

The implications of the immigrant demonstrations for the class struggle in America

Socialist Equality Party
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The demonstrations, strikes and boycotts by immigrant workers in cities across the United States are an indication of a sharpening of the class struggle, both in the US and internationally.

Literally millions took to the streets May 1 in cities from Los Angeles to New York, Miami to Seattle and scores of towns in between. This mass protest movement, which has been building since March, is without precedent in both its size and its national scope.

Those who demonstrated and walked off their jobs did so in defiance of warnings by President Bush as well as Democratic politicians. They also took action in the face of naked intimidation posed by recent nationwide factory raids, as well as threats of arrest and deportation by the government and violence by elements of the extreme right.

A layer of workers treated as social pariahs by the US government has suddenly emerged as a militant, potent and vocal social force.

These actions by the most oppressed and exploited section of the American working class have deep social and political roots and a far-reaching objective significance.

At the same time, they urgently pose the problems in the development of political consciousness within the working class as a whole that must be overcome.

The demonstrations have unfolded under increasingly tense and unstable political conditions within the US. Poll after poll shows the Bush administration receiving support from barely a third of the American people. What accounts for this unprecedented political collapse? Neither the mass media nor the ostensible opposition party, the Democrats, has posed any consistent or serious challenge to the White House over either the war, the wholesale assault on democratic rights or domestic policies that serve to transfer wealth from the masses of working people to the top 1 percent.

Yet, three years into the illegal war against Iraq, the actions carried out by the Bush administration, combined with an accelerating deterioration of living standards and historically unprecedented social polarization, are beginning to have a profound effect on popular consciousness.

The mass movement among immigrant workers is shaped in no small part by this shift. It has unfolded largely outside of the influence of the Democratic Party or the trade union bureaucracy, which is precisely why it has taken such a mass and explosive form. The sclerotic trade union apparatus, in alliance with the big business Democratic politicians, serves only to smother and abort genuine movements of social protest.

The growth of the immigrant workforce is only part of the radical changes that are taking place in the social composition of the working class as a whole in America. Its ranks have been vastly expanded, under conditions in which substantial layers of what were once considered part of the American "middle class" are being driven down in social status and deprived of stable employment, pensions, company-paid health care and

other basic social amenities.

This process has been accompanied by an immense widening of the gap between working people, the great majority of the population, and a financial oligarchy of CEOs, Wall Street financiers and the super-rich who monopolize an ever-greater share of the wealth created by society. While 25 years ago, CEOs were paid \$10 for every \$1 earned by an average worker, today the ratio is \$431 to \$1.

This sharp social divide is creating conditions for social upheavals in America. And the immigrant protests will undoubtedly come to be seen as the prologue to massive class battles in the center of world capitalism.

The truism that America is a "nation of immigrants" has always served to conceal the fierce conflicts and intense social contradictions that have characterized mass immigration to the US. The wave of immigrants from Europe at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century provided the main source of labor power for the explosive growth of US manufacturing. And their radicalization gave rise to the first mighty waves of struggle of the modern American working class.

The new wave of immigration will unquestionably have just as profound an effect. But it takes place under radically transformed conditions. The US is no longer an ascending capitalist power, but rather has become the world's greatest debtor nation and is resorting to global militarism in an attempt to reverse the relative decline of its position on the world markets.

Moreover, immigration today takes place in the context of vast changes in world capitalist production in which developments in computer technology, telecommunications and transportation have been utilized by transnational corporations and international banks to organize the productive process on a truly global scale.

Globally mobile capital demands the throwing open of national boundaries and the removal of all restrictions on their exploitation of labor, markets and raw materials in every corner of the globe. The result, particularly in Mexico and Central and South America, the native lands of the majority of America's undocumented workers, has been the devastation of national industries, the destruction of jobs and a catastrophic decline in living standards. These are the conditions that serve to propel immigration.

Yet, political representatives of the same US-based corporations that demand open borders for their investment whip up hysteria against working people attempting to cross the American border in search of jobs and call for the walling off and militarizing of the 2,000-mile-long frontier with Mexico.

This demand for open borders for capital and the walling up of labor is not just a policy of the US government, but is pursued in one form or another by every major capitalist power.

The political establishment in America is incapable of resolving the demands advanced by the immigrant protests in a progressive fashion.

While sections of the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy have sought to cast the protests as an emergence of a “new civil rights movement,” the reality is that those taking to the streets are posing demands of a profoundly social character, demanding their rights as workers.

Nor is the ruling elite in America about to offer the kind of limited concessions that were the product of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s—the programs identified with the “war on poverty.” For the most part, these programs have already been decimated and what remains is under attack.

The US Congress has been split over immigration “reform” by a reactionary debate over how severely immigrant workers should be punished. The House of Representatives, which has passed the only piece of legislation, has called for the undocumented to be treated as criminal felons and for walling off the border. The Senate failed to pass any bill after a right-wing Republican assault on a so-called compromise that would still have demanded that millions leave the country, while providing a protracted path to legalization for those who have been in the US the longest.

