

THE POLITICS OF LABOUR MIGRATION: CHINESE WORKERS IN NEW YORK

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Most socialists have always embraced the concept of proletarian internationalism. Indeed, organizations like the International Working Men's Association and the Second and Third Internationals were established to forge alliances among working people of all countries. This kind of alliance was necessary to fight the capitalist form of accumulation, which is global. To counter this, as Marx and Engels pointed out, it is necessary to 'bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.'¹

But in practice proletarian internationalism has meant the working class of one country supporting the working-class struggle of another; the spirit of internationalism has not often extended to immigrant workers. Clearly, popular sentiment has not favoured immigrants. Native workers have been wary of newcomers, seeing them as competitors who increase the labour supply, reduce wages and cause unemployment. Resentment against them has been typical in America. Irish immigrants, arriving poor and Catholic, incurred the wrath of Americans in the form of the mid-nineteenth-century 'Know-Nothings'. Yet decades later an Irish leader expressed a thought common among his peers: 'There should be a law ... to give job to every decent man that's out of work. And another law ... keep all them I-talians from comin' in and takin' the bread out of the mouths of honest people.'² Native workers built institutional shells around their jobs to exclude immigrant competition. Engels noticed that the American native worker took on 'an aristocratic attitude and wherever possible leaves the ordinary badly paid occupations to the immigrants, of whom only a small section enter the aristocratic trades.'³ Even progressive labour leaders have considered immigrants, like racial minorities, as serious

obstacles to organizing the working class, and their anti-immigrant feelings have been openly expressed.⁴ They sometimes considered the immigrants as lacking class consciousness and being willing to conspire with the employers, and thus unfit to be organized; or if immigrants wanted to be included in the unions, they feared their improved conditions would only attract more immigrants and thus nullify their organizing efforts.

Hostility towards immigrants has usually been expressed in ugly chauvinistic ways. During the second half of the nineteenth century virtually every labour newspaper and organization in the U.S. supported the exclusion of Chinese immigrants. The progressive Knights of Labour, who organized everyone, including farmers, unskilled labourers, women and Negroes, invited them all into the local assemblies—except the Chinese,⁵ who were some of the first ‘coloured’ immigrant groups to arrive. Members of the organization claimed that the Chinese were ‘inassimilable elements’ who should be barred from immigration, and urged that those already in the country should be expelled from the labour force and prevented from ‘competing’ with whites. Even the International Workingman’s Association passed a resolution to exclude Chinese immigration only one year after it had called for ‘complete political and social equality for all, without distinction of sex, creed, colour or condition.’⁶ Its leaders claimed that the Chinese were slaves and willing to work under any conditions and that American free individuals could not compete with them.

The historical lessons are clear. By excluding immigrants, organized labour leaves them defenceless, and they become easy victims of employers for use, as cheap and docile labour, and as strike-breakers. Their presence ensures the perpetuation of xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiments which further accentuate divisions within the working class. The result is that the immigrants cannot benefit from the gains achieved by the labour movement, while the movement itself is weakened. In effect, capital is able to use immigrants to blackmail the whole of the working class.

Today, more than ever, the left needs a unified position, accepting and insisting that immigrant workers are fully part of the working class. This does not mean that we need to take a moralistic point of view, by insisting that immigration issues should ‘not start from economic consequences but from rights and freedom’,⁷ or by defending the immigrants’ absolute right of movement across national borders to seek better opportunities. The problem with this position is that it places immigrants’ desire to migrate as the central determining factor of migration. True, migration has always been part of human experience—people choose to move to places where there are better conditions for survival. However, wanting to get to places of higher wages does not mean they’ll get there. In the modern era, large-scale and sustained migration waves have been the result of the uneven development of capital. It is capital’s initiative that in large part determines migration. Migrations are never indiscriminate flows of people looking for a better future. They do so from very specific areas and towards equally specific destinations—drawn to serve capital’s need for

labour. Most importantly, capital encourages and manipulates labour migration to maximize its leverage over the working class.⁸

It is clear that a central challenge for socialists is to turn the issue of international workers' migration to their advantage in the struggle against global capitalism. As it is, the inability to incorporate immigrants politically has been the weakest link of most labour movements around the world. In this essay, I will use the experience of Chinese workers in the U.S. as an example to show that immigrants are indispensable strategic partners in the building of a powerful labour movement for socialist transformation.

IMMIGRANTS AND CAPITALIST RESTRUCTURING

In today's 'global economy' capitalist markets have permeated the globe more thoroughly than any time in the past, drawing more zones of the world and a growing portion of its population directly into capitalist social relations. The result is more uneven development and greater social disruption worldwide. This makes the issue of international migration more important than ever.

The pressure to emigrate to the advanced countries is great, but the demand from these countries for Third World labour is also great. A recent conservative estimate suggests a total migration of 'well over 100 million for post-war migrations to the OECD countries, with the majority of those movements taking place in the thirty years between 1965 and 1995—more than triple the great transatlantic migrations of the 1880s to the 1920s.'⁹ The driving force behind the current globalization is the need to maintain a high rate of profit, by means of the capitalist restructuring process that began in the 1970s. To overcome the accumulation crisis of that decade it was necessary to invest in new technology and to increase efficiency through reorganization, particularly by dismantling inefficient industries and moving them abroad. But in addition to moving production overseas, to wherever labour is cheaper and less organized, businesses also subcontracted work to smaller domestic production sites whose operations remained more flexible because they employed unregulated labour. To accomplish the last objective, it was and still is critical to break down domestic labour opposition to it.

