

## The Left, Labour, and the Future of U.S. Radicalism: The Struggle for Immigrant Rights

Steve Striffler

*University of New Orleans*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper first explores the decline and current state of the U.S. left, with a particular emphasis on the proliferation of progressive campaigns, causes, and coalitions that are relatively isolated from each other, as well as the labour movement, and have little capacity to shape public debate or policy. The second part examines this tendency through a case study of one of the left's most promising initiatives: the immigrant rights movement.

**KEYWORDS:** left, labour, Latinos, immigration, social movements, Sensenbrenner

The subject of this paper does not, in a strict sense, exist. To be sure, the “solidarity left” in the United States consists of a diverse group of actors who have orchestrated an ever-changing collection of progressive campaigns, causes, organizations, and even “movements.” And these initiatives have animated many of the most prominent examples of left activism during the past three decades: anti-sweatshop, anti-war, Worker Centers, international solidarity, immigration rights, global justice, environmentalism, women's issues, etc. The solidarity left also has a rich history, with deep political-intellectual roots in various progressive traditions dating back at least to the 1960s and the New Left. Indeed, the solidarity left is one of the three core constituents of the broader U.S. left, along with organized labour and the working poor.

Yet, to define the solidarity left in this (admittedly imprecise) way is not to say that “it” actually exists in the sense of an even vaguely, semi-coherent, political force that can effectively intervene in public

debates, let alone shape public policy. There are no institutions, organizations, or parties of the “solidarity left,” nothing holding “it” together. Even most of the “single” issues listed above are, in reality, an amalgam of largely disconnected, uncoordinated, and resource-poor organizations and actors. Progressive initiatives are everywhere in the United States, yet the presence of the left in public life, public debates, and public policy has become almost non-existent. We are thoroughly marginalized and ceding more ground every day. This paper explores why, first through a broad, but brief, discussion of the current state of the solidarity left and, second, through a case study of one of the solidarity left's most promising initiatives: the immigrant rights movement.

There is no single reason why the left has fragmented and become virtually absent from public life within the United States. It could certainly be argued that the current moment, defined by a repressive legal-political apparatus, neoliberal policies, growing

economic inequality, and a powerful right, is not a good one for building a left.<sup>1</sup> It is also reasonable to conclude that although the material and human resources may be sufficient to allow for individual causes and campaigns to emerge (if not always thrive), they are not at a level to sustain movements and organizations on larger scales. Individual efforts often lack resources, tend to be isolated, and are frequently surrounded by allies who are equally weak. Stuck in survival mode, small campaigns and organizations are in no position to act on larger scales.

Without dismissing these explanations, it is worth noting they do not really help us understand how we got from there to here, how the current situation became so bleak, how the left in the United States became so marginalized and fragmented, or what role the left has played in making this mess. The weakness, fragmentation, and lack of coordination within the solidarity left (and the left as a whole) is a political problem that limits our capacity to build class power and confront capitalism, but it is also an intellectual problem that requires explanation. The source of this problem is not wholly external. It cannot be laid entirely at the feet of repressive and inequitable political, legal, and economic systems; or blamed on a right that increasingly sets the terms of debates while controlling political power and the corporate media; or passed off on a public that appears unreceptive to our ideas and projects. These are all, in varying degrees, valid intellectual explanations as to why there is no left within the United States today.

Yet, it is also the reality that we must work within, change, and have strategies for confronting. To say that a certain strategy failed because of repression or inequality, conditions we know exist, is to fail to develop viable paths for confronting these conditions, and to doom ourselves to ever-deepening marginalization.

### The Era of Campaigns, Causes, and Coalitions

The solidarity left in the United States is currently defined by a seemingly endless array of campaigns,

causes, organizations, and coalitions. On the one hand, the presence of so many initiatives and “movements” can and should be taken as a sign of the breadth and energy of left activism during the past three decades. We put a lot of time, energy, and resources into fighting sweatshops. Over one hundred Workers Centers now exist throughout the United States. The immigrant rights movement mobilized some of the largest protests in U.S. history. Hundreds of thousands fought against war in the Middle East. There is something going on here.

