

Thousands rally in New York for immigrant rights

Alan Whyte
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Tens of thousands rallied October 4 in New York City's Flushing Meadow Park to demand rights for immigrant workers. Many carried banners and signs in defense of foreign-born workers, the most popular one stating, "No human being is illegal." Unions, immigrant rights groups, churches and various student and community organizations brought delegations to the rally, while many came on their own from the surrounding heavily immigrant neighborhoods of Queens.

The demonstrators were demanding legalization of the undocumented, and full democratic rights including citizenship rights for all immigrants. They also demanded equal pay and benefits for immigrant workers. Joining the rally were 900 immigrant "freedom riders" who traveled for two weeks throughout the country on 18 buses to publicize these demands.

It is estimated that there are 30 million foreign-born workers in the US, with as many as one third of them undocumented. Employers exploit their lack of legal status to pay minimum or sub-minimum wages with no benefits and to impose intolerable working conditions.

While the crowd at Flushing Meadow turned out to protest these conditions, those who organized the rally, principally the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy, proposed no real program to carry forward their demands for equality and social justice. In many cases, the unions have accepted sweatshop conditions and poverty wages for these workers in return for dues checkoff by employers.

At the same time, the aim of the rally's union organizers was to channel the growing militancy of immigrant workers behind the Democratic Party.

In addition to union bureaucrats, as well as religious and community leaders, Democratic Party politicians

such as Representative John Lewis of Georgia and New York's City Council speaker Gifford Miller spoke to the protesters.

The remarks from the platform consisted largely of expressions of vague sympathy for the plight of immigrants. Almost no one even mentioned the war in Iraq or the attacks on civil liberties and on immigrants in particular carried out under the mantle of Bush's "war on terrorism" and the USA Patriot Act.

The WSWs interviewed several workers about the issues raised at the rally.

Winston Williams, who lives in New York City, is originally from Jamaica and is a member of Local 79 of the Laborers Union. "My local now has Latinos, blacks, Irish and whites," he said. ">From the time blacks were first living here, the struggle is continuing for human rights. Unions have collapsed since earlier times. Construction work was up until 1995, and now it is going down.

"There are big union leaders making a lot of money, while some workers are able to live a little better when they are organized. There are corporate heads in this country making a lot of money. There is a one corporate executive for a company who is also a president of a construction union local. Right now, it is money that rules."

Michael Johnston came to the US from the West Indies 15 years ago. He is a member of Local 1, representing theater stagehands. "I support immigrants being allowed in the US," he said. "Also, civil rights for better working conditions are needed for workers who have been here for years. The union gives me benefits, but I don't get enough work. Since 9/11, things have gotten tougher for immigrants and every worker. Jobs must be created."

A young immigrant worker from China told the

WSWS: “I have been a US citizen for three years. My whole family came here together. It seems that all over the world, a small group of people controls most of the resources. In the last 10 years, the Chinese government has privatized many businesses. If you are a big owner who is politically connected with the government, you can make a lot of money. China is becoming more like the US. There is racism in this country, and the police here have too much power. Some police are very corrupt. Sometimes, they harass me even though I did nothing wrong. I work for a private social service agency for Asians. All of my co-workers at the agency are here.”



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