

Immigrants Didn't Kill Your Union

Ruth Milkman

Immigrant organizing stood out as a rare bright spot on the otherwise dismal U.S. labor scene in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. To the surprise of many observers, starting in the late 1980s low-wage foreign-born workers, including the undocumented, eagerly welcomed opportunities to unionize and infused the labor movement with new energy. Immigrants also helped to galvanize the “alt-labor” movement, flocking to worker centers across the nation that deployed new strategies to challenge wage theft and other employer abuses in sectors where obstacles to traditional unionism were especially formidable. Largely in response to these developments, union leaders abandoned their longstanding support for restrictive immigration policies; by the turn of the century organized labor instead had become a vociferous champion of immigrant rights.

Yet some unionists dissented from this stance, especially in the relatively conservative building trades, many of which are still overwhelmingly made up of U.S.-born white males. In 2010, the Pennsylvania building trades lobbied for a proposed state bill to penalize construction firms that hired undocumented workers. More recently, in upstate New York a carpenters’ union representative admitted that his union routinely reported undocumented workers on construction sites to immigration authorities. These unionists, like many ordinary Americans, were convinced that immigrants, and especially the undocumented, lowered wages and took jobs away from U.S. citizens.

On the surface, their view may seem plausible. Construction has suffered severe deunionization over recent decades, leading to lower pay and degraded working conditions, especially in the residential sector of the industry. Employers launched a vigorous anti-union assault as the residential industry recovered from the recession of the early 1980s, using a variety of tactics to expand the non-union segment of the industry. When that happened, U.S.-born building-trades union members abandoned the jobs affected, typically moving from the residential to the commercial sector of the building industry—the latter was booming in the 1980s and remained



A New York construction worker demonstrates in anticipation of the Supreme Court's *Janus* ruling in 2018. Construction has suffered severe deunionization in recent years, leading to lower pay and degraded working conditions. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

heavily unionized. Meanwhile, employers recruited immigrant workers, both authorized and unauthorized, to fill the newly degraded jobs in residential construction. Thus the employment of immigrants did not *cause* the labor degradation in the industry; on the contrary, it was the *result* of the employers' anti-union campaigns. Similar processes unfolded in many other industries as well. But rank-and-file workers, as well as some unionists, unaware of this dynamic, often blamed immigrants instead for the degradation of jobs.

Such scapegoating has become even more widespread since the rise of Donald Trump and the aggressive attacks on immigrants that propelled him into the presidency. Not only did his 2016 campaign, with its gratuitous attacks on birthright citizenship and "chain migration," as well as unfounded claims that "illegals" raised crime rates and committed voter fraud, famously arouse the latent xenophobia and racism of many white workers. In addition, after taking office, the Trump administration systematically promulgated an array of draconian anti-immigrant initiatives: the Muslim travel ban, new limitations on refugees and asylum-seeker admissions, family separations at the border, large-scale ICE sweeps, and increased arrests and deportations.

Some on the left point to continuity in regard to the last of these: not for nothing had Obama earned the moniker "deporter-in-chief." Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests were up 42 percent in the first

eight months of the Trump administration, compared to the same period in 2016, but the numbers were even higher in 2010 and 2011, under Obama. Yet most deportations in the Obama era involved new arrivals apprehended at the border, or immigrants with serious criminal records. By contrast, under Trump ICE prioritized “internal removals” of the undocumented, often sweeping up those with no criminal records and others who had resided in the United States for many years. ICE agents became increasingly aggressive, apprehending undocumented immigrants in courthouses and outside schools, locations it had avoided under earlier administrations. Workplace raids, rare in the Obama years, were revived. Trump has also taken steps to curb *legal* immigration, for example, seeking to end “temporary protected status” for Haitians, Central Americans, and others. All these policies are relentlessly trumpeted in the president’s speeches and tweets, along with his beloved border wall proposal.

As detentions and deportations became increasingly arbitrary and unpredictable, fear and anxiety in immigrant communities spiked to levels not seen for half a century. In California, the state with the largest undocumented population as well as a much-vaunted sanctuary law (introduced immediately after Trump’s election and signed into law in 2017), “thousands exist in a cordon of terror,” as Michael Greenberg reported in the *New York Review of Books* in November. “Paranoia has infiltrated every aspect of life. Civic activity [among the undocumented], such as attending town meetings and other public events, has ground to a virtual halt.”