On the other hand, the endless proliferation of campaigns is problematic on a number of levels, and says something about the left in general. To begin, the simple fact is we do not have a lot to show for our efforts. It takes an exceptionally creative intellect to conclude that the anti-sweatshop movement has significantly improved the lives of workers, let alone made a dent in global inequality or advanced labour organizing; or that immigrant rights activism has generated anything resembling decent immigration policy; or that anti-war activism has stopped, or even significantly slowed, U.S. militarism. It also seems overly optimistic to suggest that these defeats have established the building blocks for a future movement, that in losing these many battles we somehow gained the alliances, knowledge, and resources to eventually win the war.<sup>2</sup>

The inability of our campaigns, causes, and initiatives to produce more positive change is, of course, due to a whole host of structural factors, but there is something perverse about a strategy that seems to suggest we should all struggle independently. To be sure, virtually all of the issues that the solidarity left addresses have local manifestations. They can, and in many cases should, be fought at the local level. And single-issue campaigns and organizations, peopled by professional experts, certainly have their place. Yet,

1 Though one could easily argue the opposite, that the objective conditions have fully exposed the brutality of capitalism and made it ripe for organizing.

2 One can argue that many of these fights had to be fought regardless of the outcome. Had we not mobilized by the thousands it is likely that the U.S. military and its foreign allies would have been even more aggressive and dangerous. We saved lives. Had we not fought against attacks on public education and healthcare the neoliberal agenda would be even further advanced. This matters. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these battles were, in a sense, lost from the very moment we engaged in them. They were rear-guard struggles in which, as Adolph Reed Jr. has so aptly put it, the left “negotiates the best possible terms of defeat” (Reed 2010:12).

the fact is that (a) most of these “different” issues are produced by a common set of root causes (i.e. it is all connected) and (b) in many cases only the federal government has the authority, resources, and capacity to address these issues. These are national and international battles with local expressions. And yet, the un-stated, *de facto*, strategy of the solidarity left seems to be to wage dozens, even hundreds, of isolated campaigns in order to limit our losses on the local (or issue) level. This strategy seems both defeatist and not particularly efficient in terms of the use of resources. It also potentially contributes to the marginalization of the left in the United States, whereby we no longer occupy a meaningful space within national debates, where we have no common platform for influencing the national machinery.

Moreover, despite a lot of rhetoric and sloganeering about unity, the solidarity left’s varied stances with respect to organizing on larger scales more typically ranges from the overly optimistic (i.e. focus on local efforts and larger scale organizing will inevitably emerge) to the overly pessimistic (i.e. it can’t be done so why bother), to the disinterested, openly hostile, reluctant, or subtly resistant. Some of this resistance to larger scale organizing is understandable as a reaction to somewhat domineering efforts at “party building” during the 1960s and 1970s, whereby (to over simplify a bit) organizations run by white men worked from somewhat rigid notions of class and effectively compelled folks to toe the party line. This forced unity led a variety of groups to not only demand full membership in the left, but to rethink left politics in the U.S. more broadly. For some, unmet demands for a full seat at the table led to various forms of separatism, initially and most typically along gender and race lines. Yet, into the 1980s most groups understood (either explicitly or implicitly) this separation as temporary, as a necessary stage on the path to a broad revolutionary movement that would include men, women, and children of all types.

What this meant in practice, then, was a move away from large-scale social movement building (that often struggled for ideological and organizational cohesion) towards social mobilization that engaged in a large variety of conflicts through smaller-scale campaigns (that typically had shorter term goals).

Had things gone (quite) differently, it is possible that this shift would have been temporary, with various progressive groups eventually finding their way back together in some form of political movement. This did not happen for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the process unfolded during, and was ultimately stimulated and distorted by, neoliberalism. As neoliberal policies in the U.S. remade state priorities, and the government’s ability to address social problems was further undermined, many progressive groups not only shifted their political activities away from the state, but an important sector of the left devoted much of their energy towards offering services previously provided by the state.