The impasse in the Senate reflects the insoluble political contradictions posed by the immigration question to America’s ruling elite. On the one hand, big business wants a steady flow of cheap and exploited labor, and, on the other, it has promoted nationalism and xenophobia, both to further its campaign of global militarism in the “war on terror” and to divide the working class at home.

The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday that state legislatures throughout the country have responded to the gridlock in Congress by passing their own anti-immigrant legislation—463 bills introduced in 43 states. Most of them call for punitive measures such as subjecting undocumented immigrants to arrest, denying them basic services as well as driver’s licenses, and ordering state and local police to check the immigration status of anyone stopped, even for a minor traffic violation.

Much has been made by the mass media about the immigrants’ embrace of the “American dream.”

There is no doubt that this massive and politically amorphous movement of protest suffers from many illusions—in the Democratic Party and the ability to pressure for reforms—as well as naivete about the nature of American society. These illusions pose real dangers and must be overcome through political struggle.

But the reality is that immigrants are participating in a deepening American nightmare. Latino soldiers have died by the hundreds in the Iraq war. Soaring gas and fuel prices and stagnant or falling wages are hitting immigrant workers just as they are every section of the working class.

It is this common interest that accounts for the hostility within the ruling elite toward the call for a nationwide “boycott” of work and stores on May 1, an action that forced the closure of a wide number of businesses, including a substantial section of the US meatpacking industry. The fear is that other sections of the working class may view this action and ask themselves, “Why can’t we do it too?”

This is what lies behind the orchestrated “backlash” against the immigrants’ actions. The most reactionary, hypocritical and politically dangerous expression of this phenomenon has come from the Bush White House itself, with the seemingly absurd whipping up of a controversy over a Spanish-language version of the National Anthem produced by a number of Latino recording stars.

Never mind that Bush himself reportedly participated on a regular basis in campaign rallies where Spanish versions of the “Star Spangled Banner” were featured, with no apparent concern. The issue was manufactured and pumped up by Republican political operatives with the aim of appealing to the right-wing xenophobic layer within the Republican Party that constitutes the administration’s bedrock political base.

The stupidity and irresponsibility of such an appeal is breathtaking. The

promotion by the US president of the concept of making English an official language—something that exists nowhere in the US Constitution—carries with it the threat of provoking the kind of intense social conflicts that, in some countries, have led to civil war.

Parallel with such backward nationalist appeals is the right-wing populist agitation conducted by disparate elements ranging from CNN commentator Lou Dobbs, who has been turned into a national political figure, to the fascistic Minutemen vigilantes and sections of the trade union bureaucracy. They all pretend that their hostility to immigrants is motivated by concern for the American working class, whose jobs are allegedly being taken away and wages depressed by the presence in America of 12 million undocumented workers.

This is a reactionary lie. The attacks on jobs, living standards and social benefits are the fault not of the immigrants, but of a global crisis of the capitalist system—an economic system that is defended by all those who are trying to turn the undocumented workers into scapegoats.

There is no way to defend any rights or past gains of the working class in America or any other country by supporting the walling off of the national economy against immigrants. The futility of such an approach is amply demonstrated by the abject failure of the official trade union movement in the US, which for decades tried to convince workers that they had a common interest with big business in defending “American jobs” against foreign companies and workers alike. The result was the shutdown of factory after factory and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, as US-based transnational corporations shifted production to Mexico, China and elsewhere, seeking ever-lower labor costs.

The working class can wage a successful struggle only if it is organized on an international basis to confront globally mobile capital. There is no viable answer to the incessant demand by employers that workers accept drastic cuts in wages or working conditions or lose their jobs to low-wage countries except a fight to unite workers internationally in a common struggle based upon an internationalist and socialist perspective.

This must be combined with the steadfast defense of the right of working people to live and work in any country they choose—including the US—with full democratic and social rights of citizenship.

It is no accident that the huge demonstrations in America follow by only weeks the outbreak of mass protests in France that brought together students, workers and immigrant youth against the attempts by the Chirac government to attack the rights of younger workers and make the working class as a whole pay for the crisis of French capitalism.

The conditions for a powerful and united offensive of the international working class against global capitalism are emerging. Globalization has not only rendered the old national reformist orientation of the trade unions impotent, it has also dramatically increased the number of workers on a world scale, while imposing upon working people in every country ever-more similar conditions.

The struggle to unite American working people with their class brothers and sisters in Europe, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere on the basis of a common socialist and internationalist policy requires an irreconcilable break with the Democratic Party. A new mass socialist movement of the working class must be built, committed to the defense of immigrants’ rights and democratic rights, as well as jobs and living standards.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2006 elections with its own candidates to lay the political foundations for the emergence of such a movement. We will wage an implacable fight in this campaign against all forms of anti-immigrant chauvinism and will seek to give political voice to the demands of immigrant workers, and to unite their struggle with those of both native-born US workers and working people all over the world.

We urge all those who support the rights of immigrants and want to advance the cause of working people as a whole to study our program,

participate in the campaign to place our candidates on the ballot and join with the SEP in the fight to build a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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