

Axis of Global Inequality

Native and Immigrant Workers

by William I. Robinson

The division of the global labor force into immigrants and citizens is a major new axis of inequality worldwide. Securing a politically and economically suitable supply of labor has been a major challenge for capital throughout its 500-year history. In earlier epochs this was accomplished through such institutions as the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism or the imposition of rigid caste systems. In this new epoch of globalization, transnational capital is becoming dependent upon increasing flows of immigrant workers who are denied the rights of citizenship.

The late 20th century began a period of massive new migrations worldwide. A low-end estimate by the United Nations placed the number of immigrant workers in 2005 at some 200 million, double the number from 25 years earlier. As countries and regions have integrated into global capitalism, hundreds of millions of people have been uprooted from the land, expelled from national economies and thrust onto an increasingly globalized labor market. In other words, the transnational circulation of capital induces the transnational circulation of labor.

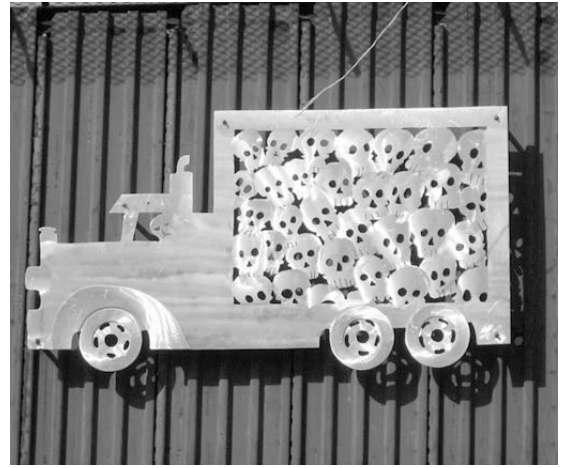
Supplying global capital with immigrant labor is now a multibillion dollar industry. Globally-organized networks of “migration merchants,” or usurious middlemen, provide a full range of legal and illegal services needed for migration, including the supply of passports, visas, work permits, cash advances, safe houses, above ground and clandestine transport, border crossing by coyotes, and employment opportunities in countries of destination, all for fees that can add up to tens of thousands of dollars and may place the transnational migrant in a situation of indentured servitude for many years. Once they arrive at their destinations, undocumented immigrants join the ranks of a super-exploitable labor force available for transnational corporations, local employers, and native

middle classes. Most people associate these new “untouchables” with the United States and Western Europe. But the use of immigrant labor goes beyond the North-South divide. Intense transnational corporate activity, wherever it takes place in the new global economy— from the factories along China’s southern coastal belt, to the South African mines and farms, the Middle East oil meccas, and Costa Rica’s service industry— becomes a magnet drawing in immigrant workers. And wherever these workers end up they face the same conditions: relegation to low-paid, low status jobs, the denial of labor rights, political disenfranchisement, state repression, racism, bigotry, and nativism.

The super-exploitation of an immigrant workforce would not be possible if that workforce had the same civil, political and labor rights as citizens, if it did not face the insecurities and vulnerabilities of being undocumented or “illegal.” It is the status of being non-citizen/undocumented, and therefore deportable, that transnational capital and local elites must reproduce if they want to assure a controllable super-exploited labor force. It is crucial to see, therefore, that state controls over immigrant labor and the denial of civil, political, and other citizenship rights to immigrant workers are intended not to prevent but to control the transnational movement of labor and to lock that labor into a situation of permanent insecurity and vulnerability.

In sum, the maintenance and strengthening of state controls over transnational labor creates the conditions for “immigrant labor” as a distinct category of labor in relation to capital. The creation of this distinct category (“immigrant labor”) becomes central to the global capitalist economy, replacing earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labor worldwide. The struggle of immigrant workers is therefore at the cutting edge of popular struggles worldwide against the depredations of global capitalism.

William I. Robinson is Professor of Sociology, Global and International Studies, and Latin American Studies, at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His latest book, Latin America and Global Capitalism, will be published in Fall 2008.



One of several pieces of art used in this issue that appear on the US/Mexico border fence in Nogales Mexico
photos: Jim Tarbell

Transnational capital is becoming dependent upon increasing flows of immigrant workers who are denied the rights of citizenship.



graphic: Kjersten Jeppesen