Neoliberalism, in this sense, not only stimulated the on-going fragmentation of the left, but did so in a particular way, channeling us further down the path of NGOization, whereby individual progressive organizations each “carves out special areas of expertise or special interest, gets intensely informed about the area, conducts campaigns on that area, and then uses this market specialization to attract members and funds. Organizations that ‘do too much’ bewilder this landscape” (Armstrong and Prashad 2005:184). Identity politics clearly contributed to this tendency. Still, there is nothing inherently wrong with a degree of expertise or specialization, and a certain amount of division of labour makes some sense. NGOs do not make movement building inherently impossible.

Yet, what seems to have happened as the process of NGOization and professionalization deepened, and defined (too) much of the left, is that the path back from fragmentation, to some sort of larger-scale, anti-capitalist, movement, has become much more difficult in both a practical and imaginative sense. Even when the problem is recognized, and it often is through much of the progressive non-profit community, NGOs remain much better equipped to attract funds than to mobilize members. As they develop expertise, conduct the next project, and become focused on demonstrating (short-term) “success” to funders, most NGOs become disconnected from “their” constituencies to the point where there is a definitive gap between the activities of NGOs and real activism on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

3 Shaun Joseph (2008) has a good discussion of this phenomenon.

In this sense, the fragmentation of the left, and our collective inability to forge a common political platform, operates as both cause and effect. On the one hand, it is very difficult for the individual causes, campaigns, and mini-movements to succeed, sustain themselves over time, envision how they fit into a larger progressive project, or connect with each other without the presence of a coherent left. On the other hand, it is very difficult for a coherent left to emerge out of a landscape defined by hundreds of relatively isolated campaigns, many of which barely exist beyond a webpage, that are struggling to survive with few resources, have little in the way of a social base, and are peopled by folks who are often exhausted, demoralized, and have little time to think about the relationship between their individual efforts and broader social change.

As a result, being part of the U.S. left is exhausting. Elizabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad capture this nicely with a sense of humour:

An initiate into the world of the [U.S.] Left is advised to buy a date book. On Monday, you have to be at the feminist anti-war meeting. On Tuesday, the environmentalists have a hearing that has to be attended. On Wednesday, there is a meeting for a new group on anti-racist justice. On Thursday, it is imperative to be at the union meeting. On Saturday, the collective meets and you have to be there. On Sunday, God rests, but since we are all atheists, we have to be at an inter-faith meeting. This is just for each evening. Forget the lunch breaks, the late afternoons, the conference calls. To be an American activist in this period is to have a heroic schedule... Our lives are governed by the logic of coalitions and if we don't think about this model, we'll tire out, waste away, lose the ability to grow beyond those hard-core folk with a well of energy. [Armstrong and Prashad 2005:183]

This model is unsustainable not simply because few individuals can keep up the pace for very long, but because despite all the hard work we are often doing little more than putting out the neoliberal fires that crop up in every locale.

It can also lead to disengagement. Because many of us on the left know nothing but defeat, and recognize that the injustices and inequalities we abhor

are so entrenched and interconnected, there is a tendency to feel that unless we devote our entire life to ten different causes that there is no point in doing anything. This can encourage us to disengage completely, or look for assurances that if, as individuals acting alone, we buy fair trade coffee from Chiapas, eat less meat, or adopt energy-saving technology we will then be able to continue our lives, guilt free, more or less as we had always envisioned. By this logic, if you don't have the time, resources, or commitment to tackle capitalism, anything less seems pointless (except being a really good consumer). Many of us have been there, and it is an understandable position in a political landscape in which there is no visibly present left to offer alternative visions or meaningful avenues for action.

It can also lead to the polar opposite of being disengaged, what Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti have called activism, an anti-intellectual hyper-pragmatic emphasis on acting, acting without analysis, where action is privileged regardless of its value, impact, direction, or connection to political aims (2002:27). This action-will-be-taken mentality, where action is by definition righteous (and potentially provides "the spark") circulates in many vaguely progressive circles and leads to the any-direction-is-as-good-as-any-other orientation that is so prevalent today in the U.S.

So where do we go? There are no easy answers, but the recent takeover of the Wisconsin capitol (2011), the unexpected emergence of the Occupy movement (2011), and the immigrant rights protests (2006) reinforce the fact that there is no future for the left without the labour movement and (ultimately) an independent political party. Some sort of national machinery is necessary, and only the labour movement or a labour-affiliated political party can provide it. The labour movement does not have all the answers, and is problematic on so many levels, but there will be no viable left in the United States without it.