In the United States, this required a readjustment in the balance of power between labour and capital established since the 1930s. The destruction of the powerful labour movement that organized many immigrant workers and was able to make significant gains in collective bargaining, higher wages, health and retirement benefits, unemployment compensation, and other social welfare safety nets has been a chief objective of the new business order in the U.S. One of the best ways to achieve this is by hiring the least organized and most vulnerable labour available—new immigrants and, preferably, undocumented ones who have no protection at all.

There is a paradox in the role played by undocumented immigrants in all this. Cognizant of concerns for equality and human rights, most states have

gotten rid of discriminatory ethnic and racial restrictions. They have also accepted the right to family unity and the right to appeal for political asylum. The central question on immigration has shifted to defining who can be 'legal immigrants' and who should be excluded as 'illegals'. Employers are usually not satisfied with the flow of legal immigration to supply the number and the kind of workers they wish to employ. They often induce the state to modify the laws and relax their execution, sometimes to the point of not enforcing them at all. The result is a persistent influx of 'illegals'.

In the U.S., the 1965 Immigration Act made no provision for a continued inflow of unskilled labour unless would-be immigrants could claim a close blood relationship to an American citizen. The new act ended the Bracero programme, which had found temporary jobs (largely as migrant farm workers) for some four million Mexicans between 1942 and 1960.¹⁰ The termination of the programme, however, had little impact on the demand for such labour. Workers who in the past came 'legally' under the Bracero programme now infiltrated the border 'illegally'. Other governments confronted with similar situations often enforce the law ambivalently, in order to appease capital's need for labour. So as long as illegals continue to come, the employers are satisfied; in fact, their 'illegal' status, hence their greater vulnerability, may serve the interests of the employers even better.

These developments run counter to the expectations of those who argue that advanced nations like the U.S. are moving towards high-tech, high-income service and information economy. They predict that low-wage jobs will be exported and that immigrant labour will no longer be needed. The opposite has happened in the U.S. At the precise period of economic restructuring from the late 1970s to the 1990s, as American family incomes were stagnating, America experienced its highest influx of legal and illegal immigrants. Normally we should expect low immigration in times of economic hardship. Yet, in the 1990s over one million legal immigrants arrived in the U.S. each year, not counting those who came in illegally or those who overstayed their non-immigrant visas—which some estimate as amounting to an additional 1 to 1.5 million per year.¹¹ Such a high rate of influx has only ever been surpassed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Modern capital, then, just as in the past, imports immigrants to cut costs. With very few exceptions immigrant labour in the advanced countries has created a 'third world' within them. These immigrants play a part in the efforts of the advanced countries to hold on to their industries by providing a local source of cheap labour to counter the lower labour standards in competing countries. Globalization thus enables employers to pit workers from different countries against one another. They seek to compete by having the lowest possible labour standards; immigrants promise a low-cost, disciplined, and unorganized workforce. They force governments to try to secure these conditions by repressing the workers' movement everywhere. This is very different from the general belief that sweatshops only exist outside of the rich countries. The

virtual indentured servitude of the Chinese illegal immigrants in the U.S. is a very instructive example of this phenomenon.

CHINESE ILLEGAL MIGRANTS UNDER INDENTURED SERVITUDE

On 6 June 1993, a Honduran-registered steamer named the *Golden Venture* ran aground just outside New York Harbour. The ship carried 286 illegal immigrants, most of whom were rural farmers from Fujian Province in southern coastal China. This was the first time the problem of Chinese illegal immigrants came to public attention, though they began arriving in the U.S. and other advanced industrial countries as labourers soon after Deng Xiaoping's 'liberalization' programme in China in the late 1970s. What is unusual about this traffic is the conditions under which they arrived—by using the service of sophisticated international smuggling networks, paying exorbitant fees which require the newly arrived workers to work for many years before paying them off.

The current price of a clandestine trip to New York from Wenzhou or Fuzhou, where most of the Chinese illegals are from, ranges from U.S. \$33,000 to \$50,000. Individuals who intend to make it have to raise \$1,500 to pay a snakehead (human smuggler) in China. The rest is to be paid upon arrival in the U.S., usually by the relatives already in the country. If the relatives make the payment, the new arrival pays them back, normally within three to five years at 3 percent interest.

In the last ten years, so many people have been coming that their relatives can no longer help because they are already burdened with the debts of others who came earlier. In that case, the new arrivals are forced to borrow from loan sharks or the snakeheads themselves, at 30 percent interest. New immigrants, without any knowledge of English, can only get menial jobs, often earning less than \$1,000 a month. That is just enough to pay the interest portion of the loan, not counting money needed for survival. But the debts must be paid, lest the snakeheads hire 'enforcers' to beat the money out of the debtors. One favourite tactic is to threaten the victim's relatives with his/her imminent execution, to convince them to come up with quick cash. In some cases, the snakeheads simply make the debtors their virtual slaves. During the day, the victims work at restaurants affiliated with organized crime. At night, after they are brought back to prison-like dormitories, hand over all their money and are locked up until the next day. These immigrants, in virtual indentured servitude, are forced to accept practically any job just to keep up with their debt payments.

