is important to all workers, helping them to gain decent wages and working conditions and have a say in their jobs.

Unions can be particularly important for immigrant workers because they often are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation on the job. And when workers join together in unions, change can happen that benefits everyone—workers gain better wages and benefits, rights are protected, working conditions improve, communities are strengthened and respect and dignity become the norm, not the exception.

How the union movement reaches out to immigrant workers cuts to the heart of what unions are all about—social and economic justice for all people. By organizing new groups of workers, the union movement will be able to increase the overall influence of working families in politics, the economy and in the workplace.