

# **Immigrant Rights: Striving for Racial Justice, Economic Equality and Human Dignity**

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Over the last two years, the possibility of a broad legalization program for undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States has emerged as not only a potentially achievable goal for the immigrant rights movement, but as a political issue taken up by anti-immigrant groups, employers hungry for profits, and high profile political figures. Legalization itself has always been a long-term objective for many immigrant rights groups, some of which fought for more than a decade for the 1986 legalization that had allowed more than two million undocumented immigrants to gain legal status. Preparing for this newest struggle, immigrant rights activists anticipated strong and well-funded opposition from the anti-immigrant movement, which was expected to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in media campaigns to influence public opinion. Over the years, immigration restrictionists have attempted to drive wedges between groups of immigrants based on differences such as legal status or national origin; have argued that legalization and family reunification would contribute to harmful population growth; and have opposed even limited guest worker programs.

What the immigrant rights movement could not anticipate was the severe backlash against immigrants, particularly the undocumented, that occurred in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11. In the days and weeks following the national tragedy, the anti-immigrant movement seized this "opportunity" to bring longstanding arguments, particularly those labeling immigrants as criminals, to the forefront of "breaking news." In this moment of shock and terror, in which thousands of lives were lost, including immigrant workers from around the world, anti-immigrant groups moved quickly to blame "illegal aliens" for not only this act of violence, but for a host of social ills. Unfortunately, such anti-immigrant and anti-immigration arguments resonated with a growing audience. Immediately following September 11, racist vigilante activities began to target Arab Americans and people perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent, including threats and attacks on mosques, temples and schools, harassment by police and security guards, and other acts of racist violence. Despite official statements against such violations, rapid federal enactment of anti-terrorism legislation fixated on immigrants, particularly noncitizens and the undocumented, establishing new and potentially permanent restrictions on civil liberties.

## ***Moving Forward after September 11, 2001***

In this changed climate, the immigrant rights movement, while still working to ensure that issues of legalization and expanded rights for immigrants remain on the national agenda, clearly faces new challenges, especially when coupled with the economic downturn, historically a breeding ground for anti-immigrant hysteria.

We must create new strategies that address the current context and which work towards long-term goals, such as creating immigration policies that uphold the civil and human rights of all immigrants, regardless of status. For example, the aftermath of Sept. 11 has reinforced the need for immigrant rights activists to build or strengthen alliances to address anti-immigrant violence,

hate crimes, and racial profiling against Arab Americans, people of Middle Eastern descent, and other immigrants of color. Activists have also been confronted with immediate concerns arising in the wake of the attacks, and some have moved to the forefront of emerging peace/anti-war movements, efforts to fight fast track legislation, such as the USA PATRIOT Act, that sacrifice civil rights to "fight terrorism," and growing resistance to increased scapegoating of immigrants, such as the new acceptance of racial profiling as a "counter-terrorism" measure. At an international level, U.S. attacks on Afghanistan have displaced hundreds of thousands of people, creating even more refugees with few places to go. Through all of this, immigrant rights groups must walk a careful line between challenging U.S. policies and practices, and dealing with the very tangible effects of the events of September 11.

The violent and widespread anti-immigrant response to the attacks, however, is no surprise. For years, the conservative Right has helped create a climate in which immigrants - particularly the undocumented - are seen as undeserving of human rights. Immigrants have been portrayed as criminals, terrorists, and welfare cheats - and accused of everything from increasing crime and invading communities to stealing the jobs of hard-working citizens to destroying the environment. At the same time, the movement for immigrant rights in the United States has faced serious obstacles in developing effective strategies to resist or transform either the public debate or its policy impact.

Creating new ways of talking about immigration, immigrant rights, and human rights is one of the primary challenges of today's immigrant rights movement, regardless of how current events may change the political climate. Ensuring the human and civil rights of all people, regardless of immigration status, involves more than just responding to anti-immigrant groups and policies. It means bringing immigrant rights into the larger movement for racial justice, labor rights, global economic equality, and human rights - something which is equally critical both during periods of increased support for immigrant rights, and during times of heightened nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

### *Framing Immigration - Where We Are Today*

The impact of the anti-immigrant Right on the current immigration debate cannot be overemphasized. In fact, up to this point, the immigration debate has largely been shaped by the anti-immigrant movement. Relying on a number of appealing and exclusionary arguments, the anti-immigrant Right has tapped into the public imagination in a way immigrant rights activists have yet to match. Because of this, discussions around immigration have centered around the themes of race relations and conflict, economic displacement, environmental destruction and overpopulation, urban sprawl, and crime.