With the flood of desperate undocumented aliens willing to work, Chinese-American employers are in the position to depress labour conditions to the limit. Chinatown wages, already low by American standards before the arrival of the Fuzhouese, have declined even further. Testifying in 1995 at a Senate hearing for anti-sweatshop legislation, Mrs Tang, once a schoolteacher in Guangdong Province who had immigrated ten years earlier to Brooklyn, recalled that in the early 1980s she worked eight hours a day and earned

\$40–\$50. Today, with competition from the Fuzhounese, she slaves twelve hours a day to make a paltry \$30.¹² In her case, she has to work almost twice as long to make the same amount of money. It is common for workers to work seven days a week, twelve hours a day, at an average hourly wage of \$3.75.¹³

Competition from the illegals is thus forcing documented Chinese workers to settle for less if they want to maintain steady employment. Thus the employers have effectively erased the distinction between legal and illegal immigrant workers. They all line up outside the factory long before the doors open in order to be the first ones to begin work. At night, they refuse to quit even after ten, just to get a few more pieces done for a few more dollars. Some of the seamstresses on sewing machines are known not to drink anything during the day lest they interrupt their work, calculated by piece rate, by going to the bathroom. One Cantonese garment worker has testified to a Congressional committee that Fuzhounese illegals work until two in the morning, sleep in the factory, and start again right after sunrise. If they are not able to complete a given order, they ask their children to come in to help.¹⁴

Undocumented immigrants have given employers leverage that enables them to force workers to accept many obviously illegal labour practices. Homework, thought to have disappeared in America 50 years ago, is a common phenomenon in Chinatown, as is child labour. The most egregious practice at both non-unionized and unionized Chinese garment factories in New York is withholding workers' wages. Previously, the normal withholding period was three weeks; now anything under five weeks is considered good. Of course, there is never a guarantee; after the employment starts, the employer can claim cash-flow problems or manufacturers' non-payments to postpone his own wage payments. After a few weeks, the workers are faced with the difficult decision of whether to hope against hope and work for another week, or quit and cut their losses.

After several years of working like machines, at the rate of eighty-four hours a week, some workers begin to develop physical ailments. Restaurant workers complain of pinched nerves, back and shoulder pains, swollen feet, stomach cramps and insomnia. Kitchen help can be temporarily blinded by the sudden rush of steam to the eyes from pots or dishwashers. Some have even developed 'battle fatigue' syndrome, unable to move at all. Seamstresses complain of sore arms, headaches, dizzy spells, and rapid heart palpitation. Bronchial asthma is common, caused by exposure to the chemicals used in treating fabrics. The worst problems develop from working with polyester, whose shredded fibres, if inhaled over a long period of time in the dry, unswept conditions of most work places, can cause nose bleeds and asthma. Many such health problems, like repetitive stress syndrome, can be avoided by taking regular breaks and working shorter hours; as for back and shoulder aches, a change in the construction of the chairs workers sit on could minimize their problems. Of course, the employers will do none of this.

Illegal Chinese workers have also been used for union busting. In 1994, the

owners of Silver Palace Restaurant—one of Chinatown's largest restaurants, which was unionized in 1980—locked out all their union workers, claiming that their wages were too high. The owners saw that it made no sense to pay union wages when there was such a large supply of cheap labour to be had. The locked-out union workers picketed the restaurant for more than seven months. 'If the owners win this one,' the leader of the picketing workers stressed, 'employers all over Chinatown could impose any kind of conditions they want on the working people, no matter whether they are legal or undocumented. We are then nothing but slaves.'

The issue is no longer just the treatment of illegals. In Chinatown, by using illegals to depress wages for all workers, employers have simply aggravated the class struggle between labour and management. It should be added that most Americans see the Fuzhounese as an aberration—an isolated ethnic phenomenon at the margin of society. But in the past ten years, undocumented Fuzhounese have penetrated the garment, construction, and restaurant trades all over New York City. Non-Chinese-owned small electronics factories and vegetable farms in New Jersey, construction companies specializing in pricey loft renovation in the fashionable Manhattan neighbourhood of Soho, and Long Island farms use Chinese employment agencies to find Chinese labour contractors who will take care of the selection, transportation, payment and management of their workers.

Moreover, Chinese illegal immigrants are not the only group paying high fees for their passage to enter this country. This 'contract labour' phenomenon has spread to other immigrant groups as well. Mexicans are paying \$5,000, Poles \$8,000 and Asian Indians up to \$28,000 for their passages. Thai women were discovered in Elmonte, California, working and living in a locked and fenced-in factory because they could not repay their transportation fee. They were routinely abused, and told that if they escaped their captors would 'go to their homes in Thailand to burn their houses down.'¹⁵

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

How is it possible that this most advanced nation has these nineteenth-century immigrant and labour conditions? Why does the U.S. government not crack down on the smuggling networks and sweatshop labour practices?

Saskia Sassen argues that economic internationalism, the formation of transnational economic space, and the emergence of an international human rights regime have changed the 'substantive nature of state control over immigration.'¹⁶ Moreover, states are increasingly becoming part of a web of rights and regulations that are embedded in supra-national entities, from the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to international courts defending the human rights of immigrants and refugees. States no longer have the technical or administrative capacity to control their borders, nor the ability to set labour standards in their work places.¹⁷ But states are the guarantors of

the capitalist mode of production. On immigration, they have shown their willingness to use their power to benefit the business community in a number of ways. First of all, states have the power to select and determine who can enter, allowing only able-bodied healthy individuals in and screening out others and not permitting immigrants to bring their families. Once inside the country, states may have laws that restrict immigrants' access to housing, education, health care, and business and land ownership. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the U.S. government even enforced 'legal' contracts that placed immigrants in indentured servitude.¹⁸ In the twentieth century capitalist states keep immigrant workers in a special legal category. Non-citizen immigrants are placed in a transitory status as guest or non-resident temporary workers who enjoy limited social benefits and legal protection. If they appear to be the least bit political they can be removed. Illegals are not allowed at all. But if the state does not deport them, and at the same time ignores their labour conditions, illegals have no means to object to abuse by their employers.