For the solidarity left, for progressives disconnected from or on the margins of the labour movement, this recognition is significant for how we spend our political energy. We need to find more and better ways to engage organized labour, or sectors

of organized labour, as a way of building a coherent left. Similarly, if we recognize that many of our causes, projects, and mini-movements are destined to fail in a climate devoid of a broader U.S. left, we must work on creating an independent, national-level, organization that strives to effectively influence state power and public policy. Building what essentially amounts to a political party will not be an easy task, has been tried before, and is filled with pitfalls, but if we spend less time on causes and campaigns that the past tells us are destined to fail, we might actually take some steps in the right direction. Put another way, I would rather fail at building something that has the potential to get us to where we want to go than to “succeed” in building something we know will take us nowhere. On some level, it doesn’t matter how hard something is to do if that is in fact what needs to be done.

### **Building a Left through Immigrant Rights**

There is perhaps no better place to understand the need, potential, and current limitations of a strong alliance between the solidarity left, the U.S. labour movement, and *los de abajo* (in this case, Latinos) than in the immigrant rights movement. This alliance simultaneously produced the largest protests in U.S. history and failed to translate this “street energy” into sustained power or even modest policy reform. It is a prime example of what the left is not and what it could be.

In a four-month span during the Spring of 2006 somewhere between about 3.5 and 5.1 million people rallied for immigrant rights in the streets of over 160 U.S. cities and more than forty states (Barreto et al. 2009:736; Bloemraad et al. 2011:3). For most cities, these rallies represented the largest mobilizations in history, and in virtually all cases saw more people take to the streets than any protest in recent memory. The marches also caught the mainstream media and public completely by surprise, in part because few people in the United States knew about House Bill 4437, much less understood how a piece of legislation could serve as a catalyst to bring hundreds of thousands of Latinos into the streets. Immigrants, even legal Latinos, were supposed to remain silent and invisible. The protests disrupted this norm in spectacular form.

Had House Bill 4437, also known as the Sensenbrenner bill, actually passed the U.S. Senate and been signed into law, it would have turned undocumented immigrants into felons subject to imprisonment and deportation while also imposing criminal penalties on those employing and/or assisting the undocumented. The legislation also potentially exposed anyone who helped undocumented immigrants to up to five years in jail, including educators, businesses, health care workers, priests, friends, and even family members who were U.S. citizens. It was this combination of both being overly punitive and targeting a wide range of people that brought so many into the streets so quickly.

Protests literally followed protests. Following a first wave in March, in which 300,000 took to the streets in Chicago, a second wave gripped nearly 100 U.S. cities in April, and began to push a broader set of demands, including a viable path to citizenship and social justice for undocumented immigrants.<sup>4</sup> May 1st, known both as the “Great American Boycott” and “A Day Without Immigrants,” then saw hundreds of thousands of (mostly) Latinos skip school, leave work, and/or not purchase anything for a day while taking to the streets. “Eight of these rallies attracted at least 100,000 participants, with perhaps half to three-quarter million people marching in the streets in Chicago and Los Angeles on May 1” (Bloemraad et al. 2011:7).

The combination of the size, spontaneity, long-term potential, and unprecedented nature of the protests led to hyperbole and somewhat uncritical enthusiasm from the solidarity left, hyperbole and backlash from the Right, and some combination of the above from media and politicians. It was widely observed that a “sleeping giant had been kicked” and Latinos would now flex their political muscle in a way that reflected their demographic might. According to Justin Akers Chacón, a “new civil rights movement for immigrants” had emerged that had “blown wide open” the debate over immigration politics, in effect redrawing “the parameters of the debate – previously

4 By contrast, 250,000 went to Washington DC to hear Martin Luther King in 1963 while somewhere around 300,000 marched in Washington to protest the Vietnam War in 1969. (Bloemraad et al. 2011:3).

restricted to criminalization on one side and partial legalization combined with a guest-worker program on the other” (Chacon 2006:1). The National Immigrants Solidarity Network “saw themselves as the vanguard of the first civil rights movement of the twentieth century.” Many activists, according to Kevin Johnson and Bill Ong Hing, “believed that the anti-immigrant tide that had dominated the national debate since the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, might have turned. In the heady days following the marches, even positive immigration reform, including amnesty for millions of undocumented immigrants appeared possible” (Johnson and Hing 2007:100).