During the past few years, these arguments have had less impact, and during this time, immigrant rights organizers and advocates have been able to steadily build up alliances and engage greater numbers of immigrant community members around direct issues.

But the real impact of anti-immigrant arguments is evidenced in the drastic shift in the discussion of legalization proposals since September 11. Some policymakers and advocates have begun to argue that legalization is a way to improve national security - reasoning that by bringing people out of the shadows, their activities can better be monitored. Unfortunately, such arguments deflate the need for legalization as a means of providing safety and security for all people.

In a period dominated by national security concerns and the presumed sacrifice of civil liberties, there is all the more reason to ensure that the most vulnerable are provided with basic protections. The United States will hardly be "safer" by locking out those who have migrated to the United States for a safe and secure life, to work, to go to school, to be reunited with family. Legalization programs embedded in a national security framework actually threaten to create a new class of noncitizens who, while documented, are nevertheless ineligible for the same civil rights protections as citizens and who are subject to the same violations legalization proposals were intended, at least by immigrant rights groups, to prevent. Challenging this framework raises many issues, including what the ultimate goal of the immigrant rights movement is, what we expect to gain from legalization, and the role of immigrant rights in a larger struggle for civil and human rights for all people. While such issues and conflicts are not new, they must be vigorously questioned to avoid compromising our overall vision for immigrant rights.

### ***Immigration as a Racial Justice Issue***

Whether proposing that there be a moratorium on immigration because of crime or urban sprawl or national security, anti-immigrant groups have relied strongly on racist arguments and sentiment to boost their position. Rapid demographic changes in the United States have played a significant role in defining the recent wave of anti-immigrant sentiment. Migrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa now comprise the majority of newcomers to the United States. Today, 85 percent of arriving migrants are people of color. In four of the country's five largest cities - New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston - Latinos and Asians already collectively form a majority of the population, while in California, people of color are now the majority. The changing demography of the United States, particularly in regions with increased immigration, has aroused racial anxieties in many White communities and some communities of color. While some communities have responded positively to these changes, there are an even greater number of highly publicized incidents of tension and hostility between newcomers and other residents.<sup>1</sup>

The immigrant rights movement has faced several formidable obstacles to forging a successful alliance with a broad movement for civil rights and racial justice. At an institutional level, White supremacy continues to define access to education, employment, community resources, and other opportunities for communities of color. Within the movement, distrust and/or lack of relations among and between groups of color remain principal obstacles to building a broad anti-racist movement inclusive of an immigrant rights agenda. With a lack of meaningful communication, points of conflict and tension often erupt over the allocation of material resources among economically marginalized groups of color. In order to expand and preserve civil and human rights for immigrants, the immigrant rights movement must build a strong base of multiracial support and articulate a distinctly anti-racist agenda. Immigrant rights groups must also begin to reach out to communities with which they have not previously worked, including Arab, South Asian and Muslim communities which have recently become the targets of both racist and anti-immigrant policies and violence.

### ***Pitting Workers against Each Other***

Economic arguments against immigration often rely on racist ideologies to justify immigration restrictions, as well as to divide workers and prevent a unified movement for economic justice.

Fueled by racial, ethnic, and economic tensions, anti-immigrant sentiment has been extremely effective at pitting low-wage workers of color against each other. Many communities have also been divided around the question of immigration and its impact on job availability for native-born people of color. In response to such concerns, the immigrant rights movement has often dismissed the possibility of job displacement impacting established communities of color, particularly African Americans. This approach has only exacerbated existing tensions. Instead, the immigrant rights movement needs to support research examining the structural conditions limiting access to decent jobs and resources for all workers.