In the case of Chinese illegals, while labour violations and abuses by employers continue, U.S. law-enforcement authorities are passive and slow to respond to their complaints. Workers find that taking legal action against employers almost never succeeds. To begin with, employers do not believe that illegal workers will dare to file complaints against them. But even when they do, scarcely anything happens; there are currently hundreds of complaints filed with the New York State Labor Department against Chinese employers for back wages, but so far there have been only two convictions.¹⁹

In New York State, the State Apparel Industry Task Force is supposed to be the watchdog of the industry but it has just five inspectors to monitor more than 4,000 clothing factories. Moreover, the majority of the cases that have been cited for violations involve the failure to register, which is the absolute minimum level of compliance with industry regulations. Nevertheless, these labour departments blame their inaction on lack of funding, while reproaching the victims, the immigrant communities, for not coming forward with incriminating information. This typical official response does not address the criticisms, that the slow and passive response by officials endangers the lives of those who do come forward. The result is a stalemate between law-enforcement officers and the employers with the latter free to operate at will, treating the immigrant communities in the U.S. as foreign territory.

At the same time, the flow of illegal immigration into this country has not slowed, even with the passage of the harsh 1996 Immigration Reform Act. What has happened is only a dramatic increase in the fees charged by human smugglers and a new sophistication in the methods used by the smuggling networks. For the Chinese, prices that were \$33,000 at the time of the Act's passage have now reached \$50,000. In addition to the original sources of illegal migration—the southern cities of Fuzhou and Wenzhou—Chinese today come illegally from Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and many other cities in the north. To avoid detection by American authorities along America's Pacific coast, the

snakeheads have developed dozens of alternative routes through the Caribbean Islands. But these days fewer illegal immigrants come in by ship or cross the U.S. borders by land. They are increasingly coming in by air. These illegals, holding stolen or counterfeit passports, are allowed to board U.S.-bound planes by unsuspecting airline officials or by the paid-off ground security personnel.

The problem is, however, not shortcomings in the labour department, the immigration office or the Border Patrol, that could easily be fixed by increased budgetary appropriations. It is the misdirected supply-side illegal immigration policy which ignores the fundamental factor behind illegal immigration—namely, American employers' demand for cheap and vulnerable labour. In fact, the U.S. is so addicted to immigrant labour that without it many businesses in agriculture and the garment and meat packing industries would not survive. Americans have become so used to immigrants working in the restaurant, service and domestic-help trades that they are not even conscious of their presence in their midst. So long as the employers are willing, or prefer, to hire illegals, the human smugglers can be assured of an income.

The American approach to attacking illegal immigration from the demand side is contained in the 'employer sanctions' provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. The act treats 'knowingly' hiring illegals as a crime, but not employers' exploitation of illegals. 'Employer sanctions' were the best compromise Congress could come up with after long years of debate and controversy. In the end, the opponents of 'employer sanctions' from the business community succeeded in getting Congress to make the Act easy for employers to comply with; by doing so, they also made violations easy. Before the passage of the IRCA, it was not against the law for an employer to hire illegals; they simply followed a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. However, since the IRCA was passed employers have to inquire about the legal status of their workers in order to protect themselves. If an employer still hires an illegal worker after checking, it means that he has leverage over that worker.

Wing Lam, the executive director of the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, an immigrant rights group in New York City, refers to the 'employer sanctions' legislation as 'the slave law'. According to him, if workers have proper papers, many bosses will tell them that there is no work available. From the bosses' perspective illegals make a much better workforce; they are usually young, compliant, and willing to work long hours. If a worker cannot produce documentation, the boss says he will do him a favour. Since the boss is doing the worker such a big favour, the worker is expected not to mind being paid less—say, 20–30 percent less,²⁰ nor working very long hours. Wing believes that in the end employer sanctions hurt all workers, legal or illegal, in that 'before the law, few people worked a seven-day week, but now it's very common. They have nowhere to go. It's like on [a] plantation.'²¹ Employer sanctions have helped employers to create a larger army of surplus labour and to keep *all* workers' wages down—which is exactly the opposite of what the IRCA had intended, and exactly what employers hoped for. The 1996 laws

against immigrants have to be seen as a political ploy to win votes from a public shaken by the media images of the Golden Venture and World Trade Center bombing incidents.

The American pattern is no different from that of the states of the EU who, since the end of the cold war, have been building a 'Fortress Europe' to deter illegals from their region. These anti-immigrant measures will not work as long as the need for immigrant labour continues. Employers, on their part, just assume to see the states establishing ineffective punitive restrictions depriving immigrants of protection for easier exploitation. The society in the end gets the worst of both worlds—unchecked immigration and impoverished immigrants.

LABOUR'S FAILURE TO ORGANIZE CHINESE GARMENT WORKERS

The fact that the U.S. Congress can pass laws detrimental to the interest of American workers shows the absence of powerful organized labour to oppose them. In fact, the American labour movement is suffering from a steady decline. It has had trouble developing an adequate response to capital's aggressive tactics of outsourcing, leveraged buyouts, relocations, and casual employment.²² The white ethnic labour leadership inherited from the past is getting out of touch with the rank-and-file membership. Many unions, no longer engaged in militant crusades against large corporations like those that dominated the 1930s, have themselves become led by well-paid and powerful bureaucracies. They shunned organizing in the secondary labour market in the past for a simple cost-benefit reason: to unionize low-income workers in small separate workplaces costs more and requires more organizing effort than to unionize large, centralized plants. The bureaucratized union leaders have lost the fire in their bellies to do the tough work that is necessary to rebuild union membership by 'organizing the unorganized'. Besides, union bureaucrats are interested in maintaining themselves in power. They are often fearful of low-ranking organizers who become successful by being close to the rank-and-file.