This was not to be. The protests did stop Sensenbrenner in its tracks (an important victory), but did not lead to federal legislation that would provide a path to legalization. Nor did the protests, at least in the short term, help realize a broader set of goals and hopes surrounding amnesty, a civil rights movement, or a progressive coalition that could effectively push for social justice on a number of fronts. Rather, the mass movement dissipated and disappeared from public view almost as quickly as it emerged. Once the more controversial features of Sensenbrenner lost support in Congress, the common enemy that had united so many and brought more mainstream groups into the streets was eliminated. With the immediate threat gone, large numbers of people breathed a sigh of relief and returned to their day jobs; many immigrants were effectively silenced by the subsequent backlash and returned to the shadows; and organized labour and the mainstream media shifted their resources and attention to the 2006 Congressional elections.

More than this, the mobilizations did not shift the terms of the immigration debate in any significant way. Quite the opposite. They confirmed a slowly deteriorating, if not entire stable, status quo. After 9-11, so-called “amnesty” was effectively off the table, and any substantive differences between the two political parties narrowed considerably as both Republicans and Democrats converged around a bi-partisan immigration policy defined almost exclusively by punishment. Debate between the two parties was now largely limited to how much money would be spent to militarize the border and punish

immigrants. The post-2006 “plan” that the federal government delivered came in the form of 700 miles of fence along the border, increased raids, and greater enforcement. All the vaguely progressive features of comprehensive reform were effectively gutted as the terms of the debate shifted decidedly to the right.

The inability of progressives to turn massive street protests into effective pressure on President Obama and the U.S. Congress to pass decent national-level immigration reform has had real consequences for the immigration battle. For one, failure on the national level has allowed the right to take the fight local, to the city and state level – a la Hazelton, PA, Arizona, and Alabama.<sup>5</sup> “In the immediate aftermath of the protests of 2006 and the failure of H.R. 4437, no fewer than 1,059 pieces of immigration-related legislation were introduced in state legislatures, and 167 of those became law in 2007, more than double the number of immigration-related laws enacted in all of 2006” (Bloemraad 2011:36). Here, we can include sanctions on employers who knowingly hire those lacking documents, laws preventing the undocumented from obtaining drivers licenses or business licenses, and a variety of laws making it difficult for the undocumented to attend and/or afford public higher education (Varsanyi 2010:3). The rapid expansion of the 287(g) program during the second Bush term, whereby Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) trains local law authorities to enforce immigration law, can also be seen as part of the localization of the immigration struggle.

The broader point is not that “we” will lose all local battles. In fact, in most cases, the worst of the right’s local-level legislation has been stopped or stalled, and despite what it might seem like from the media, localities are actually more likely to propose, and much more likely to pass, legislation that works to integrate immigrants in some way than they are to pass legislation that is openly hostile (Voss and Bloemraad 2011:x-xi). Arizona and Alabama are not

<sup>5</sup> There may be a longer history of this type of legislation, but the current round started with the passage of the Illegal Immigration Relief Act in August of 2006 by the Hazelton (PA.) city government which, among others things, targeted landlords who rented to undocumented immigrants and made English the city’s official language. The city was quickly criticized by immigrant rights groups and contacted by hundreds of cities who wanted to implement similar laws.

the norm. The point, however, is that regardless of the outcomes in particular locales, the “local” turn itself signals that the terms of the immigration debate have moved dramatically to the right – especially when what passes for national immigration policy is now reduced largely to increased policing. Leaving the basic rights of immigrants up to the balance of forces in particular locales is a bit like leaving basic civil rights for African Americans up to local authorities in Mississippi in the 1950s – in some cases it may turn out fine, in others not so much, but the broader point is that doing the right thing should not be optional or left to the vagaries of particular locales. Local is not always good. Hundreds of progressive NGOs working in isolation to confront the local excesses of the anti-immigrant right is not a recipe for success.

