

**Labor Organizing among Mexican-Born Workers in the U.S.:
Recent Trends and Future Prospects**

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Summary:

This paper surveys unionization patterns and other workplace-oriented organizing among Mexican-born workers. Drawing on U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) data, I review and analyze the patterns of union membership among Mexican-born workers over the decade from 1994-2004. There is no systematic source of data on the range of organizing efforts that do not involve formal unionization, but the paper includes some discussion of such activity as well.

The *absolute number* of Mexican-born and foreign-born union members grew over the past decade, yet the unionized *proportion* of each group declined. This decline was disproportionately large for the Mexican-born, and especially for non-citizens. That the Mexican-born population includes a large proportion of relative newcomers helps explain the decline in their unionization rate, since recently arrived immigrants are less likely to be union members than their more settled compatriots. Another factor is the increased geographic dispersion of immigration in recent years, especially the declining share of Mexican-born workforce in states like Illinois and California, where union density is high, and the growing share located in those where density is low. Even with this dispersion, California accounted for over half of the nation's Mexican-born union members in 2004 (down from 60% in 1994).

Survey data suggest that immigrants, and Latinos in particular, are more positive in their attitude toward unionism than most native-born workers (with the exception of African-Americans). This is reflected in the wave of high-profile immigrant organizing campaigns that emerged in the U.S. during the 1990s. But these campaigns have yielded relatively small numbers of union members. In the labor market as a whole, pro-union attitudes do not necessarily translate into union membership under the U.S. system of exclusive representation. Instead, the primary determinant of an individual's union (or nonunion) status is the sector or occupation in which she or he is employed. Unionism is extremely unevenly distributed across sectors and occupations, and immigrants tend to be underrepresented in the most unionized sectors (such as government employment).

Alongside union efforts to recruit immigrants, a variety of community-based organizations have emerged during the past fifteen years with a focus on economic justice issues. Some of these organizations have close ties to organized labor, while others are entirely independent. Their advocacy for low-wage workers – a group that typically includes Mexican-born and other foreign-born Latinos – has led many of these organizations to focus explicitly on immigrant workplace rights, especially for domestic workers and day laborers with little or no access to conventional unionism. Meanwhile, Mexican (and other) hometown associations that began as largely apolitical groups have been increasingly drawn into the world of workplace advocacy and political mobilization. And labor unions, especially in California, have been highly effective in mobilizing immigrants into electoral politics in the 1990s.

Resumen

Este trabajo discute los patrones de sindicalización y otras formas de organización laboral entre trabajadores nacidos en México y que laboran en los Estados Unidos. Su base informativa es el Estudio General de la Población Actual (*Current Population Survey*, CPS) de los Estados Unidos, del cual he revisado y analizado los patrones de membresía sindical entre trabajadores nacidos en México para el período comprendido entre 1994 y 2000. Aunque en lo relativo a esfuerzos organizativos informales la información no es sistemática, este trabajo también discute ese tipo de actividades.

Si bien en términos absolutos aumentó la población sindicalizada que había nacido en México y también en el extranjero, en términos *proporcionales*, el número de trabajadores sindicalizados disminuyó en ambos casos. Para los mexicanos, en particular, la proporción fue sumamente elevada, sobre todo entre quienes no eran ciudadanos estadounidenses. Ello se entiende, en parte, porque entre los trabajadores nacidos en México figura una gran cantidad de recién llegados, que no se inclinan tanto a sindicalizarse como sus compatriotas más arraigados en el país. Otro factor que incide en esta situación es la creciente y marcada dispersión de la inmigración durante los últimos años. En estados como California e Illinois, donde prevalecen altos niveles de sindicalización, ha disminuido la fracción de la fuerza laboral que es oriunda de México. Y al revés: en aquellos estados que acusan bajos niveles de sindicalización, ha aumentado la proporción de trabajadores nacidos en México. Aún así, en 2004 California presentaba más de la mitad de los trabajadores sindicalizados que habían nacido en México, proporción que, por otra parte, es menor a la que había registrado diez años antes: 60%.

La información obtenida indica que los inmigrantes, y en particular los latinos, suelen tener una actitud más positiva ante la sindicalización que aquellos trabajadores han nacido en los Estados Unidos (con excepción de los afroestadounidenses). Esto se expresó en la gran ola de campañas que hubo en el país durante los noventa para promover la organización de los trabajadores inmigrantes. Sin embargo, dichas campañas dieron pocos frutos en materia de sindicalización. En el mercado laboral estadounidense la postura en favor de la sindicalización no necesariamente se traduce en una sindicalización de hecho, debido a que impera un régimen de representación exclusiva. El factor que determina si alguien se sindicaliza o no es el tipo de sector ocupacional en el que trabaja. De hecho, la distribución del sindicalismo en Estados Unidos es muy dispareja. Varía considerablemente, según el sector y la ocupación, y los trabajadores inmigrantes suelen estar subrepresentados en la mayoría de los sectores laborales sindicalizados (como, por ejemplo, en el gobierno).