The problem is aggravated by the absence of union democracy. Most unions keep their members at a distance from real decision-making. Only a handful give members the opportunity to vote for their representatives. In most unions the rank-and-file are treated as 'clients', not as active participants in their own struggles.²³ Chinese immigrants' experience with ineffectual unions reflects the present crisis of the American labour movement.

Chinese immigrants entered the American labour market in significant numbers just when the American economy was being restructured. Much domestic manufacturing had been subcontracted to firms located in ethnic immigrant neighbourhoods under the management of co-ethnic subcontractors. New Chinese immigrants, with limited education and without English language skills, end up working inside Chinese ethnic enclaves like New York's Chinatown in either restaurants or garment trades. The Chinese entered New York's garment industry just at the time of its decline because of competition

from Southern states and Third World countries. Between 1969 and 1982, the number of jobs in New York's garment industry fell by almost 40 percent. This decline, however, has been reversed since the influx of the Chinese. During this same period, the number of Chinese working in New York's Chinatown garment factories increased from 8,000 to 20,000 (a rise of 250 percent).

American organized labour has not at all been interested in organizing Chinese restaurant workers, but the first Chinese immigrant workers to be organized by American unions inside their ethnic enclaves were those who worked in the garment industry. Most of the Chinatown garment shops were organized in the mid-1970s, when Chinese contractors agreed to unionization by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in exchange for a promise that the union would help commit large clothing manufacturers to providing Chinese contractors with a steady supply of job orders. From the beginning, Chinatown factories were unionized from the top down, without the ILGWU ever having to mobilize the Chinese in the factories; today, 90 percent of Chinatown's garment workers in Manhattan's Chinatown, both legal and illegal, belong to the ILGWU, now renamed UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees). Yet even with their importance to the industry and the fact that they are unionized, their wages and conditions remain deplorable.

The ILGWU has made very little effort to involve the workers on the shop floor, even though most of them are new arrivals, unfamiliar with the laws of this country. Many factories have no shop representative to whom workers can report their grievances. Without a shop representative, business agents—the union's overseers of individual shops—become the only union presence in the factories. The most common complaint among the Chinese seamstresses is expressed in a labour newsletter: 'The business agent rarely visits our shops, and when he/she does come, he/she never talks to the workers.'²⁴ This is not surprising, since the success of the union is based on its ability to maintain dues-paying membership, and that depends more on the co-operation of Chinese owners than on the rank-and-file. This being the case, the owners' power is dominant in the factory, and workers cannot be expected to speak up and risk retaliation from their bosses and betrayal by union officials.²⁵

The union's strategy of 'organizing from the top' worked as long as the manufacturers wanted a steady, stable supply of labour. After the manufacturers adopted flexible production, the ILGWU still continued to tie its survival to its co-operative relationship with the manufacturers. It watched as production moved to the South, to Third World countries, and to non-unionized shops, powerless to stop the process, and blamed cheap foreign imports for its inaction. One of the ILGWU campaigns consisted of asking members to attend 'Buy American' rallies in order to induce Congress to pass restrictive import legislation. It is ironic for the union's Chinese members to be picketing against their fellow workers in China and Hong Kong. The prevailing wage in Hong Kong stands at \$3.50 an hour—comparable to sweatshop rates in America.

After a number of embarrassing exposés of sweatshop conditions in unionized shops, the union has currently embarked on 'A Partnership for Responsibility' campaign to stop sweatshops. Its literature proposes a programme to urge American consumers not to purchase sweatshop-made goods.²⁶ Notably, their targets of sweatshops are in Third World countries like China, Bangladesh and Guam, not in New York or Los Angeles.

The union implicitly justifies its weak enforcement of contracts by appeal to the fear that strict enforcement would put Chinese-American owners out of business, although there is no indication that the threat is real. Plenty of 'help wanted' ads appear on factory gates and in Chinese-language papers every day. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Mr K. L. Lin, a Hong Kong-born American citizen and a one-time 1960s radical, got involved in the profitable business of importing garments manufactured in China to the United States. By the mid-1990s, he decided to move his operations back to America, because contractors in New York who ten years ago asked \$3.75 for one piece of sewing now offer to do the same job *plus* cutting the garment before sewing for just \$1.75. 'It's actually cheaper to do it in New York,' he says, 'because the labor cost in New York has come down, if you add the cost of transportation, purchasing of the U.S. import quota, insurance and all sorts of taxes imposed by the Chinese government, it's not worth doing it in China anymore.' Besides, he adds, 'you get a much faster turnover rate in New York.'

While calling for corporate responsibility and consumer boycotts, the union thus itself shows neither the ability nor the willingness to organize the unorganized, or at least to do so effectively in so far as those it has organized are not protected from substandard conditions. The call for public vigilance is reflective on the union's inability to mobilize its own membership. This, however, is not because the Chinese women workers are not militant. The ILGWU stereotype image, that Chinese women are docile and tied to Chinatown's political and social structure, was shattered in the summer of 1982 during negotiations for a new contract. The negotiations involved the renewal of a three-year-contract and called for the standard wage increase. The manufacturers signed the contract; in fact, the same contract had already been signed to cover 120,000 non-Chinese garment workers on the East Coast. But the Chinese subcontractors balked. They were angry because even though 85 percent of the firms affected by the contract in ILGWU Local 23-25 were Chinese-owned, there were no Chinese on the negotiating team. The subcontractors expected the community to rally behind them, particularly in this clear case of 'racial discrimination'. The contractors said to the workers: 'We are all Chinese and should be able to settle this in our own house; there is no need to go to the white man's union.'²⁷

The union had to head off the confrontation and called for a demonstration by its membership in Chinatown. Within the union, the officials had no idea how the Chinatown women would react, since their staff had not been close to the membership. Some even doubted that the Chinese would turn out at all.