Not surprisingly, despite his populist rhetoric, the president is no friend to organized labor. Still, many unionists welcomed (albeit warily) his posture on trade, resonating to the critique of NAFTA and the “tough” approach to trade with China. Labor leaders also harbored hopes that Trump’s stated commitment to rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure (which soon proved to be “fake news”) would generate a raft of new union jobs. Yet there has been no retreat from the AFL-CIO’s or the Change to Win (CTW) federation’s support of immigrant rights, with the notable exception of the unions representing ICE agents and border control officers, both of which endorsed Trump in 2016 and ever since have been cheerleaders for his “zero-tolerance” immigration policies. Indeed, organized labor mobilized in support of immigrants threatened with deportation, for example in the Working Families United coalition, formed in 2017 by the Painters union, the hotel workers’ union UNITE HERE, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Teamsters, LIUNA, as well as the Bricklayers and Ironworkers. That same year the AFL-CIO developed a toolkit to assist unionists threatened with workplace immigration raids. Several individual unions launched their own training efforts to educate members about how best to respond to raids or the threat of deportation.

While most segments of the labor movement have continued to support immigrant rights, if less vocally than in earlier years, the liberal consensus on immigration policy has begun to weaken in the wake of Trump’s

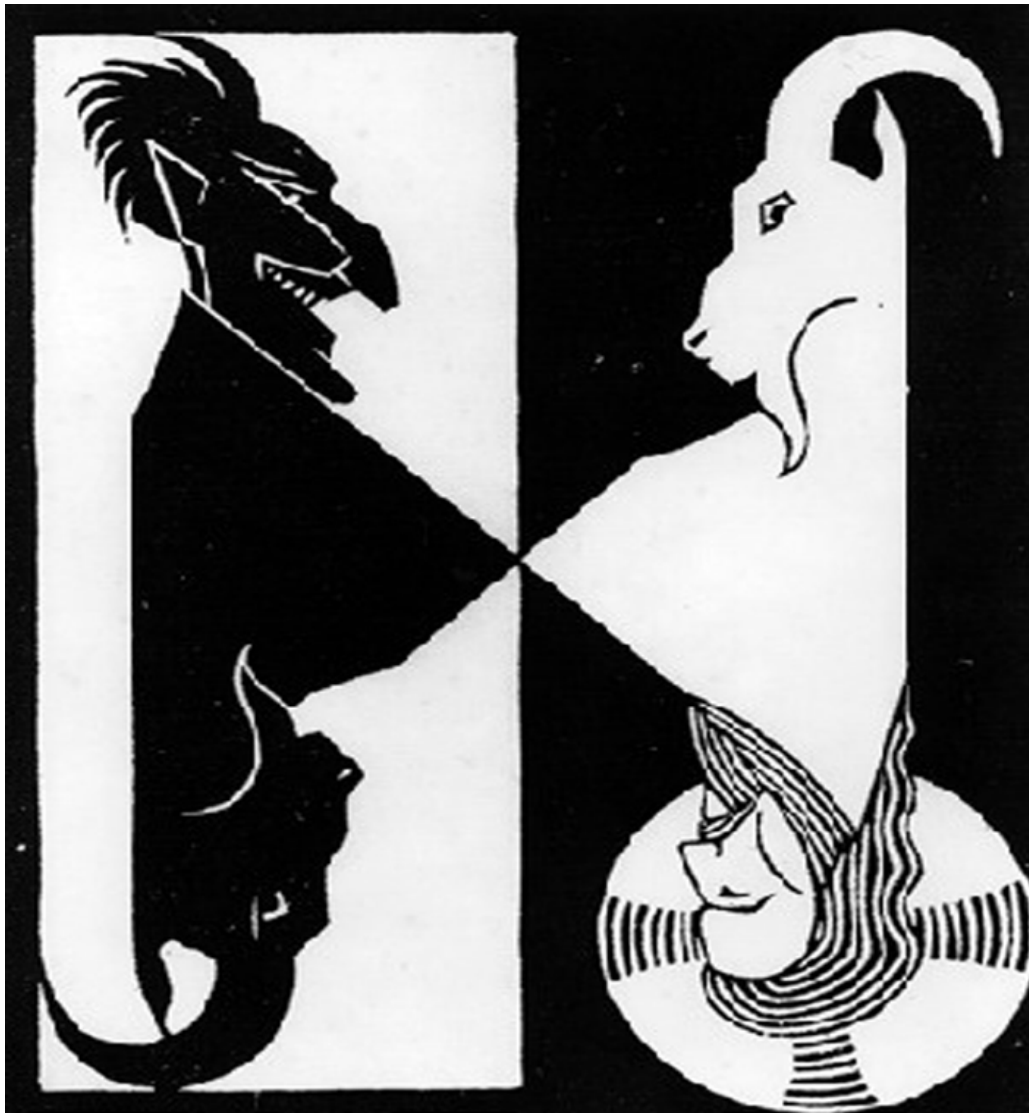
success (and that of right-wing populists in Europe) in winning working-class support by demonizing immigrants. For example, Hillary Clinton warned in an interview shortly after the midterm elections that “if we don’t deal with the migration issue it will continue to roil the body politic.” And in his 2018 book, *The Nationalist Revival*, John Judis confessed his sympathy for Trump’s nationalist agenda, arguing that low-wage immigration inevitably reduces the leverage of the U.S.-born working class. “Enormous numbers of unskilled immigrants have competed for jobs with Americans who also lack higher education and have led to the downgrading of occupations that were once middle class,” he declared. This type of left-wing nationalism is even more widespread in Europe.