Junto con el esfuerzo desplegado por los sindicatos para reclutar inmigrantes, en los últimos 15 años también han surgido diversas organizaciones de carácter comunitario centradas en asuntos de justicia económica. Algunas de estas organizaciones están estrechamente relacionadas con los organismos sindicales, pero otras no, y operan de manera autónoma con respecto a estos últimos. La labor de defensoría que dichas organizaciones han realizado en favor de trabajadores de bajos ingresos (grupo que suele incluir a gente nacida en México y también en América Latina) las ha llevado a centrarse explícitamente en los derechos del trabajador inmigrante en su sitio de trabajo, sobre todo para trabajadores domésticos y eventuales, quienes suelen no tener acceso a la sindicalización convencional. Mientras tanto, las organizaciones que han surgido en torno

a las localidades de origen de los inmigrantes (bien sean mexicanos o de otros países) y que comenzaron siendo apolíticas, se han ido involucrando cada vez más en el mundo de la defensoría de los derechos en el sitio de trabajo y de las movilizaciones políticas. Mientras que los sindicatos, sobre todo en California, fueron sumamente efectivos durante los noventa movilizand o involucrando a inmigrantes dentro de la política electoral.

Introduction

Labor organizing among Mexican and other Latino immigrants in the U.S. took off in the 1990s. Among union and community leaders as well as outside observers, the once-conventional wisdom that immigrants – especially the undocumented – were “unorganizable” (see Delgado 1993) was replaced by its opposite during this period. Many labor leaders now became convinced – thanks to such high-profile organizing successes as the Los Angeles Justice for Janitors campaign (see Waldinger et al 1998) – that foreign-born workers were *more* receptive to unionism than their native-born counterparts. In recent years, union organizers have increasingly targeted the large and growing immigrant workforce in their recruitment drives, and also have engaged in extensive political mobilization efforts in immigrant communities.

At the national level, organized labor has become a major force in legislative and political efforts on behalf of immigrant rights. In February 2000, the AFL-CIO endorsed a new amnesty for undocumented workers and announced that it now opposed the employer sanctions policy (embodied in U.S. immigration law since 1986) that it had previously supported. This shift helped galvanize a renewal of legislatively-oriented immigration reform efforts, which steadily gained momentum until September 11, 2001, when they came to a sudden halt. Two years later, in the fall of 2003, a high-profile labor-sponsored initiative, the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride, sought to get the legal

reform movement back on track, again positioning unions as a key ally of the immigrant rights movement.

Paralleling yet distinct from these developments, a vibrant immigrant-focused “worker center” movement, as well as a variety of day laborers’ organizations and other immigrant workplace rights advocacy groups, became increasingly visible during the 1990s. Immigrant hometown associations (HTAs) have also become more engaged in labor issues in recent years, although for them the workplace remains a secondary focus, they increasingly work in coalition with labor groups on immigrant rights.

Thus in the waning years of the 20th century, a variety of immigrant organizing campaigns, many of which had a grassroots component, transformed both the perception and the reality of the relationship of foreign-born workers to the labor movement. The geographical center of this activity has been California, but it also has emerged in other parts of the U.S. on a smaller scale. This new wave of immigrant organizing is not exclusively focused on the Mexican-born population, but both the large size of that population and the fact that so much of the recent activity has been based in California means Mexican-born workers have been central to these developments.

This paper surveys unionization patterns and other workplace-oriented organizing among Mexican-born workers. Drawing on U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) data, I review and analyze the patterns of union membership among Mexican-born workers over the past decade. (The CPS did not include questions about place of birth until 1994, so the analysis focuses on the period 1994 to 2004, the most recent year for which data are available.) There is no systematic source of data on the range of organizing efforts

that do not involve formal unionization, but the paper includes some discussion of such activity as well.

*Unionization Patterns Among Mexican-born Workers*¹

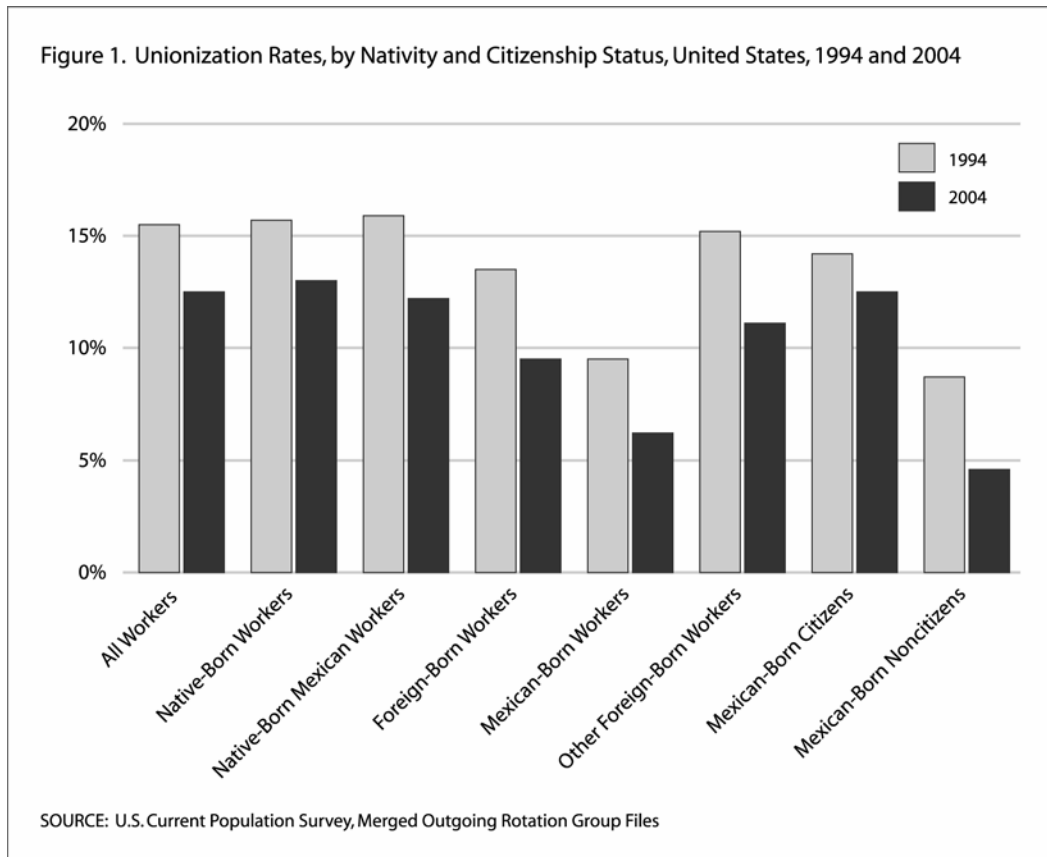
Unionization of immigrants generally, and Mexican-born workers in particular, has grown substantially over recent years. The CPS data indicate that there were 296,300 Mexican-born union members in the U.S. in 1994, or 1.8% of all the nation's union members; this figure rose to about 360,500 in 2004, or 2.3% of all U.S. union members. (The trend is similar for the immigrant population as a whole: the number of foreign-born union members grew from 1.4 million in 1994 to 1.7 million a decade later; increasing the foreign-born share of the nation's union members from 8.4% to 11.1%.)