But they did. The rank-and-file ILGWU union members quickly mobilized. Hundreds of women volunteered to operate phone banks to contact individual members, urging them to turn out. Others produced bilingual leaflets, banners, and propaganda material. On the day of the demonstration 20,000 workers turned out, making it one of the largest union demonstrations in the city's history. After the demonstration, the Chinese contractors backed off, and the workers won a new contract.

This militant demonstration showed that the Chinese workers were more class- than race-conscious on issues relating to their work, and that this would show itself if they were given a chance to participate and take a stand in the American labour movement. Unfortunately, the union did not take advantage of the workers' activism to build a strong rank-and-file power base, but just co-opted the most active members into management positions. It continues to treat the rest of its membership as 'clients', not as the fount of its power.

In 1997, during the new three-year contract negotiation between UNITE and Chinese contractors, the union, trying to put pressure on the contractors, revealed the results of its own membership survey, which asked union members to list their greatest grievances on their jobs. The number-one complaint, according to the survey, was working extremely long hours, including Sundays, without overtime pay.²⁸ UNITE members in the United States, under union contracts, have been working over sixty-hour weeks without overtime pay. Did the union need a membership survey to come up with this information? Where was the union after all? The institutionalization of the labour movement has robbed the workers of their strength to fight. Wing Lam, the executive director of the Chinese Staff and Workers Association, describes this as a profoundly 'dehumanizing process'.

Of course, this lack of commitment to organizing is not limited to UNITE, nor does it affect only the Chinese. This same attitude of passivity has long plagued organized labour nation-wide. Not surprisingly, union membership among American workers dropped from 35 percent in 1955 to 11 percent in 1995.²⁹ Unions lost membership even though the American workforce continued to expand, especially in the service industries. Contrary to the oft-heard assertion that the American working class is shrinking in this high-tech 'information age', the labour force in fact grew from 82.3 million in 1970 to 131 million in 1994. But even with declining membership, organized labour still hesitated to organize the unorganized, the immigrants and especially the illegals. Yet, Latinos and Asian immigrants have been the fastest-growing segment of the American population. It was clear for a long time that the unions' justification of their passivity by blaming the Republicans and the conservative climate in the U.S. had been wearing very thin. So was the excuse that American workers cannot be organized until the wage levels of the Third World workers catch up.

MIGRATION PRESSURE IN CHINA

Illegal immigrants from China come mainly from the cities of Fuzhou and Wenzhou, or rather from the rural outskirts of these cities. They are two of the fastest-growing economic regions in China, fuelled by foreign investment. The village outskirts of the two cities have always been highly productive, supplying food produce for city-dwellers. The residents of these villages commanded a favourable position even during the days of the People's Commune. Deng Xiaoping initiated his economic reforms first in rural China, allowing the farmers to break up the collectives and sell their produce in free markets. The farmers accumulated wealth quickly. They then invested their earnings in hand-craft and small-scale manufacturing industries, such as making shoes and clothing. Thus, Deng's reforms initially brought remarkable gains in rural productivity. Between 1978 (the beginning of the reform) and 1984, gross output in the countryside grew at an impressive annual rate of 9 percent. In a very short time these rural farmers became wealthy relative to urban residents who worked for state enterprises on fixed salaries.

By the middle of 1980s the Chinese government loosened its external controls, permitting foreign firms to set up factories in special industrial zones. This policy was intended to gain cash reserves from these enterprises, and to use this to modernize state industries. Immediately, multinationals like NIKE and K-Mart set up production plants to take advantage of China's cheap labour. Much of China's most dynamic expansion has occurred in sectors predicated on export, and their development was mainly financed by foreign investors often under the management of subcontractors from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Most of this growth is concentrated in the southern coastal areas in places like Fuzhou and Wenzhou.

With new high-wage jobs available in these cities, people's expectations rose. Migrants from rural areas and interior regions where there had not been such development rushed there looking for jobs. China's internal migration is also encouraged by factory owners, including the foreign ones, who prefer out-of-province workers as 'being less demanding and working harder'. Some factories recruit only young out-of-province girls who live in barracks and work in sweatshop conditions. Still, workers are competing for these jobs because whatever they make there is far more than they can make at home. In many of these foreign investment zones the 'out-of-province' population even surpasses the local population. This rural-to-urban, north-south migration has brought inflation, over-crowded housing, open sewage, street congestion, depressed wages, high unemployment, petty crime and general social disorder to the cities. Unaccompanied young girls and boys sleep in the open air and sell their labour and bodies in city markets to anyone willing to pay. Some of them become street urchins, barefoot and dressed in rags, scabby-headed, with flies gathering in the corners of their eyes. Their presence recalls the human deprivation of pre-1949 China.

On the other side of the coin, the consequence of foreign investment is the destruction of newly-established domestic industries. Village enterprises simply could not compete with the newer, urban ventures equipped with modern machinery and backed by foreign investment. As one small rural entrepreneur, a relative of one of the 'Golden Venture' human cargo, put it in an interview: 'As increasing numbers of people got into making shoes and clothing like ours, the profit margins declined and the markets dried up.' This individual, who had prospered earlier in shoe manufacturing, explained: 'We are left to fend for ourselves in a highly risky business,' and concluded that 'without government connections, we cannot get into the more lucrative export markets. Where can we sell our products?'

