

# Undocumented immigrants make up 10 percent of California's workforce

Norisa Diaz  
5 November 2014

California's labor force contains around 1.85 million undocumented immigrants, or one in ten workers in the state, according to a recent report by the California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC). These workers live in constant fear of deportation, are paid low wages, and are often subjected to unsafe working conditions. Half of the undocumented workers in the California labor force have been in the US for ten years or more.

The CIPC report noted that "undocumented immigrants in California alone contribute about \$130 billion of California's GDP [Gross Domestic Product]—a figure greater than the entire GDP of the neighboring state of Nevada. 44 percent of Californians speak a language other than English at home. Throughout California, immigrants speak more than 103 languages."

Immigrant employment, both documented and undocumented, dominates large sectors of industry throughout the state. The report found that, "in terms of occupations, immigrants make up the majority of those involved in farming, fishing, and forestry (80 percent), grounds cleaning and maintenance (62 percent), production (57 percent), construction (42 percent), food preparation and serving (42 percent), transportation (42 percent), and personal care and service (37 percent) jobs." Undocumented immigrants are disproportionately represented in the farming (38 percent), construction (14 percent), production, service, and transportation industries.

University of Southern California (USC) sociology professor Manuel Pastor, a contributor to the report and co-director of USC's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the findings portray an immigrant population "deeply embedded in the labor market, neighborhoods and social fabric of the state."

California has the eighth-largest economy in the world with a gross state product of \$2.05 trillion. The state is home to some of the largest urban centers in the country, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Immigrant workers, defined as workers who hold green cards, visas, or residency status, or are undocumented, represent more than a third of the state's labor force (35 percent) and a quarter of its residents (27 percent). California contains the highest concentration of immigrants in the US.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) reported that "Los Angeles County has the highest number of undocumented residents (nearly 900,000) of any area in the state, followed by Orange County (nearly 300,000), San Diego County (close to 180,000) and Santa Clara County (more than 170,000)."

A 2013 PPIC survey showed that the vast majority (76 percent) of Californians held the belief that "illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years should be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status."

As a third of California's workforce, immigrants create immense societal wealth. This layer of workers is painfully and systematically subjected to abuses in the form of unpaid work, threats of deportation by employers, and a lack of access to legal recourse. Employers take advantage of their vulnerable status, which facilitates their hyperexploitation.

A telling example of the gravity of their condition is provided by a recent report by the US Labor Department's wage and hour division of San Francisco that documents a company in Silicon Valley, Electronics for Imaging, paying a group of immigrant Indian workers wages of \$1.21 an hour.

Although state authorities sought to portray the development as an aberration, entire sectors of

California's economy are characterized by sweatshop conditions. California farm workers are among the most exploited: onion producers often pay a family of three a total of \$60 for a full day, or \$20 per worker. Field laborers are told to consider themselves lucky if they make \$5.40 an hour.

According to the "supplemental poverty measure" by the US Census Bureau, an alternative method for determining true poverty, California has risen to the top of state rankings with 23.4 percent poverty.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and ongoing global recession, nearly a quarter of the undocumented workers in California were laid off, they and their families detrimentally impacted on this or that side of the border. Their living standards, like the vast majority of working people around the world, continue to decline, poverty rates and unemployment soar, all while each year the number of billionaires around the globe continues to exponentially increase.

Statistics taken in March 2013 showed that nearly 11.3 million undocumented people reside in the US, a substantial decrease compared to the peak just before the global recession in 2007, when the undocumented population was 12.2 million.

The report suggests that businesses would do well to access immigrants' "untapped labor market potential," stating, "immigrants are more likely to be over-skilled (24 percent) than native born workers (17 percent)—that is, holding a Bachelor's degree or higher and working in an unskilled job. Immigrants account for 39 percent of all residents with a Ph.D degree."

The report adds, "recent deportations of the undocumented not only fragment families and neighborhoods but also deprive many productive industries in the region of much needed workers." Based on this observation, the report concludes that "immigrant advocates are urging the Obama administration to emulate the example set by California and provide deportation relief to all undocumented residents."

Such appeals to the venal profit interests of major corporations, and the big-business parties that represent them, in the hopes that they will better the conditions of undocumented immigrants, are futile. Major corporations are perfectly happy to have their workforces—and the workforces of smaller companies they contract with—be constantly in fear of deportation,

which allows them to drive down wages and subject workers to ever-worsening living conditions.

These are the circumstances in which the Obama administration deported a record 438,421 people last year, the highest number of annual deportations in US history, according to official figures published by the Department of Homeland Security last month.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**