However, immigrants remain underrepresented among the nation's union members, relative to other population groups, and this is especially the case for Mexican-born workers, whose unionization rate is only half the average for all U.S. workers. In 2004, 12.5% of all U.S. workers were union members, but the figure was only 9.5% for foreign-born workers, and only 6.2% for Mexican-born workers. Moreover, as Figure 1 shows, the gap in unionization rates between Mexican-born workers and their U.S.-born counterparts increased over the 1994-2004 period.

At least three separate trends intersected to produce this outcome:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all the findings reported in this section of the paper are based on the author's analysis of the 1994 and 2004 CPS Outgoing Rotation Group data for civilian employed wage and salary workers aged 16 and over. The sample definition and weighting procedures are identical to those described in Hirsch and Macpherson 2005. Thanks to Galo Falchettiore and Claudia Solari for assistance with the data analysis, and to Rebecca Frazier for her help in preparing the graphics.

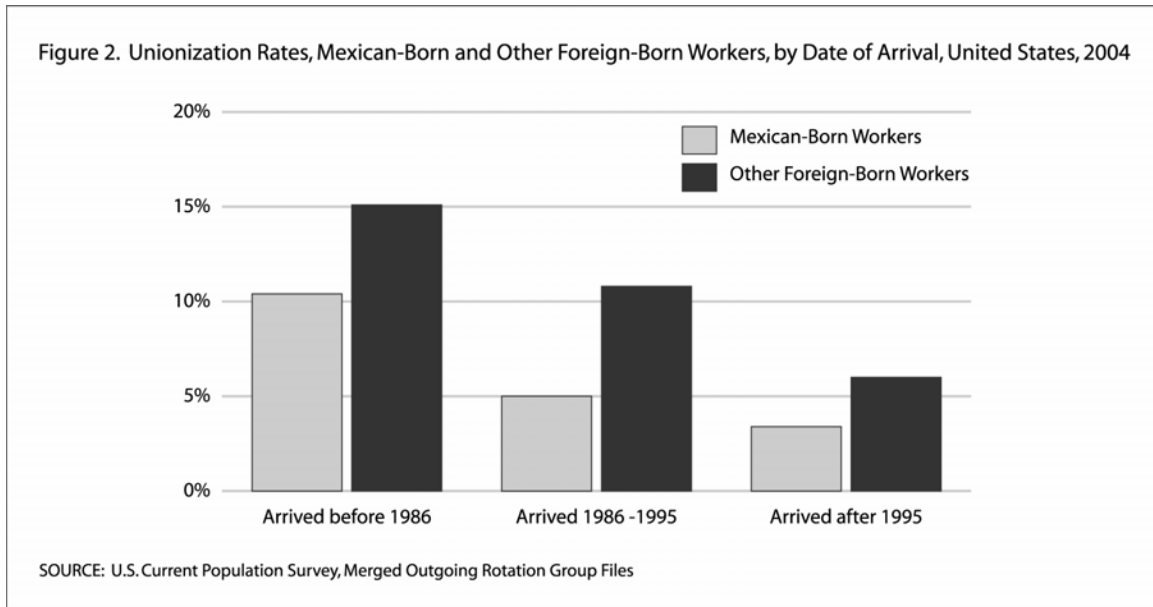
- Overall, U.S union density declined in this period, from 15.5% in 1994 to 12.5% in 2004.² The decline was particularly severe in the private sector, where most foreign-born workers are employed (as detailed below). This is one reason that, even though the *absolute number* of Mexican-born and foreign-born union members grew over



the decade, as noted above, the unionized *proportion* of each group declined. This decline was greater for the foreign-born than for other groups, as Figure 1 shows, and it was disproportionately large for the Mexican-born. Native-born Mexican-American workers’ unionization rate also fell slightly more relative to the rate for other native-born workers. Among the Mexican-born, non-citizens experienced the sharpest decline over this period, from what were already unusually low unionization rates.