Around 1985 rural output slowed down noticeably in contrast to the growth in the urban areas. Some analysts suggest that once peasants abandoned grain production for the more profitable cash crop and rural industries, they soon fell victim to the cyclical process that begins with heated market competition and leads to the shortage of raw materials, price inflation, and finally overproduction and glut.³⁰ Certainly, those individuals who had the opportunity to taste the fruits of free enterprise have grown resentful of the new development and blame the corrupt political system for their troubles. Chinese Communist Party officials are using their positions to monopolize the most lucrative enterprises for themselves. It is a common complaint that party officials allocate public funds to invest in their private business ventures. During China's 8th National People's Congress 5th Plenary Session held in Beijing in March 1997, delegates castigated the government for its failure to halt the massive exodus of \$100 billion stolen government funds since 1979. An estimated \$17.8 billion left in 1995 alone. The culprits are top managers of national enterprises and sons and daughters of high-ranking officials—known in China as princelings—who use their privileged positions to channel state funds to private savings accounts outside the country.³¹

Members of the Communist Party have, in effect, arranged for themselves and their children to be first in line to benefit from China's transition to capitalism. The corrupt environment is so suffocating that ordinary Chinese feel that they have no future in China. They also believe that continued government corruption and the increasing polarization of classes will inevitably lead to another political upheaval, much worse than the Tienanman massacre of 1989. You don't have to be poor and at the bottom of the social strata in China to want to leave.

So the pressure of emigration is still building. China has a rural workforce of approximately 440 million. At the current rate of growth in agricultural production, only 200 million farmers are needed.³² The newly sprouted village and township enterprises alleviated this unemployment temporarily. Even so, by the end of 1995, village and township enterprises were providing work for only 126 million former farmers. This leaves China with millions of unemployed. In one 1999 study, China's rural and urban unemployment was

estimated to have reached 130 million people, many of whom are roaming around the country in search of work.³³ China's economic growth, impressive as it has been, is not likely to absorb all this vast mass of surplus manpower. The Chinese leadership had to look for Western help. But in order to get it, it had to agree on 'privatization programmes', more specifically to liquidate all unprofitable state enterprises in three years.³⁴ The result of this was to add five million more unemployed per year, at a time of economic slowdown in Asia.

This is a risky situation. Already in the first nine months of 1996 there were 1,520 reported incidents of mass demonstrations by threatened and laid-off workers in 120 cities. They marched under unofficial, unsanctioned banners, reading 'Unemployment Workers Alliance', 'Anti-Capitalist Restoration Association', or simply, 'Chinese Labour Association'.³⁵ In the rural countryside there is also a great deal of unrest due to the imposition of heavy and arbitrary taxes by local officials. When the peasants cannot pay, officials resort to confiscation of property and imprisonment. These harsh measures have led to violent revolts in half a dozen provinces, including Fujian. The worst reported incident happened in one county of Hunan Province where the peasants, angered by a variety of unreasonable taxes, demonstrated in front of the county government building. More than ten thousand gathered and sacked the government offices. Eventually thousands of police and militia were called in from other regions to quell the uprising.³⁶

The Chinese leadership is thus facing an immediate crisis of survival, which explains its anxiety to join the WTO; yet in joining the WTO, while China gains trade and tariff benefits, it has to open its most lucrative insurance, banking and communication markets to foreign ownership. In a way, the leaders are counting on the Western powers to pull the country out of its economic crisis, in order to stay in power. In this sense the Chinese Communist leadership may be in danger of becoming no less comprador in nature than the Nationalist Party leadership, which it overthrew fifty years ago.

The government is also encouraging emigration. The labour department has intensified its efforts to export workers to wealthy nations. The government makes money out of these transactions. The government's desperation can be seen from the way it tries to please its clients. A local court in Sichuan Province recently sentenced an individual to a two-year prison-term for his leadership role in organizing a strike in Kuwait, where he had worked. The strike by Chinese labourers was against Kuwaiti construction companies forcing them to work over thirteen hours a day, in violation of their contract which set a maximum of nine hours a day.

In this global economy, Chinese workers have no escape, either inside their country or as immigrant labour elsewhere. Globalization has strengthened the hand of capital and weakened workers everywhere. To reverse the situation there has to be an organized international opposition. The building of such an opposition, however, has to start from the working-class movement in each country, just as Marx and Engels had spelled out that workers 'first of all settle

matters with its own bourgeoisie.' Today, the well-being and living standards of workers even in the richest countries depends on a successful labour movement that advances beyond its past to encompass the entire working class: including people of colour, immigrants and illegal aliens.

THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF CHINESE IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Are the Fuzhounese illegals in the United States ready to be part of such a struggle? Is their kinship loyalty too strong? True, Chinese immigrant workers are mainly from rural farming backgrounds, hoping to move up to property ownership in the new land. As immigrants they are dependent on kinship loyalty to sustain their migration chain. Therefore, their sense of ethnic solidarity is likely to be strong. In the Chinese American community the strength of kinship loyalty is seen in the formation of clan, family, village, fraternal and trade associations. These associations, transplanted from China during the feudal period of the nineteenth century, remain important to assist new immigrants to adapt to this country.

Before the 1960s Chinese immigrants, without English language and professional skills, could not find jobs in the American labour market because of strong objections by whites to working alongside them. They had to survive by self-employment in small businesses like laundries, restaurants and the grocery trade. To start these businesses, they needed sums of money beyond the reach of most individual immigrants, and relied on district and kinship connections to help them find business partners and pool their resources together. Now, the decentralization of American industry has changed the situation—manufacturing jobs and service firms have come to the ethnic communities to tap their cheap labour resources. Chinatown has, in effect, been transformed from a small-business ghetto into an ethnic manufacturing centre. The majority of the Chinese in Chinatown today are no longer self-employed but employees in factories and restaurants that retain dozens to a couple of hundred people. They are workers.