Similarly, Angela Nagle’s provocative essay, “The Left Case against Open Borders,” published in the pro-Trump journal *American Affairs*, harkened back fondly to the days when organized labor embraced restrictive immigration policies, pointing out that the main supporters of open borders have been free-market ideologues like the Koch brothers, along with employers reliant on cheap labor. Historically, she added approvingly, trade unions took the opposite view:

They [unions] saw the deliberate importation of illegal, low-wage workers as weakening labor’s bargaining power and as a form of exploitation. There is no getting around the fact that the power of unions relies by definition on their ability to restrict and withdraw the supply of labor, which becomes impossible if an entire workforce can be easily and cheaply replaced. Open borders and mass immigration are a victory for the bosses.

The attack on the left for supporting “open borders” is a red herring; this stance remains on the margins of the progressive mainstream—but most progressives *do* oppose the restrictive policies favored by Trump and his acolytes. Moreover, the labor movement abandoned the perspective Nagle articulates two decades ago. Despite their painful awareness that many rank-and-file union members voted for Trump in 2016, the AFL-CIO leadership and that of the CTW federation, as well as the vast majority of their affiliates, have not wavered from the pro-immigrant rights stance they adopted at the end of the twentieth century.

There are compelling economic reasons for progressives to align with labor in this regard, as Eric Levitz has noted in *New York Magazine*. Immigration obviously does expand the labor supply, but it also creates additional economic demand; and in the context of an aging population, the immigrant influx, disproportionately comprised of prime-age workers, contributes to the fiscal sustainability of programs like Social Security and Medicare. This is the consensus among most experts, as a 2017 National Academy of Sciences report documented. But as Levitz observes, the case



The Scapegoat (Flor de Pascua), by M. C. Escher.

for restrictionism put forward by commentators like Judis and Nagle is “primarily an argument about politics, not economics,” pivoting on the susceptibility of U.S.-born workers to right-wing populist appeals.

The fact that proposals to support immigration restriction have surfaced among liberals and on the left in the wake of Trump’s success is remarkable in its own right. But Levitz makes a compelling case that adopting them would be politically disastrous for the Democratic Party and the wider progressive community. Given the seemingly irreversible demographic trends toward a majority-minority society, he declares, “The Democrats are going to be a visibly multiracial party in a browning America,” adding that on both moral and pragmatic grounds “there is no way for Democrats to avoid the liabilities of that position—they can only strive to capitalize on its benefits.”

To meet that challenge, for progressives and the labor movement alike, the most urgent task is to push back against the right-wing narrative that blames immigrants for the reversal of fortune suffered by white U.S.-born workers over the past four decades. Progressives need to promote instead a counternarrative that highlights the ways in which business strategies from the 1970s onward have reduced wages and undermined the labor movement—strategies that have been rendered invisible or irrelevant for the many U.S.-born workers who have been persuaded by Trump and his supporters to scapegoat immigrants. In a nutshell, the task is to redirect the entirely justifiable anger of those workers toward employers instead of the foreign-born.

The case that immigration was a key driver of working-class distress does seem plausible at first glance, especially in regard to timing. Not long after the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act ended four decades of highly restricted immigration, the economic status of white male non-college-educated workers, most of whom had prospered in the postwar years, began to spiral downward. In the same period, inequality surged as well.