² Here the term “union density” is used interchangeably with “unionization rate”; both terms denote the proportion of the workforce made up of union members in a given population group or geographical unit.

- A second trend affecting unionization rates for both Mexican-born and foreign-born workers was the growth in the proportion of *recent* immigrants (who are less likely to be union members than more settled immigrants) among both groups. As Massey et. al. (2002) argue, although the explicit aim of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was to restrict immigration, it produced the opposite result, especially in the case of Mexicans. Indeed, over the 1994-2004 period, the proportion of the U.S. labor force comprised of Mexican-born workers nearly doubled, from 2.9% to 4.7%. The overall share of foreign-born workers also grew, although somewhat less rapidly: from 9.7% in 1994 to 14.6% in 2004. As Figure 2 shows, unionization rates are much higher among immigrants who have been in the U.S. longer than among those who are relative newcomers. In the case of the Mexican-born, the 2004 unionization rate for those who arrived before 1986 was more than double that for more recent arrivals. A less extreme variant of the same pattern can be seen for other immigrants as well. For those who arrived in the U.S. before 1986, the unionization rate was 10.4% in 2004 for the Mexican-born, only slightly below the overall unionization rate of 12.5%; and for non-Mexican immigrants who arrived in that period the 15.1% unionization rate was actually *above* the overall average. The fact that the Mexican-born population includes such a large proportion of relative newcomers, then, helps explain the decline in their *rate* of unionization over the past decade, despite the simultaneous rise in the *number* of Mexican-born union members. The same anomaly is evident (in less extreme form) for non-Mexican immigrants.



- The third key trend affecting Mexican-born workers’ unionization rates is closely related to the second, namely, their increased geographic dispersion in recent years. The most important element here is the declining share of the nation’s Mexican-born workforce based in states like Illinois and California, where union density is high, and the growing share located in those where density is low (the extreme case is North Carolina, which has lower density than any other state).

Table 1 shows the change in the geographic distribution of the Mexican-born workforce for all states with at least 2% of all Mexican-born workers in 2004, alongside union density data for those states for 1994 and 2004. With the exception of New York, all the states that attracted a growing share of Mexican-born workers between 1994 and 2004 had union density below the national average. During the same period, moreover, the proportion of Mexican-born workers in highly unionized states declined. Particularly consequential was the decline in the proportion of all Mexican-born workers located in California, which fell from 53.8 to 35.1% between 1994 and 2004.

Table 1. Share of Mexican-born Workforce and Union Density, Selected States, 1994 and 2004.

State	Share of U.S. Mexican-born Workers		Union Density	
	1994	2004	1994	2004
California	53.8%	35.1%	17.9%	16.5%
Texas	19.8%	19.3%	7.0%	5.0%
Arizona	3.4%	6.5%	7.9%	6.3%
Illinois	8.9%	6.2%	19.9%	16.8%
Georgia	1.8%	3.3%	8.0%	6.4%
North Carolina	0.5%	3.2%	5.2%	2.7%
Colorado	0.5%	2.5%	10.9%	8.4%
New York	1.2%	2.2%	28.9%	25.3%
Florida	3.0%	2.2%	8.2%	6.0%
Other States	7.2%	19.6%	16.1%	12.7%
<i>U.S. Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>15.5%</i>	<i>12.5%</i>

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Current Population Survey, Merged Outgoing Rotation Group Files.

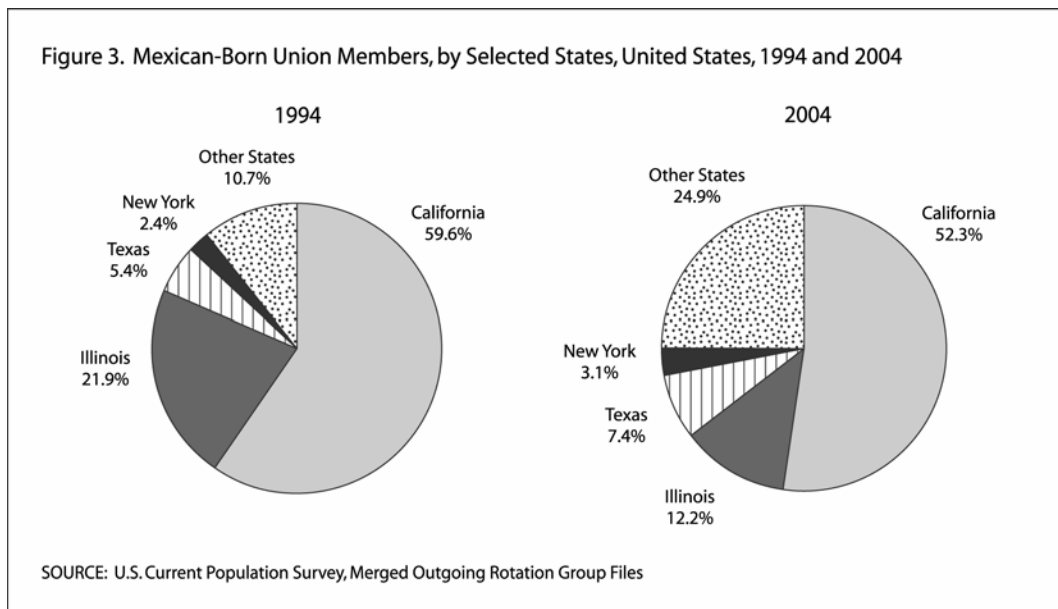
California is not only the nation's most populous state but also, with its relatively high level of union density, accounts for a larger share of total U.S. union membership (15.4%) than any other state. The state's role is even more important for immigrants: 30.4% of all foreign-born union members in the U.S. lived in California in 2004, and as Figure 3 shows, in 2004, *more than half (52.3%) of all Mexican-born union members in the U.S. were located in California!* In 1994, the figure was even higher (59.6%); the decline (reflecting the increased geographical dispersion of Mexican immigrants) would have been even greater had union density in California not been relatively stable over this period, compared to many other parts of the U.S. (see Milkman and Rooks 2003).