The labor movement itself has also been divided on its position in regards to immigrant workers. Some progressive unions, such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), have supported immigrant workers and opposed policies such as employer sanctions, and in the process have proven to be crucial allies for immigrant rights advocates. Until recently, the AFL-CIO itself had supported employer sanctions in an effort to "protect" the jobs and interests of U.S.-born workers. In early 2000, however, the AFL-CIO shifted its position, speaking out strongly in support of immigrant workers rights and calling for a broad legalization program and an end to employer sanctions. Such action may help broaden support for immigrant workers on a number of levels, from the workplace to the political arena, and is now all the more critical, considering both the national security framework being applied to immigrants and the economic downturn. The AFL-CIO recently reaffirmed its support for immigrant rights in a post-September 11 resolution acknowledging the increased scapegoating of immigrants following the terrorist attacks.

### ***The Specter of Population Explosion***

In recent years, some anti-immigrant groups and population restrictionist advocates have promoted surprisingly effective claims that population increases due to migration pose the greatest threat to the environment. Arguments blaming immigrants for dwindling resources can be very powerful to people frustrated with traffic jams, overcrowded classrooms, and long unemployment lines in their communities. More recently, restrictionists have played to environmental concerns over urban sprawl, citing immigration as a major source of urban overcrowding. Such arguments have generally not swayed the environmental movement to side against immigration. However, they have not helped to build better relations between the environmental movement and immigrant communities.

While there has been some progress in breaking down the barriers between the predominantly White traditional environmental movement and communities of color through the environmental justice movement, these attacks threaten our ability to address serious environmental issues in immigrant communities. In the United States, communities of color, including immigrant communities, have overwhelmingly been the victims of environmental degradation, not its cause. Furthermore, if immigrants and other people are unable to exercise their human and civil rights, they cannot be equal partners in defending and shaping a safe and healthy environment for the benefit of all people.

### ***Criminalization of Immigration***

Finally, whether at the U.S.-Mexico border or in the interior of the United States, immigration has been framed as an issue about breaking the law, not about participation in a global economic system. Linking immigration and crime justifies a heightened law enforcement approach to immigration control, as demonstrated in the fact that immigrants are now the fastest-growing incarcerated population. Portraying immigrants as criminals has proven to be an effective public relations strategy for the INS and for anti-immigrant groups, making it easier to deny basic rights of privacy and due process, as well as human and civil rights, to immigrants. This practice has recently been taken to a new level with the labeling of immigrants as terrorists and has included such violations as secret detention and the creation of military trials for non-citizen civilians.

In the United States, debates around the question of immigration usually do not take into account its global dimensions. Restrictionists and immigrant advocates alike have often failed to consider the sources and patterns of international migration when formulating policy and strategy. A global perspective sheds light on the limitations of restrictive immigration policies. Although the stated aim of U.S. immigration policy is to control immigration, that policy framework fails to address the root causes of international migration, including economic pressures, ethnic and social conflicts, and environmental degradation. Significantly, the United States has often played a central role in creating the global conditions which lead to migration, from Structural Adjustment Policies that ravage national economies and social systems, to U.S.-based corporate policies, and to military intervention.

### *Messages of the Immigrant Rights Movement - A Closer Look*

Recognizing the impact of the anti-immigrant movement on the immigration debate, however, is not enough. Because the anti-immigrant Right has been very skillful in convincing the public that immigrants cause social and economic problems, it is easy to name the anti-immigrant arguments: "there are too many immigrants;" "they take away jobs;" "the United States can't take in all the world's poor;" "there are too many Mexicans;" "we are losing our culture." In contrast, the immigrant rights movement has often failed to clearly articulate what *our* message is.<sup>2</sup> Of course, those who advocate for immigrant rights have advanced certain arguments to defend against changes in immigration law or increases in enforcement. Advocates have often resorted to quick defenses without opportunity to analyze the implications of some arguments that are commonly employed. For example, following September 11, some advocates for legalization have argued for a legalization program to help national security, disregarding the possible impact such a "legalization" may have on the civil and human rights of all noncitizens. By examining the limitations of some of these arguments, we can lay the groundwork for some more effective ways to reframe the debate - and also to avoid falling into similar traps in the future.

### *Splitting "Illegal" and Legal Immigration*

In the past, Washington-based political negotiations have sometimes pushed advocates to compromise their position on what many see as an untenable or politically vulnerable stance - the defense of the undocumented. Scrambling to win public support in a period of heightened nativism, some advocacy groups have conceded to the rhetoric of anti-immigrant lawmakers. By agreeing that illegal immigration is a problem, some advocates had hoped to preserve at least a few rights for immigrants, even if only for a limited constituency.<sup>3</sup> In their view, energies need to

be focused on portraying legal immigrants as hardworking, law-abiding, and deserving of rights, in contrast to their undocumented counterparts.