These trends are indeed interconnected, but the line of causality runs in exactly the opposite direction from what Trump's and Judis's anti-immigrant narratives imply. Immigration was not the cause of the neoliberal economic restructuring that began in the 1970s or of the accompanying explosion of inequality and labor degradation. On the contrary, the influx of low-wage immigrants was a consequence of these developments. U.S. employers' efforts to externalize market risk through various forms of subcontracting, and at the same time to actively undermine labor unions, generated a surge in demand for low-wage labor. That, in turn, led millions of immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, to enter the bottom tier of the nation's labor market to fill "jobs Americans won't do." As I documented in my 2006 book *L.A. Story*, in many sectors immigrants entered low-wage jobs in substantial numbers only *after* pay and conditions had been degraded to such a degree that U.S.-born workers exited the impacted occupations.

The primary driver of labor migration, past and present, is economic demand. While "push" factors in sending countries do spur emigration, it materializes on a significant scale only in response to employers' search for new sources of labor. The 2008 financial crisis is revealing in this regard: as the U.S. economy imploded, and jobs in sectors like construction and manufacturing evaporated, the number of unauthorized migrants crossing the border decreased dramatically. Prior to the Great Recession, immigration grew in direct response to rising employer demand for cheap and pliable labor. Starting in the late 1970s, new business strategies drove down labor costs through expanded subcontracting, deregulation, and efforts to weaken or eliminate labor unions.

In industries like taxi driving and trucking, where deregulation led to union decline and wage cuts, as well as in deunionized construction,

manufacturing, and service industries, many U.S.-born workers voted with their feet to reject the newly degraded jobs, and then immigrants were hired to fill the vacancies. If migrants did not arrive on their own in adequate numbers to fill the demand, employers routinely sent recruiters to Mexico and other parts of the Global South to find them, often in blatant violation of immigration laws and regulations. In short, immigration was the consequence, not the cause, of declining labor standards.

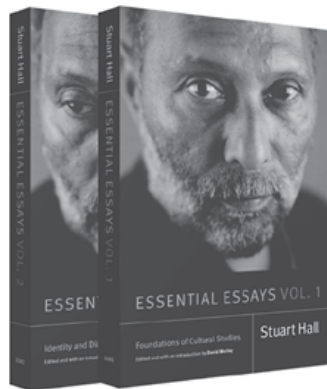
Demand for immigrant labor also expanded in the domestic and personal services sector in this period. Here the key driver was not employment restructuring and job degradation but instead a combination of demographic changes and rising income inequality. As maternal labor force participation grew, the nation's increasingly prosperous professional and managerial classes devoted a growing part of their disposable income to purchasing services from housecleaners, nannies, and eldercare providers, as well as manicurists and other "personal appearance workers." Many affluent households now included two adults with long working hours, thanks to the feminist movement's success in opening the professions and the corporate suite to upper-middle-class women in the 1970s, even as changing expectations of parenting and the aging of the population stimulated growing demand for care work inside the home. Yet in the same period, the traditional labor supply in domestic labor occupations was evaporating, as the civil rights movement opened up lower-level clerical and service jobs and other options to African-American women. Black women thus began to shun domestic work just as demand for it began to rise, leading many households to replace them with immigrant women, who were increasingly available in this period as permanent family settlement came to dominate over the earlier pattern of male-dominated circular migration.

Some of the biggest concentrations of Trump's U.S.-born white working-class supporters in 2016 were in the Rust Belt. No one can seriously suggest that immigrants should be blamed for the massive wave of plant closings that swept across the Midwest starting in the 1970s. In this context jobs were not degraded, they simply disappeared. Yet as Linda Gordon showed in her recent study of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, immigrant scapegoating does not necessarily have to be rooted in reality. Native-born "anger at displacement, blamed on 'aliens,' sometimes rested on actual experience but more often on imagination and fear stoked by demagoguery," Gordon points out. "We know this because the Klan flourished in areas with few 'aliens.'"

The right-wing anti-immigrant narrative has in effect distracted attention from the actual causes of declining working-class living standards. The white working class has every reason to be alienated and enraged by rising inequality and the disappearance of good jobs, but their anger has been profoundly misdirected. It should focus not on immigrants but on the deliberate actions of business interests to degrade formerly well-paid blue-collar

jobs and to promote public policies that widen inequality. Rather than following the lead of Judis and Nagle (fortunately still a marginal position on the left) in opportunistically jumping on the anti-immigrant bandwagon, labor and progressives hoping to regain support from the white U.S.-born workers who supported Trump in 2016 should devote their energies to shifting the public conversation in this direction.

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