A more modest version of the same dynamic involves Illinois, another highly unionized state with a large Mexican-born population. Illinois – where, as Table 1 shows, union density was even higher than in California – accounted for 12.2% of all Mexican-born union members in 2004, sharply down from 21.9% ten years before. Texas, despite far lower union density, was home to 7.4% of all the nation's Mexican-born union members in 2004, due primarily to that state's huge (and relatively stable)

share of the Mexican-born workforce. By contrast, New York, the nation’s second most populous state and the one with the highest union density, with a relatively small (but growing) share of the Mexican-born workforce, was home to only 3.1% of all Mexican-born U.S. union members in 2004.

Sectoral and Occupational Patterns of Mexican-born Unionization

In the U.S., with its peculiar (in global terms) industrial relations regime based on a winner-take-all system of exclusive representation, individual workers seldom are able



to choose whether or not to become union members. Instead, in most cases, union or non-union status is determined primarily by a worker’s specific location in the employment structure. A pro-union worker who is employed in a non-union unit is rarely able to become a union member, unless he or she manages to bring into being a successful campaign to unionize the entire unit. Conversely, if an individual is hired into an employment unit which was unionized at some previous point in time (and has remained

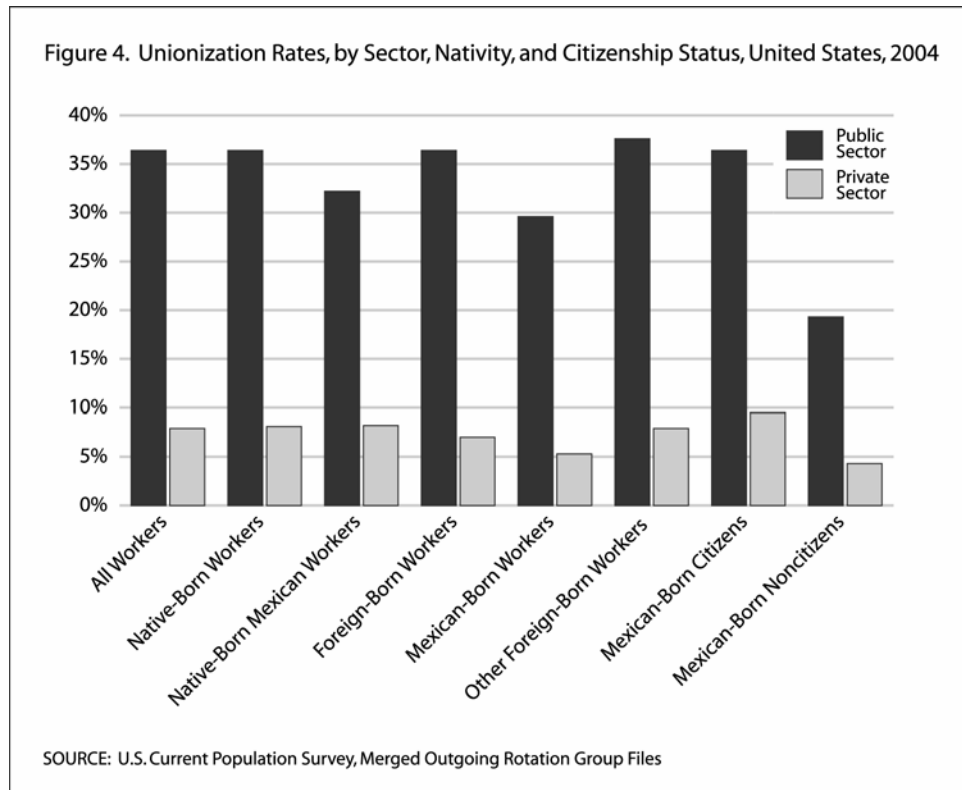
unionized), he or she will probably become a union member, regardless of personal preferences.³

Thus the low unionization rate for immigrants generally, and Mexican-born workers in particular, reveals little about their potential interest in unionism. Indeed, attitudinal data, while fragmentary, suggest that Latino workers' receptivity to unionism is relatively strong. (There are no attitudinal data available for the Mexican-born specifically.) In the 1994 National Representation and Participation Survey, for example, 51 percent of Latino respondents nationwide (regardless of nativity) who were not union members indicated that they would vote for a union if a representation election were held in their workplaces, compared to 35 percent of non-Latinos.⁴ Other studies also have found relatively strong pro-union attitudes among Latino workers, regardless of immigrant status (for an early review see DeFreitas 1993: 289, 293). Although Latinos are not quite as pro-union as African Americans, both groups are consistently more positive toward unionism than whites. And in a 2001-02 statewide survey of California workers, 67 percent of nonunion Latino respondents indicated that they would vote for unionization, double the rate for nonunion Anglo respondents (33 percent). Only African-Americans had stronger pro-union preferences (74 percent) in this survey.