This is true of Fuzhou and Wenzhou immigrants as well, except that initially they are even more dependent on kinship networks to help them to pay off their exorbitant smuggling fees. However, as the number of illegals entering the U.S. grows, the kinship networks are overburdened with debts and no longer able to handle further kinship demands. The usefulness of kinship networks has declined. In fact, those Fuzhounese who came earlier use the networks to prey on the newcomers, so it has become increasingly clear to illegal immigrants that their future lies with other workers. They may have petty bourgeois aspirations, but the oppression against them is so intense that they have to accept their class position to save themselves. The indications are that Fuzhounese illegals are fighting back.

In the late 1980s, Wai Chee Tong and Stanley Chang opened a garment factory in Brooklyn's Sunset Park district. The employees were mainly illegal

workers—Fuzhounese, Malaysians and Hispanics—approximately seventy in all. Around September 1990, when the shop was particularly busy, the owners stopped paying wages, even though the factory was turning out an average of 15,000 garments per week. After a few months, the owners of Wai Chang owed one female worker \$3,000; another \$6,000, one year's back pay; a couple a total of \$10,000; and a seventy-year-old male worker \$1,900. The situation was becoming critical, and a number of workers could no longer hold on. They organized a work stoppage, and the partners brought a nasty-looking gangster on to the factory floor to threaten them. The owners also threatened to report the workers to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

When the workers went to the U.S. Labor Department for help its investigation quickly halted when department officials 'could not locate the owners'. By then, the partners had closed the factory, transferred their accounts out of the corporation, liquidated their properties and disappeared. But the workers did not give up. At a news conference open to the Chinese and English language press, two undocumented workers contended that because the partners knew that they had no green cards they thought that they could get away with not paying wages. The two workers vowed to pursue the case to get back their hard-earned pay, *even if it meant deportation*, and offered to testify in court against the owners to achieve that objective.

The workers filed criminal charges with the New York State Attorney General's Office. After four months of investigation the owners, Wai Chee Tong and Stanley Chang, were charged on forty-one misdemeanour counts of failing to pay wages and keep accurate payroll records. The judgement stipulated that Tong and Chang pay \$80,000 in unpaid wages, making it the largest suit ever won in New York's garment industry. The prosecution, however, could not move forward because the two owners 'disappeared' again. Wai Chang workers organized a rally in the Chinese community, seeking help in locating the owners. They also encouraged others in the community who had suffered from the same type of mistreatment to come forward. The workers spent weeks and stayed up for nights and finally spotted Stanley Chang walking out of his hiding place and had him arrested. He was convicted and imprisoned for nine months. Again, the imprisonment of an employer for holding back wages was the first in New York State history. Unfortunately, after he got out Chang claimed bankruptcy and still refused to pay the workers.

But the Wai Chang workers' action has served as an inspiration to many others, showing them that they can fight even if they are undocumented aliens. Thousands of workers employed in hundreds of Chinatown factories and restaurants have experienced similar problems with unpaid back wages. The employers count on the fact that labour laws on this issue are lenient and never enforced, and on the assumption that Chinese workers, particularly the undocumented, will not fight back. But one Chinese community organizer now describes the issue of back wages sprouting like 'green grass after a spring rain.' Soon dozens of garment workers in other factories came forward to

demand return of back wages. Employees of a number of Uptown Manhattan Chinese restaurants also went on strike to demand back wages.

Chinese workers, the undocumented included, are clearly ready to fight for their rights despite having to confront the co-ethnic business owners, the threat of gang violence, pro-business labour laws, indifferent labour officials, and even the possibility of deportation. Their problem is the reluctance of the organized labour to mobilize them. Chinese illegals saw themselves as workers and wanted to fight for the enforcement of 'American labour standards', to challenge the unlawful practices of the traditional Chinese pro-business superstructure, and demolish Chinese employers' efforts to split ethnic Chinese labour into legal and illegal immigrants, in order to better super-exploit them both.

Yet in view of the current economic changes taking place in the U.S., what is going on in Chinatown is not at all marginal to the American labour movement. Fuzhounese immigrant workers are not that different from the rest of American working people—they only happen to be on the breaking edge of the crumbling working class structure. The presence of Fuzhounese and other kinds of indentured servitude is an indication of the decline in the American labour movement. Capital counts on labour's traditional racism and exclusionary practices, recruiting precisely those whom organized labour excludes. Today, the well-being and living standards of all Americans depends on a successful labour reform movement that rises from a broad, bottom-up mobilization campaign encompassing the entire working class including people of colour, immigrants and illegal aliens. The inclusion of Fuzhounese immigrants in the ranks of American labour will be a test of organized labour's viability in the future. Protecting the most vulnerable segment of the working class from brutal exploitation is necessary both to save American workers from a downward slide into the primitive conditions of the nineteenth-century capitalism, but also to create the strength to build an international working movement capable of sustaining an advance to socialism.

NOTES

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4. Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labour*, p. 82.
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8. To take just one historical example: in the 1880s, Flemish-speaking Belgian immigrants were recruited to work in the textile factories of the Roubaix region in France, to break a strike and discourage resistance to mechanization by native French workers. Belgian worker's desire to work in places with relative high wages obviously was a 'necessary' condition for migration; however, it was French employers' interest in hiring workers who were docile and culturally distinct from French workers, and resented by them, that was the decisive factor in paving the way for these immigrants to come to France. See Roger Magraw, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic*, London: Blackwell, 1992, p. 71. Magraw recounts (p. 42) that, in a similar fashion at the turn of the century, Italian immigrants were recruited to work in the French coal-mines. They lived and worked in a world apart from the native workers. Their accident rate was three times higher than that of French coal-miners.
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