The question is why? Why, despite some of the largest street mobilizations in U.S. history, were progressives unable to push through even mildly decent immigration reform? On the one hand, it is hard to see how things could have turned out differently in the short term. The fact that a draconian bill that would not have seen the light of day prior to 9-11 nearly passed in 2006 was not a signal that a progressive social movement was about to blossom and transform the political landscape. It was a sign of how quickly the political landscape had deteriorated. In this sense, although the ability of immigrants and their allies to turn back Sensenbrenner was significant, the fact that such a hostile bill had political legs in the first place was perhaps even more indicative of where the country was politically, and how much ground had been ceded to the right on this issue as well as many others.

On the other hand, the inability of the immigrant rights protests to either generate significant transformation or to develop into a more sustained movement also speaks to the weakness of the progressive foundations upon which the mobilizations rested. Contrary to the perception that the protests came out of nowhere, they can in fact be traced to longer histories of organizing and alliances between core sectors of the broader left, including Latinos (an important component of the working poor, or “*los de abajo*”), organized labour, and the solidarity left

(largely in the form of progressive churches and community/advocacy organizations of various stripes). These groups are central to the formation of a U.S. left, and it is the weakness of these groups and the links between them that partially explain the inability of immigrant rights movement to develop further.

In Los Angeles, the epicenter of the 2006 marches, Latino social activism dates back at least to the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. More recently, efforts to organize against a series of anti-immigrant initiatives in California during the 1990s (Prop 187, 209, 227) laid the groundwork for 2006. And, as Randy Shaw points out, the protests were themselves the immediate product of an even more recent alliance between Latinos, labour, and the solidarity left that was consciously built during the decade prior to the protests:

In a little over a decade, prior to the mass marches of 2006, a conscious effort was made to connect labor unions, and to reconnect the religious community, to the immigrant rights movement. This effort was primarily focused in Los Angeles, where activists like Miguel Contreras, Eliseo Medina, and Fred Ross Jr., who got their formative training with Chavez’s UFW, played key roles in mobilizing labor and religious support for immigrant rights. The building of an immigrant rights movement that included labor and the religious community in key roles was a multifaceted project that took many years and entailed changing the orientation of the national labor movement toward immigration. [Shaw 2011: 83]

Such organizing was possible in part because of the peculiarities of Los Angeles, namely a large and longstanding Latino population, a cohort of seasoned union leaders and activists with roots dating back to the United Farm Workers, and a level of union density that is almost unique within the United States. Such conditions exist nowhere else. Nevertheless, it was the same combination of groups – particularly Latinos, labour, religious progressives, and left activists – that insured the 2006 mobilizations would be national in scope.

Central to this entire process was a fundamental, if uneven, shift within organized labour – a national-level shift that itself was driven by the successful

unionization of Latinos in places like Los Angeles in the 1990s. The AFL-CIO, which had long been on the wrong side of the immigration debate, on the sidelines, or insistent that immigrants could not be organized, changed its stance in 2000 by calling for a general amnesty and asserting the rights of all workers, including those without papers, to organize.

It then organized a number of large rallies in major cities across the country in 2000 that highlighted how employers took advantage of undocumented workers and used them to divide the working class as a whole. This led into the Immigrant Workers Freedom Rides of 2003, spearheaded by UNITE HERE and SEIU (and sponsored by the AFL-CIO), which brought together a coalition that looked very similar to the one that provided the driving force behind the 2006 rallies – organized labour, religious progressives, students, civil rights groups, community-based organizations, immigrant rights advocates, and others. The momentum from this dissipated as the AFL-CIO was inevitably seduced away from organizing by the 2004 federal elections, but much of the groundwork was in place for 2006, especially in Los Angeles where two decades of immigrant unionization meant that Latinos were at the heart of a vibrant labour movement (Chacon 2006:1-2; Voss and Bloemraad 2011:3; Milkman 2011:201-203).