³ In a "union shop," union membership is automatic after a short probationary period, except where there is an "escape clause" in the union contract; in an "open shop," union membership is optional for the individual, yet still far more likely than in a nonunion setting.

⁴ African-American respondents expressed even stronger support for unionism in this survey, with 64 percent indicating they would vote for a union, compared to 32 percent of non-African-Americans. The WRPS is described in detail in Freeman and Rogers (1999). The question for which results are reported here was asked of all respondents who were neither managers nor current union members: "If an election were held today to decide whether employees like you should be represented by a union, would you vote for the union or against the union?" The ethnic and racial group data reported here are unpublished but available at <http://www.nber.org/~freeman/wrps.html>. The above figure for "African Americans" includes both respondents who identified themselves as "black" and those who identified themselves as "African American" and differs slightly from those reported for "blacks" in Freeman and Rogers (1999: 71). These results are statistically significant ($p < .001$ for African Americans, and $p < .01$ for Latinos).

Whereas earlier studies did not examine such attitudes by nativity, this one found more pro-union sentiment among immigrants (most of whom were Latino) than among natives, and even more among non-citizens: 66 percent of non-citizen respondents (regardless of ethnicity) expressed a preference for unionization, compared to 54 percent of foreign-born citizens, and 42 percent of native-born respondents.⁵ (Weir 2002: 121) Analysis



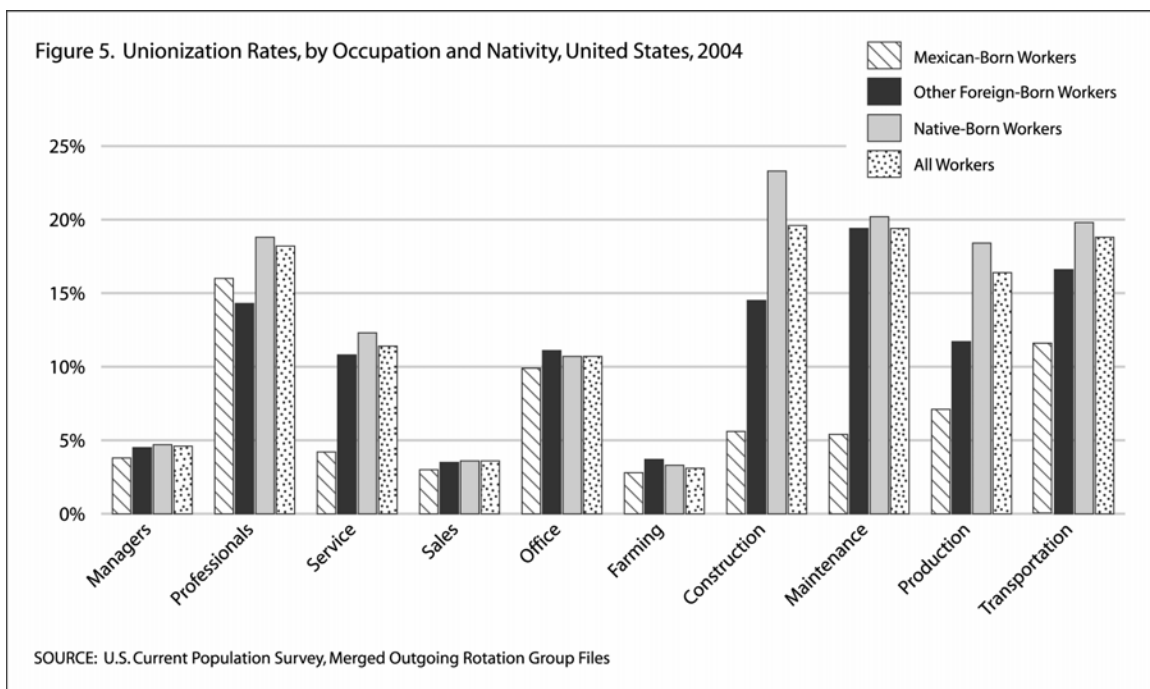
of actual union representation election results, similarly, suggests that union organizing efforts tend to be more successful in workplaces that employ predominantly nonwhite workers (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004: 36-37).

⁵This finding is from the 2001-02 California Workforce Survey (CWS), which asked a question identical to the one in the WRPS. However, the results of the two surveys are not strictly comparable. The WRPS asked the question of almost all workers, except high-level managers, who were not current union members; by contrast, the CWS asked it only of nonsupervisory respondents who were not current union members, excluding a broader group of middle-level managers. The CWS results are statistically significant ($p < .01$ for the race/ethnicity variable and $p < .05$ for the citizen status variable).