However, some of the concessions made in the name of political pragmatism have only served to further demonize and criminalize undocumented immigrants. In the absence of any visible public defense of their rights, the undocumented have become scapegoats for both the anti-immigrant and "pro-immigrant" agenda. The media further portrays undocumented immigrants as underground drug dealers, criminals, and lazy welfare cheats.

The danger of such negative characterizations of undocumented immigrants became apparent in the debate over Proposition 187 in California. Some advocates projected that stopping illegal immigration was necessary, but that the proposition was a misguided strategy. Playing on the fears of many White voters, anti-187 ads evoked the dangerous threat of disease spreading among "illegals" who "handle your food supply," the possibility of gangs of youth roaming the street after being expelled from school, and the bureaucratic costs of implementing the measure.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing the difference between "legal" and "illegal" immigrants also perpetuates a false divide in immigrant communities. Many immigrants exist in "transnational families" which include members of varying legal status.<sup>5</sup> One household may include U.S. citizen children, permanent resident parents, and an undocumented cousin, sibling, or grandmother.

Conceding to the documented/undocumented divide obscures the very reasons why people are forced to migrate without documents. While violent conflict and repression exist in many parts of the world, only migrants from certain countries have been granted refugee status in the United States. This distinction usually reflects the bias of U.S. foreign policy: migrants from countries considered to be U.S. adversaries such as Cuba have gained refugee or asylee status far more easily than Salvadorans or Guatemalans fleeing U.S.-backed military repression. In addition, long waits for family visas make it very difficult for migrants from countries such as the Philippines or Mexico to obtain legal entry to the United States. For poor immigrants without a sponsoring relative who meets certain income requirements, the chances of obtaining a permit for legal entry are even more slim. In contrast, a millionaire can obtain residency in the United States with few obstacles. Because of such biased policies, there are few avenues open to migrants from certain areas - particularly Latin America and Asia - other than to migrate without authorization.

The attempt to maintain public support by contrasting one set of immigrants to another has weakened the immigrant rights movement. Not only has it alienated mainstream advocacy and lobbying groups from the grassroots, but it has failed to maintain a reasonable degree of protection for either undocumented or legal immigrants. For example, the strategy to "split the bill" (into provisions dealing with undocumented and "legal" immigrants) adopted by many advocates in the 1996 round of legislative negotiations may have proved successful in its short-term goal of derailing Congressional proposals to reduce legal immigration. But it also guaranteed the passage of a bill which contained numerous damaging provisions - and by no means spared legal immigrants from harm. Now, immigrants intending to apply for political asylum must do so at the airport, often without the aid of an attorney. Many longtime legal permanent residents who have been convicted of crimes (including minor drug offenses) are now

immediately subject to deportation, even if they have resided in the United States since infancy, and have no family or other ties to their native country. While the 1996 legislation initially made it easier for the U.S. government to deport permanent residents for their political beliefs and affiliations, in June 2001 two Supreme Court rulings determined that deportation provisions in the law could not be applied retroactively and that the INS could not indefinitely imprison immigrants.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in the wake of the events of September 11, such moves to uphold the civil and human rights of immigrants have been challenged once again, this time in the name of anti-terrorism measures, leaving all noncitizens, including permanent residents, additionally vulnerable to rights violations. The combined impact of these laws on many immigrant families is devastating.

### ***The Perils of Cost-Benefit Analysis***

The question of whether immigrants are a net fiscal benefit or drain to the United States often distorts the debate with reports quantifying immigrants' contributions and costs cited by both immigrant-rights advocates and those opposed to immigration. These arguments are deeply problematic on both empirical and moral grounds.

