

# Los Angeles: immigrant workers protest layoffs, repression

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Over 1,000 immigrant workers and their supporters marched in Los Angeles July 29 in opposition to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policies. While the marchers were protesting the increasing use of I-9 audits and E-Verify (both means by which the government checks on the “eligibility” of workers for employment), mass firings and sweeps against the immigrant working class in industries across the country, the organizers of the protest are merely asking that fired workers be given more notice.

The march began on Alameda Avenue, in the heart of the city’s industrial belt of sweatshops that employs hundreds of thousands of workers. The vast majority of the marching workers were employees of American Apparel, a clothing manufacturer that employs 6,000 workers, 2,000 of whom are undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The protest ended with a rally at the Federal Building.

The mostly young marchers were spirited; many walked with their friends and families. The two most-heard chants were “Obama, escucha, estamos en la lucha!” and “Obama, prometiste—cumple!” (“Obama, listen, we are in struggle!” and “Obama, you promised—keep your promise!”)

The march was smaller than the several thousand that protested on April 4. The demands were also much more modest.

As opposed to the April protest, this time there was an almost complete absence of American flags. The issue has been raised by right-wing talk show hosts and other reactionary groups ever since the massive march of March 2006 in which protesters demanded full rights for immigrants. At that time one million protesters, many of them carrying their own national flags and their own spontaneous signs and slogans, flooded the streets of Los Angeles, in a demonstration that had the potential of a revolutionary explosion.

Subsequent protests, however, have been more tightly controlled. In April 2009, organizers tried to prevent marchers from accepting leaflets and newspapers from socialist groups and provided thousands of US flags for the protesters, a concession to the xenophobic right wing. The demonstration itself reflected the politics of the organizers, linked to the Democratic Party, and remained at the level of issuing appeals to President Barack Obama for a limited legalization of immigrants.

Unfortunately, the absence of the stars and stripes this time was no reflection of a left turn by the protest organizers, much less toward internationalism or class solidarity. The organizers of this event, the Hermandad General de Trabajadores Unión Internacional (General Workers Brotherhood International Union—HGTUI) and the Southern California Immigrant Coalition (SCIC), merely asked that the fired workers be given 90-day, instead of one-month, notices.

On their web site, the SCIC calls “on all immigrants and human rights organizations and supporters to DEMAND THAT OBAMA STOP THE RAMPANT I-9 AUDITS AND E-VERIFY!” The I-9 form is required for all workers and demands documentation proving eligibility to work in the US. A companion program, E-Verify, as its name implies, is a tool that employers can use for instant verification of immigration status. The SCIC

had made a similar appeal in a previous march in April (See “Thousands march in Los Angeles to support immigrant rights”).

The ICE campaign largely coincides with the profit needs of the companies involved. Last May, Overhill Farms, which manufactures frozen foods, sacked 254 undocumented full-time workers who, it claimed, were working illegally. None of the displaced workers were replaced with full-time workers. Under conditions of high levels of unemployment, employers find that they can use the power of the state to impose ever more brutal forms of exploitation on the unskilled workers, immigrant or not.

At American Apparel, layoffs have been taking place worldwide since last December. The company has carried out job cuts as a result of the economic crisis and the installation of newer equipment that makes many workers redundant. Whether they can provide adequate documentation or not, immigrant workers are suffering the same effects of the economic crisis as other workers: layoffs and reduced hours.

A recent *Los Angeles Times* article quoted Todd Slater, an industry analyst who declared that the average factory employee is “underutilized.” “This is likely to be more of a human-interest story than one affecting the ability to make enough garments,” said Slater; “it should have no impact on earnings.”

It is an open secret that Los Angeles sweatshops, textile, toy and food companies have been hiring undocumented immigrants for years. The existence of a so-called illegal workforce provides plants in Los Angeles and in many other metropolitan centers with the flexibility of dismissing its workforce without having to worry about severance pay, unemployment compensation, or any other legal mandate.

In the waning days of the Bush administration, Attorney General Michael Mukasey issued a ruling denying the constitutional right of immigrants facing deportation to legal representation. The ruling severely weakened immigrants’ ability to appeal their deportations. As a January 15 article on the World Socialist Web Site explained, “Mukasey’s ruling outlines an assembly-line system of administrative justice for immigrants, separate and unequal to that afforded to citizens, and not subject to judicial review.” (See “US Justice Department rulings target immigrants’ legal rights”)

Were it to become convenient to conduct wholesale expulsions of immigrant workers from the plants, as in the 1930s, the mechanism can be easily set in motion.

Since April the SCIC has ramped up its rhetoric. According to the organization, “Across the country tens of thousands of immigrant workers have become the target of I-9 audits and the use of E-Verify leading to mass firings. A clear attack on the working class across the country (documented or not), the Obama Administration must put a stop to the cheap scapegoating and racial profiling of Latino immigrants. This is certainly not the change we voted for, and not the immigration reform promised by President Barack Obama.” Behind this rhetorical cover, the SCIC obscures the fact that many of the organizations that compose it

enthusiastically supported the election of Obama.