Why, then, do immigrants have relatively low unionization rates, as shown in Figure 1? The primary factor shaping unionization patterns among Mexican-born and other foreign-born workers is their disproportionate concentration in sectors of the economy where union density is relatively low. Consider the contrast between the highly unionized public sector and the poorly unionized private sector. As Figure 4 shows, the rate of public sector unionization is much higher than in the private sector *for all population groups*, including immigrants. In 2004, public sector unionization rates for native-born and foreign-born workers were identical (36.4%). Mexican-born workers' public-sector unionization rate was somewhat lower (29.6%), but still far higher than for Mexican-born workers in the private sector. For Mexican-born U.S. citizens, interestingly, the public sector rate was the same as that for natives, although it was much lower for non-citizen Mexican-born workers. (The same disparity between these two groups obtains in the private sector, with Mexican-born noncitizens having by far the lowest unionization rates, as Figure 4 also shows.)

But far more striking than the between-group differentials *within* each of these two sectors is the relatively small proportion of foreign-born workers who are employed in the public sector: only 8.5%, compared to 17.5% of all native-born workers. Among the Mexican-born, the figures are even more stark: only 3.9% of all Mexican-born workers are employed in the public sector, and only 2.0% of Mexican-born non-citizens. The vast disparity in overall public and private-sector unionization rates, combined with the underrepresentation of foreign-born (and especially Mexican-born) workers among public sector employees, greatly depresses the overall immigrant unionization rate.

Unionization rates vary greatly not only by economic sector, but also by industry (not detailed here) and occupation. The fact that immigrant workers are unevenly distributed through the occupational structure, and that they tend, in general, to be underrepresented in many of the occupational categories that are the most highly unionized, further depresses their overall unionization rate. As Figure 5 reveals, the variation within major occupational groups by nativity is much more modest than the variation across occupational groups – paralleling the contrast between the public and private sectors discussed above. Although it is true that, even within these categories, foreign-born workers, and especially Mexican-born workers, have lower unionization



rates than their native-born counterparts, this is because these broad occupational groups are internally segregated by nativity.

For example, consider the case of construction jobs, where the immigrant-native differential in unionization rates is particularly large, as Figure 5 shows. Latino

immigrants are concentrated in the largely nonunion residential sector of the construction industry, while native-born workers are much more extensively employed in the more highly unionized commercial sector. In service occupations, similarly, Latino immigrants are disproportionately employed in the most casualized fields, like domestic household service or day labor, where unionization is rare or nonexistent. Undocumented immigrants are particularly concentrated in such unregulated, marginal fields, where employers are seldom concerned with workers' legal status (Marcelli and Heer 1997).

Occupational segregation along lines of nativity is so extensive that Catanzarite (2002, 2004) goes so far as to argue for a category of "brown collar" occupations in which immigrant Latinos, especially the most recent arrivals, are highly overrepresented. (She does not look specifically at Mexican-born workers, but of course they are the predominant Latino immigrant group.) Such occupations are at the bottom of the labor market in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing as well as in the service and hospitality industries.

Figures 6 and 7 expose this dynamic from a different angle, and in somewhat greater detail. As Figure 6 shows, unionization is not distributed evenly through the occupational structure. Professionals, for example, make up a higher proportion of union members than of employed workers (reflecting the extensive unionization of teachers and other professionals in the public sector), and the same is true of production, maintenance and construction occupations. By contrast, managerial, sales, and farming occupations account for a higher proportion of employed workers than of union members. Thus the probability of an individual being unionized varies greatly with his or her occupation.

Figure 7 shows the same kind of comparison for Mexican-born workers. Here the uneven distribution of unionism through the occupational structure, as well as the concentration of Mexican-born workers in particular types of occupations, are both in evidence. Thus, although only 9.5% of Mexican-born workers are in professional or office occupations, these two occupational groups account for about twice that proportion (18.6%) of all Mexican-born union members. And a comparison between Figures 6 and 7 reveals that Mexicans are more heavily employed in occupations (like services) where overall unionization rates are relatively low. Even at this high level of aggregation, these variations are evident; a more detailed analysis of specific occupations would expose them even more starkly.

