

The Fire This Time Debating Strategy in the Struggle for Immigrant Rights

by William I. Robinson

It is the communities of poor immigrant workers and their families who swell our cities and rural towns – to whom we must turn to reverse the anti-immigrant onslaught.

Draconian legislation introduced into the US Senate triggered mass protests by millions of US immigrants and supporters in Spring 2006. Known as the Sensenbrenner bill, for the name of the sponsoring senator, it would have criminalized both undocumented immigrants and their supporters. The bill underscored the extent to which elites in the United States, as elsewhere in global society, are willing to go to maintain a super-exploitable and super-controlled army of immigrant labor for the new global economy.

The uprising in protest over the Sensenbrenner bill, however, frightened the ruling class. A mass immigrant rights movement is at the cutting edge of the struggle against transnational corporate exploitation. Granting full citizenship rights to the tens of millions of immigrants in the United States would undermine the division of the US—and by extension, the global—working class into immigrants and citizens. That division is a central component of the new class relations of global capitalism, predicated on a casualized and “flexible” mass of workers who can be hired and fired at will, are de-unionized, and face precarious work conditions, job instability, a rollback of benefits, and downward pressures on wages.

The mass protests of Spring 2006 helped defeat the Sensenbrenner bill, but also sparked an escalation of state repression and racist nativism and fuelled the neo-fascist anti-immigrant movement. The backlash has involved, among other things, stepped-up raids on immigrant workplaces and communities, mass deportations, an increase in the number of federal immigration enforcement agents, the deputizing of local police forces as enforcement agents, the further militarization of the US-Mexico border, anti-immigrant hysteria in the mass media, and the introduction at local, state, and federal levels of a slew of discriminatory anti-immigrant legislative initiatives.

In the face of what can only be described as a terror campaign against immigrant communities, a split occurred. In simplified terms, the more “moderate” or liberal wing of the leadership pursued a strategy of seeking allies in the halls of power and limiting mass mobilization to just pressuring elites to open up space at the table for the Latino/a establishment, while the more radical, grassroots-oriented wing insisted on building a mass movement for immigrant rights and social justice from the ground up.



photo: National Immigrant Solidarity Network



photo: deletetheborder.org

The liberal camp has sought allies in Congress, among the Democrats, organized labor, and mainstream civil rights and public advocacy organizations, to negotiate more favorable immigrant reform legislation. This camp has been willing to sacrifice the interests of some immigrants in order to win concessions from mainstream allies. Sacrifices include forsaking full legalization for all immigrants in exchange for dubious “paths to citizenship,” and to compromise over such issues as “guest workers programs,” which have been condemned as indentured servitude and have been shown to place the labor movement in a more vulnerable position.

The radical grassroots camp was not against lobbying or attempting to penetrate the halls of power, but insisted on prioritizing a permanent mass movement from below that subordinates alliances with liberals to the interests of the disenfranchised majority of immigrant workers and their families. This camp has also insisted on the need to link the immigrant rights movement more openly and closely with other popular, labor and resistance struggles around the world for global justice.

These distinct strategies represent, in the broader analysis, two different class projects within the multi-class community of immigrants and their supporters: the former, those middle class strata who aspire to remove racist and legal impediments to their own class condition; the latter, a mass immigrant working class that faces not just racism and legal discrimination but also, the acute labor exploitation and survival struggles imposed on them by a rapacious global capitalism.

The strategic challenge is how to achieve the hegemony of the mass worker base within the movement. The expanding crisis of global capitalism opens up grave dangers – for immigrants and for all of humanity – but also opens up opportunities. It is not to the Democratic Party or to the halls of establishment power, but to the mass base of this movement – the communities of poor immigrant workers and their families who swell our cities and rural towns – to whom we must turn to reverse the anti-immigrant onslaught.