In July, ICE, which is a part of the Homeland Security Department, announced that it was “launching a bold, new audit initiative by issuing Notices of Inspection (NOIs) to 652 businesses nationwide—which is more than ICE issued throughout all of last fiscal year.”

The Obama administration has continued the policies of the Bush administration; in fact, intensifying the attacks on immigrant workers. This was acknowledged by a speaker at the downtown LA Federal Building, where the march ended. He bitterly denounced the replacement of “el gobierno racista de Bush” (the racist government of Bush) by “el gobierno racista de Obama.”

The class outlook of the SCIC and of the HGTUI became transparent July 29 when, in one bizarre moment, American Apparel’s founder and CEO, Dov Charney, appeared on the stage. Charney assured the workers that “together we will win” this struggle. He referred to the clothing company’s origins in Los Angeles with 30 employees and reminded his employees, many of whom will have no jobs this week, that the company now had 10,000 workers across the world, a warning, perhaps to workers that it is futile to resist.

Both SCIC and HGTUI supported Barack Obama for president in 2008.

A Socialist Equality Party campaign team attended the protest and spoke to American Apparel employees at the rally.

Glenda, Maria, Guilman and Marvin are immigrant workers employed by American Apparel in Los Angeles, California, who have received termination notices from the company. They spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about what brought them to last week’s protest.

Glenda: “We came to this march so that everyone can see that everything that is going on is unjust. More than 2000 workers at American Apparel received letters from the company. The letters give us one month’s notice and tells us that we are being fired. The company blames ICE for the sackings. We are being laid off in stages. Some have one more week, others have two weeks, and others have one more month, depending on when they received the notice. The same thing is going on in other factories in the area, such as Farmer John’s.

“All we are demanding today is a 90-day notice, something that we are legally entitled to. If we get the 90 days, then we can see what happens. Many of us have worked for years in the US. The fair thing is that the government and the company gave us a work permit and allow us to become legal.

“All three of us here have gone to all the marches, including last year’s million-person protest. Nothing has been gained. I don’t know what more to do. I believe we all deserve to be made legal. Most of us protesting here from American Apparel have many years working here. The unity of all the struggles of the working class is an ideal that we need to fight for. We have to begin by organizing ourselves and then reach out to the other sections of the working class.

“Many of us have children whom we support with no help from the government because we are denied even those programs that we have a right to. Others have left our children behind in Mexico, Guatemala or other countries and support them from our work at the plant.”

Guilman: “I work as an assistant at American Apparel, delivering material to the operators. We had good jobs at American Apparel, better than in other factories. A production worker can make \$110 per day by putting out a quota of 2400 tee-shirts. If the quota is not met, the job pays a minimum of \$72. This is hard work, even hard for experienced workers. Most of the workers laid off are young workers like me; this is because the majority of the undocumented are young. The sackings are bound to have an impact on the company.

“The people who are coming in to apply for our jobs have no idea what the job involves. Many of them quit right away. A few are already collecting pensions and have been forced return to work because their checks don’t cover all their needs.”

Maria: “The least I have made in one day at the plant is \$80 and the most is \$110. I do quality control. For me the quota was 2500 tee shirts each day. This is exhausting work. They treat us badly because we are immigrants.

“I have two children in Guatemala, ages 9 and 4, whom I have not seen since I came to the United States to work. I stay in touch over the phone. They depend on me, and I miss them very much.”

Marvin is from Guatemala. He has worked at American Apparel for five years.

“The ICE has arrived to check the paperwork that the company has and make a decision about firing the workers that don’t have documents. They are destroying this dream that so many have of being able to work for this company. By next week, many workers will be let go for lack of papers.

“Of course, we’re not going to stay at the company; because if they don’t let us go, there will be a big lawsuit, and if they don’t get rid of us, they will be subject to certain fines. The only thing we ask is an extension longer than they gave the company. Because they gave us a limit of 30 days, but we want at least that they give us two more months to work there.”

Asked what he would do if given the extension, Marvin replied: “We would have to see how to fight, and we have to keep fighting as long as we can, so that the government sees that we are needed.

“I don’t know much about politics in this country, but many had hope in the president, but unfortunately it’s the opposite. I think that the whole government, when they want to get into office they offer a lot of things, and in the end, they say one thing, they do another, because it’s not true what they say they’re going to do.

“We come to this country to succeed and to work. Not to ask that the government maintain us for a while and then we’ll work. The only thing that we want is to work. We don’t want anything given to us. Our families depend on us, on our effort in this country. And if we don’t have work, then unfortunately they’re going to lack the financial help we send them.”



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