At roughly the same time as organized labour was embracing immigrants in major urban areas, the Latino-Labour alliance got an additional boost from the spread of Worker Centers throughout the United States, many of which serve immigrant communities in regions with little union presence and a growing immigrant population. Worker Centers, a key initiative of the solidarity left, typically provide services for and/or advocate on behalf of immigrants, and in doing so also “organize” in the sense of building connections, forging a sense of community, and deepening people’s understanding of workplace rights, discrimination, and exploitation. In this respect, it is noteworthy that “the congruence between the geography of the spring 2006 marches and that of worker centers themselves [was] especially striking” (Milkman 2011:210).

In short, between organized labour’s presence

in major urban areas and the existence of Worker Centers in less densely inhabited parts of the country (populated with new immigrant populations), the labour movement as a whole has a significant presence within many Latino-immigrant communities across the country. This presence was central to both the scale and breadth of the mobilizations themselves and, perhaps more importantly, put the labour movement in a potentially important position after the protests as one of the only actors with a national reach within immigrant working communities.

It has also led some observers to conclude that “there is good reason to expect that the political dynamic that unfolded in California in the 1990s could now be replicated on a national scale. If that occurs, unionism could once again become a key agent of social transformation” (Milkman 2006). In other words, just as organizing in California during the 1990s – and with it the emergence of a strong Latino-Labour-Left bloc – provided the basis for the 2006 mobilizations, the 2006 protests themselves may provide the groundwork for future mobilization outside of California, in parts of the country with a more recent history of Labour-Latino-Left organizing.

Such claims seem overly optimistic. Few places have the deep history of Los Angeles activism between and among Labour and Latinos, few have the density of unions, Latinos, and the solidarity left, and virtually nowhere else has the history and density of Los Angeles. We should also be leery of any claims that Latinos or, more narrowly, recent immigrants are a panacea or vanguard for the U.S. labour movement. It is a bit ironic that, within the span of about a decade, immigrants have gone from job-stealers who cannot be organized to (within some circles) a potential saviour of organized labour and the liberal-left. Such claims tend to obscure more than illuminate, and ignore the remarkable diversity within the category of “Latino” itself. Moreover, recent and/or undocumented immigrants, those who are most often seen as leading the revitalization of labour/left, are frequently not citizens, often do not speak English, have limited knowledge of and access to the U.S. political system, tend to be poor and marginalized, and are in an all-around disadvantageous position to spearhead any sort of movement. Again,



Los Angeles (or even New York or Chicago) is not the norm. It is not representative of the rest of the country, where the balance of power is just as likely to produce reactionary immigration policies – a la Arizona and Alabama – as they are to generate a progressive coalition of any substance.

More than this, however, is the simple fact that none of the principle parties – Latinos, labour, or the solidarity left – is particularly strong at this moment in terms of human, financial, and organizational resources, or in the sense of possessing something resembling a reasonably clear, unified, and left political vision. This broader weakness of the left, of all its constituent parts, helps explain why an immigrant rights coalition that exploded onto the scene in 2006 could not sustain itself in California, Chicago, or New York, much less on a national scale. Nor is the immigrant rights movement alone. This tendency defines many of our efforts, including more recently Wisconsin and Occupy, both of which emerged with great drama and fanfare, but either ended in defeat, were unsustainable, and/or did not have the capacity to operate on larger scales.

To be cautious about the immediate prospects for the emergence of an effective, nation-wide, Latino-Labour-Left bloc is not to suggest that time and effort should not be spent building these bridges. Both labour and Latinos, in the form of the immigrant rights movement, have shown more signs of life than virtually any other progressive force within the United States. And the solidarity left, for all its faults, is an important ally and resource. On some level, you just have to go where the energy is. Although the immigrant rights movement consists of a largely uncoordinated and resource-poor amalgam of community and faith-based organizations (i.e. NGO-type civil rights groups, worker centers, student organizations, etc.), “it” has not only demonstrated the capacity to mobilize large numbers of Latinos but possesses a dynamic sector of left organizers and organizations with substantial experience in US labour-left circles, Latin American solidarity, and other campaigns and causes that extend well beyond immigrant rights. This more militant sector of the broader immigrant rights movement can be an important ally for more radical actors within the

labour movement – especially in terms of thinking and acting critically about the left’s relationship with the Democratic Party, elections, legislation, policy, organizing, etc. In short, Latino/immigrant rights represent both an important demographic sector and a site with some organizing momentum.