The debate over Proposition 187 in California provides a good example of how cost-benefit arguments result in confusion. Supporters of the measure often cited Donald Huddle's 1993 report, "The Net Costs of Immigration to California," which argued that immigrants incurred \$18.1 billion more in public assistance costs to California taxpayers than the \$8.9 billion immigrants paid in taxes. This figure includes \$4.2 billion for costs of assistance to 914,000 California residents who were unemployed "because of immigration."<sup>7</sup> However, the Urban Institute report *Setting the Record Straight*, more often cited by immigrant rights activists, reported that immigrants in California contributed \$30 billion in taxes and received only \$18.7 billion in government services, resulting in a \$12 billion net contribution in taxes to California.<sup>8</sup>

As these comparisons demonstrate, cost-benefit arguments ultimately become a confusing numbers game. By crafting arguments that evaluate the contributions of immigrants as opposed to their costs, immigrant rights advocates have engaged in a slippery battle. While highlighting the positive role that immigrants can play as economic actors, the immigrant rights movement cannot rely on cost-benefit arguments as a main argument. One study's data on the costs and taxes paid by immigrants can easily refute another's, and the accuracy of such data is difficult to ascertain.<sup>9</sup> Subtle methodological distinctions between various studies often fail to translate into effective arguments. They usually boil down to ideological differences in the sponsoring organizations' or authors' perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

Some cost-benefit studies have determined that immigration is a benefit to the economy because immigrant workers provide a supply of cheap labor. The problem with this aspect of the cost-benefit strategy is that it has sometimes conflated the immigrant-rights message with the interests of big business. Is the real message of the immigrant rights movement that immigrants are willing to work for cheap?

During the legislative battle over immigration in 1996, national and local immigrants rights organizations forged tactical alliances with business interests to defend employment- and family-

based legal immigration. The Silicon Valley computer industry, for example, rallied around the protection of high-tech jobs as part of the "split the bill" strategy championed by some immigrant rights groups. Although some industry representatives were specifically working to relax restrictions on mobility for educated, professional immigrants, many immigrant advocates saw this as an opportunity to build a case on behalf of immigrants in general.<sup>11</sup> Other advocates, even if they did not actively ally themselves with business interests, tacitly accepted involvement of these powerful firms as confirmation of their claims that immigrants are vital to the U.S. economy. Today, a similar dynamic has emerged in the debate over legalization, as business interests have allied themselves with efforts to create an expanded guest worker program under the guise of "legalizing hard-working Mexicans." In reality, businesses are more interested in developing new opportunities to legally exploit workers and increase profits, though it is unclear how this agenda may play out in the current climate focused on national security and economic decline.

In 1996, the weight of large business interests like Microsoft and the National Association of Manufacturers undoubtedly bolstered the split-the-bill strategy. But their high-profile defense of immigration has cost the immigrant rights movement other allies: namely, some who are concerned about protecting the interests of American-born workers. Author Michael Lind, for example, has argued that the immigrant rights movement is actually working to protect the interest of big business at the expense of U.S. workers. Lind claimed in a *New Republic* editorial that reducing immigration "is a perfectly legitimate liberal cause - if 'liberal' means protecting the interests of ordinary wage-earning Americans." He writes that those truly concerned about the interests of the working poor should note that the greatest income gains for both Black and White Americans have been noted during periods of immigration restriction. He also asserts that union membership is disrupted when "mass immigration produces a workforce divided by ethnicity."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, a 1997 brief issued by the progressive Institute for Policy Studies encourages labor advocates to give serious consideration to a national worker identification card and to guest worker programs to fill "jobs that U.S. residents don't want."<sup>13</sup>

Some of the economic benefits immigrants bring are rooted in the fact that they are often a cheap, and pliable labor force. Organized labor and many working people understandably bridle when immigrant rights activists speak in this vein. We should instead point out that the real goal of restrictive legislation is to keep immigrants, and others, from gaining labor rights they deserve by maintaining an underground workforce. Big business' interest in protecting immigration in order to maintain a cheap, pliable labor force is distinct from an agenda which advances labor and civil rights for all workers, regardless of immigration status, in the interest of economic justice. Part of evaluating the "cost-benefit" strategy is to ensure that immigrant-rights advocates do not perpetuate the notion that immigrants are "good for the economy" because they are easily exploitable, low-wage workers.<sup>14</sup> In other words, just because the *Wall Street Journal* calls for open borders does not mean that it is a natural ally of a progressive immigrant rights movement.

Even more fundamentally, by relying on cost-benefit arguments, the immigrant rights movement remains rooted in a framework that construes immigration policy narrowly as a matter of what is "good for the United States" according to simple numeric calculations. We lose an opportunity to focus attention on the global economic phenomena that affect immigrants and native-born residents alike.