Perhaps more importantly, if the point is to build progressive political power and shift the terms of public debate, and if the way to promote class politics in the short term will be more through issue-oriented campaigns than electoral politics, then the issue of immigration must be central to strengthening a Latino-Labour-Left bloc and building class power. Such an alliance almost demands a deeper analysis of immigration, one where the fight is not simply about securing a set of vitally important political and civil rights (i.e. citizenship, voting, basic access to public services, etc.), but that moves us towards related economic justice issues such as living wages, working conditions, education, healthcare, and corporate power.

We remain in a historical moment where progressive forces in the United States are, at times, still able to turn back the worst of the right’s agenda, where, if lucky, we can negotiate the best possible terms of our defeat. The longer this continues, however, the weaker we become, the further our political climate shifts to the right, and the more often we find ourselves working to repel some reactionary piece of legislation or policy that would not have been imaginable even ten years ago. Such battles are necessary, Sensenbrenner had to be stopped, but it is not a good place to be in. There is no point in pretending that there is an effective left in the United States today.

There are no easy formulas or paths forward, but part of the task is to figure out which of the necessary, but primarily, defensive struggles, have the potential to become the building blocks of a revitalized labour movement that moves us forward by reshaping public debate and political power. This is absolutely crucial not only for the United States, but for the rest of the world. The absence of a viable anti-capitalist movement in the United States not only means that US militarism runs amok, but insures that US policies will continue to promote an unrestrained capitalism that is impoverishing much of the world’s population while destroying the global environment.

## References

- Armstrong, Elizabeth and Vijay Prashad  
 2005 Exiles from a Future Land: Moving Beyond Coalitional Politics. *Antipode* 37(1):181-185.
- Barreto, Matt A., Sylvia Manzano, Ricardo Ramirez, and Kathy Rim  
 2009 Mobilization, Participation, and Solidaridad: Latino Immigration in the 2006 Immigration Protest Rallies. *Urban Affairs Review*. 44(5):736-764.
- Bloemraad, Irene, Kim Voss and Taeku Lee  
 2011 The Protests of 2006: What Were They, How Do We Understand Them, Where Do We Go? *In Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*. Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, eds. University of California Press.
- Chacón, Justin Akers  
 2006 Out from the Shadows, Into the Streets: The New Immigrant Civil Rights Movement. *International Socialist Review* 47:1. On-line edition. [www.isreview.org/issues/47/newmovement.shtml](http://www.isreview.org/issues/47/newmovement.shtml)
- Featherstone, Liza, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti  
 2002 Action will be Taken: Left Anti-Intellectualism and its Discontents. *Radical Society* 29(1):27.
- Johnson, Kevin and Bill Ong Hing  
 2007 The Immigrant Rights Marches of 2006 and the Prospects for a New Civil Rights Movement. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 42. UC Davis Legal Studies Research paper No. 96. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=951268>.
- Joseph, Shaun  
 2008 Funding for Activists, and the Strings Attached. *International Socialist Review* 61.
- Milkman, Ruth  
 2006 Labor and the New Immigrants Rights Movement: Lesson from California, July 28. <http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Milkman/printable.html>.
- 2011 L.A.'s Past, America's Future?: The 2006 Immigrant Rights Protests and Their Antecedents. *In Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*. Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, eds. University of California Press.
- Reed Jr., Adolph  
 2010 Why Labor's Soldiering for the Democrats is a Losing Battle. *New Labor Forum* 19(3):9-15.
- Shaw, Randy  
 2010 Immigration Policy Activism in U.S. States and Cities: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. *In Taking Local Control: Immigration Policy Activism in U.S. Cities and States*. Varsanyi, Monica, ed. Stanford University Press.
- 2011 Building the Labor-Clergy-Immigrant Alliance. *In Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*. Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, eds. University of California Press. Varsanyi, Monica W.
- Voss, Kim and Irene Bloemraad (eds.)  
 2011. *Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*. University of California Press.