We also lose a chance to challenge assertions about standards used to determine human and labor rights. If rights are simply accorded in order to correspond with economic success or contributions, what does that say about the elderly, the disabled, or children? Should they not have rights because they may not contribute economically? All people make contributions in different ways at different times to the communities and societies they live in. Our focus should not be whether an individual has earned certain rights, but why basic standards for human rights should apply to everyone, regardless of immigration status.

Do cost-benefit arguments have any place in the arguments advanced by the immigrant rights movement? Clearly, there is a need to refute erroneous accusations about the drain immigrants pose to society. However, instead of relying on simple cost-benefit calculations, we need to point out who really benefits when immigrants are denied rights: unscrupulous employers seeking profit while ignoring occupational, and frequently, environmental standards. The deep conflict of interest in such positions is evident in the recent debate around legalization and employer sanctions. Some employer interests have actually expressed support for legalization and an end to employer sanctions as part of a move to advocate for expanded temporary worker programs. Employers are increasingly willing to make concessions that workers may eventually become permanent residents in exchange for what is essentially a captive and exploitable work force.

### ***The "Nation of Immigrants" Argument***

Appealing to a long and rich history of immigration to the United States, many voices in the struggle for immigrant rights have used the argument that the country has always been "a nation of immigrants" in order to build support for immigrant communities today. Indeed, a majority of the U.S. population can trace its ancestry to immigrant roots. Cartoons depicting Native Americans asking, "Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?" highlight the fact that the first European settlers didn't obtain authorization before arriving and decimating the indigenous population.

Appeals to a history enriched by immigration are effective. The Statue of Liberty, which has historically served as a symbol of welcome to immigrants, is an icon of national importance. However, anti-immigrant factions have also used its symbolism to argue that the United States can no longer afford to be so generous. A 1996 cover story in the *Atlantic Monthly* depicting a weary Lady Liberty asked, "Can We Still Afford to be a Nation of Immigrants?" The article implied that the country has reached its limit of how much immigration it can absorb, and even more insidiously, that today's immigrants are "mostly Mexicans" whose ethnic separatism threatens traditional patterns of assimilation.<sup>15</sup> In light of post September 11 national security concerns, this issue has been re-raised and expanded to include other ethnic groups, and will likely continue to be a growing thread in both anti-immigrant arguments and "anti-terrorism" discussions.

In reality, immigrants have always been present in the United States, and an accurate historical perspective reveals that periods of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment almost always reflect economic trends and are rooted in racist ideology. The Chinese Exclusion Act, enacted in response to fear of Chinese competition and the Depression-era deportation of more than 500,000 people of Mexican descent (including U.S. citizens) through "Operation 'Wetback'" are just a few examples.

Finally, the notion that the United States "was built on immigrant labor" should be expanded to account for the roles of non-immigrant (or forcibly migrated) groups like Native Americans and African Americans. To simply assert that immigrants constructed the nation obscures the fact that U.S. colonizers and settlers stole Native American lands, practiced genocide, and through the enslavement of Africans, built the foundations of a U.S. economic empire. A more effective alternative should acknowledge the exploitation and sacrifice of many groups, including immigrants, who are deserving of rights, protection, and recognition.

### ***Conclusion: Creating Arguments that Work***

Many of the arguments used by immigrant rights advocates are not effective tools for advancing our long-term goals. Cost-benefit, documented-undocumented, or "nation of immigrants" arguments are limited in that they are reactive, rather than proactive. They are rooted in a framework which still sees immigration as a law enforcement problem, and not as an issue about human rights. This is even more evident in the current move to sacrifice civil liberties, particularly those of noncitizens, for national security.

Looking at the state of the debate, it is clear that we can learn some important lessons from our adversaries: the anti-immigration movement is a broad coalition which encompasses sectors of the Far Right, population groups, politicians, lobbyists, and community-based anti-immigrant organizations. Their messages are simple and rhetorically compelling. Their strategy has been to build effective local, grassroots alliances in order to tap into key concerns in communities and channel frustration or dissatisfaction into anti-immigrant sentiment. For example, in 2001 Sachem Quality of Life, a local, Farmingville, New York based anti-immigrant group, utilized the backing and support of the nationally-recognized FAIR, combined with on-the-ground community organizing to not only defeat a local proposal to create a hiring hall for immigrant day laborers, but to construct Farmingville as representative of the national immigration debate and its impact on middle-class, suburban communities.

While the immigrant rights movement also needs to formulate simple and convincing messages that reflect the concerns of a broad, grassroots base, our challenge is more formidable. Rather than urging people to scapegoat an already vulnerable population, we need to encourage people to think outside of the current confines of the debate. We must work consciously and collaboratively to avoid falling back on arguments that do not support the rights of all immigrants or that divide immigrants based on legal status or national origin. In order to do this, the immigrant rights movement needs to develop strategies that help us to reframe our messages based on a shared set of principles which uphold the rights of all people. We must work to defend and expand human rights (which include labor, cultural, civil, social, environmental, and economic rights) for everyone, regardless of immigration status, and to recognize racial equality and justice as critical to expanding a progressive immigrant rights movement. We need to assert that wealth should not determine a person's ability to move across borders and that, in a globalized economy, the concept of the "equality or mobility" is key to creating equity for working people. The immigrant rights movement should also defend full and equal access to education and public benefits, and to other rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international law, for all immigrants. Finally, we must continue to pursue coalition politics that link challenges faced by immigrants to other

sectors, including welfare recipients, low-wage workers, police accountability groups, prison reform groups, and communities of color.

Messages and objectives based on these principles can be formulated and utilized in a number of ways. For example, by offering a critique of global economic restructuring and its impact on migration, groups can call attention to migration as an issue intrinsically related to inequities in wealth and power. Similarly, we can challenge the framing of immigration as a law enforcement problem by explaining how approaching immigration exclusively as an issue of enforcement is not only inhumane, but ineffective because it fails to address the root causes of migration. As we continue to strive to integrate our struggle with a struggle for racial justice, the immigrant rights movement should also be both on the front lines of building a movement against racism, and encouraging civil rights leaders to promote immigrant rights in their own work. By framing migration as a labor issue, we can build active alliances with labor, expose how immigration law promotes sweatshop conditions, and link our efforts with emerging movements for immigrant workers' rights. Finally, we should not only actively integrate a human rights framework into our own work, but promote alliances with other sectors who use a human rights framework as a tool to analyze conditions in the United States and to achieve racial, economic, and social justice. This means building alliances with groups focused on issues such as police accountability, environmental justice, labor rights, civil rights, and women's rights. Fundamentally, these principles are inseparable, and are crucial to developing an international movement against racism, which is influenced by globalization, migration, and changing demographics.

Pursuing alliances and developing messages based on these basic principles, however, doesn't mean disengaging from the discussion over current policies and practices. In fact, engagement with legislative threats and policy debates is essential to ensure that immigrants' rights are not further compromised. Legislatively-focused strategies can also contribute to movement-building and immigrant community empowerment, and can be the basis for establishing crucial, long term alliances. Recent xenophobic measures have already catalyzed formidable mobilizations, with recent restrictions on noncitizens in particular highlighting the links between struggles for immigrant rights and movements for racial justice and human rights. As a movement, we have the potential to galvanize significant efforts by immigrant community groups and larger entities, such as the labor movement and civil rights institutions. Immigrants, people of color, and working-class people together form a majority in the United States - and have the power to change both popular opinion and public policy. If we can frame immigrant rights as an issue about human dignity, economic parity, and racial justice, then we can begin to lay the groundwork for transforming the immigration debate.

### *End Notes*

1. For examples of positive instances of intergroup organizing, see Julia Teresa Quiroz, *Together in Our Differences: How Newcomers and Established Residents are Rebuilding America's Communities*, (Washington DC: National Immigration Forum, 1995).

2. It is on precisely this point that organizations like the Federation for American Immigration Reform are able to base their strategies. See FAIR, *How to Survive Win the Immigration Debate*, (Washington, DC: by the author, 1997).

[3.](#) A DC-based lobbying organization, for example, took the explicit position that "legal immigration is not the same as illegal immigration" and asserted that "the American people want the federal government to take decisive and effective action to control illegal immigration." National Immigration Forum, "What's Wrong with the House Immigration Bill," November 1995.

[4.](#) Quotes from Arturo Vargas, co-chair of Taxpayers Against 187, from "Beyond Proposition 187: Strategies for Community Change" conference, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, March 31, 1995.

[5.](#) Leo Chavez, "Proposition 187: The Nationalist Response to the Transnationalist Challenge" (Paper presented at Ernesto Galarza Public Policy Conference, Riverside, CA, January 1995).

[6.](#) The Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) was largely responsible for these changes.

[7.](#) Donald Huddle, "The Net Costs of Immigration to California," Carrying Capacity Network, November 4, 1993; Rafael Alarcón, *Proposition 187: An Effective Measure to Deter Undocumented Migration to California?* (San Francisco: Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy, October 1994).

[8.](#) Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight* (Washington DC: Urban Institute, 1994); and Passel, Clark, and Griego, *How Much Do Immigrants Really Cost?* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, February, 1994). A 1997 study by George Vernez and Kevin F. MacCarthy of the Rand Corporation suggests that certain groups of immigrants benefit the economy more than others, and that a point system should be used to evaluate an immigrant's potential contribution versus his or her cost.

[9.](#) In testimony before a House of Representatives subcommittee on human resources, economists Michael Fix and Jeffrey Passel refuted studies which attribute high economic costs to undocumented immigrants by arguing that such studies have been produced by government agencies interested in "recovering" the costs of immigrants and receiving economic compensation. Their review found that, although such studies vary in quality, the results frequently overstate the negative impacts of immigrants in several ways; they systematically understate tax contributions of immigrants, overstate service costs for immigrants, and exaggerate the impacts and costs of job displacement. Most importantly, Fix and Passel claimed that these studies inflate the size of the immigrant population, particularly the undocumented immigrant population. See Fix and Passel, *op. cit.*

[10.](#) Some studies diverge from the taxes and services balance-sheet approach by trying to distinguish the fiscal impact of immigrants (in terms of their use of government resources) from their net impact on the economy (or their overall impact on wages and productivity). But even these reports, which seem to draw positive conclusions about immigrants, can sometimes work against the long-term interests of the immigrant-rights movement. The National Academy of Sciences issued a 1997 report, which concluded that immigration produces "substantial economic benefits for the United States as a whole" but nevertheless "slightly reduces the wages

and job opportunities of low-skilled American workers, especially high school dropouts." The report assessed the costs "imposed" by immigrants, including public education and social services. Its authors concluded that most Americans are enjoying a healthier economy because of the benefits of immigration, including an increased supply of labor and resulting lower consumer prices.

11. Some think tanks developed studies of their own to support such arguments. A 1997 study by the Rand corporation, for example, lauded the benefits of immigrant business executives proposed changing the family-based visa system and instead developing a point system to favor skilled and well-educated workers. "How to Make Immigration Better for America: Favor Aliens with Job Skills," *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 29, 1997-Jan. 5, 1998.

12. Michael Lind, "Huddled Excesses," *The New Republic*, vol. 214 no. 14 (April 1, 1996): 6. In fact, the most restrictive period for immigration was World War II when wartime conditions upset usual migration patterns. The U.S. economy was enhanced by massive government investment in creating employment and enhancing industry. The fact that U.S. workers experienced great income gains in this period had to do with government investment in the domestic infrastructure, not with immigration levels.

13. David Stoll, "In Focus: The Immigration Debate," *Foreign Policy in Focus* (an internet publication of the Interhemispheric Resource Center and Institute for Policy Studies), vol. 2, no. 31 (March 1997). <http://www.fpip.org/briefs/vol2/v2n31imm.html>. This argument echoes demands from growers who have called for a revitalized Bracero Program to bring temporary workers from Mexico to the United States legally during harvest season. Some immigrant advocates have argued that under such a program, temporarily authorized workers would be afforded some rights because of their legal entry. This argument needs to be turned around to expose that industry and capital's interest is not in providing rights for certain migrants, but in allowing agribusiness to legally shuttle workers back and forth from Mexico without providing for the social needs of the workforce.

14. See Lowell Sachs, "Traacherous Waters in Turbulent Times: Navigating the Recent Sea Change in U.S. Immigration Policy and Attitudes," *Social Justice*, vol. 23 no. 3 (Fall 1996): 129.

15. "The Price of Immigration: Can We Still Afford to Be a Nation of Immigrants? A View from the Perspectives of History and Economics," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1996.