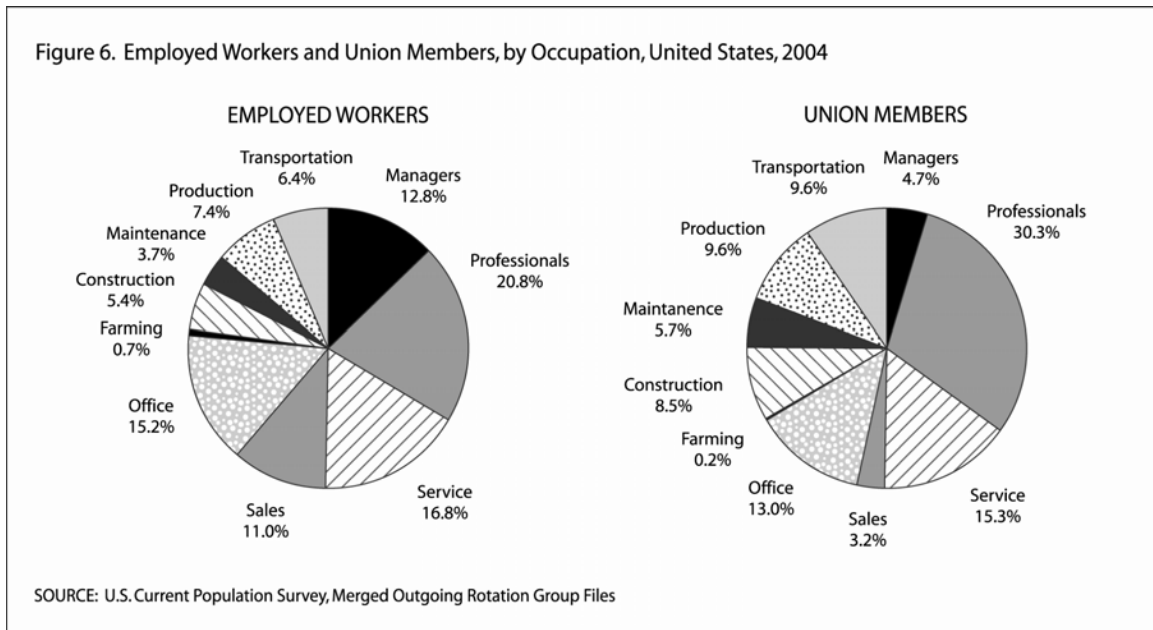
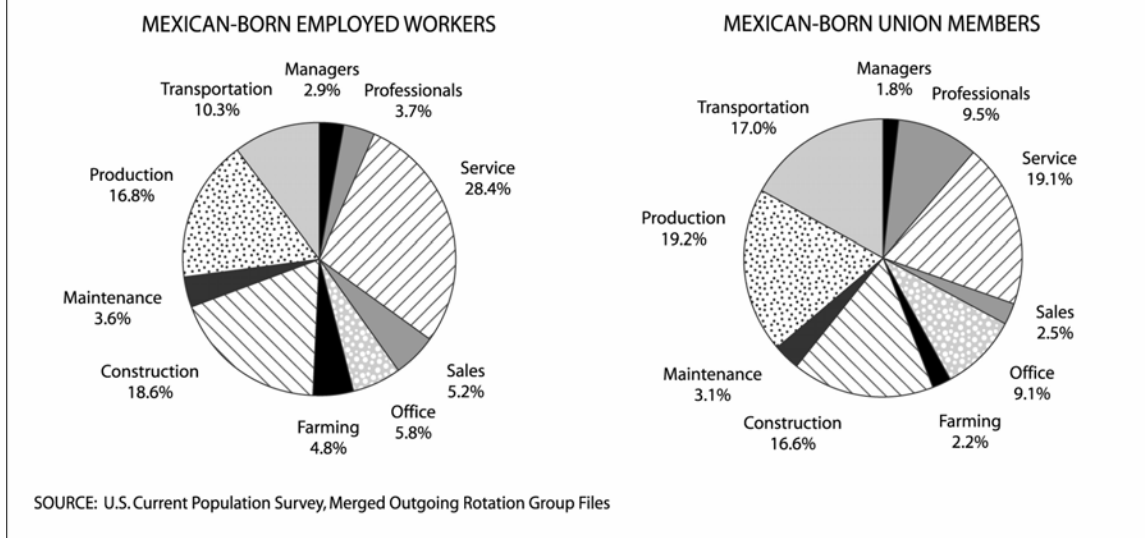


Figure 7. Mexican-Born Employed Workers and Union Members, by Occupation, United States, 2004



In short, immigrants generally, and Mexican-born workers in particular, have a lower unionization rate than their native-born counterparts not because they are less receptive to unionism – indeed, the opposite is true – but because of their particular employment patterns. The “brown collar” occupations in which they are concentrated are, for the most part, among the less-unionized fields in the U.S., although that may be changing. The fact that so few Mexican-born workers (or immigrants generally) are in the public sector is a critical factor in explaining their relatively low unionization rate.

Although there are no reliable data on the extent to which different types of unions have been involved in immigrant organizing, qualitative evidence suggests that the pattern is an uneven, yet systematic one. The industrial unions that once constituted the independent CIO (from 1935-1955) have not been active on this terrain. Most of them are centered in the high-wage manufacturing industries that have been decimated by outsourcing and plant closings. They have lost huge numbers of members in recent decades, and have not been engaged in much new organizing of any kind. The bulk of

their foreign-born members are those who have found employment in already-unionized industrial bargaining units – and immigrants are seldom hired in such jobs, which are generally well-paid and in settings where little new hiring has occurred during the wave of new immigration from the global South that began in the late 1960s. For different reasons – mostly related to language and citizenship issues, the public sector unions, as noted above, also have relatively few foreign-born members.

By contrast, several former AFL affiliates, which include the Service Employees International Union (SEIU – which launched the Justice for Janitors campaign mentioned above), the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), now part of UNITE HERE, as well as the Carpenters and Laborers unions, have been actively recruiting immigrant workers since the 1990s. These four unions (along with the United Farm Workers, which always had a predominantly immigrant membership; the Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers, both of which have some immigrant members, although fewer than SEIU or UNITE HERE) broke away from the AFL-CIO in summer 2005 to form the new Change to Win (CTW) Federation. Immigrant rights are a prominent part of the CTW program and its unions have been the most visible in recent immigrant organizing. This is the branch of the organized labor movement that has the best prospect of expanding labor’s recent efforts to recruit Mexican-born and other foreign-born workers in the years to come.

Extra-Union Immigrant Worker Organizing

Alongside union efforts to recruit immigrants, a variety of community-based organizations (CBOs) have emerged during the past fifteen years with a focus on

economic justice issues. Some of these organizations have close ties to organized labor, while others were entirely independent. The living wage movement figures prominently here, due to its success in passing ordinances in several jurisdictions raising wage levels for private-sector workers employed under government contracts (Luce 2004). A variety of other groups also took shape around the nation with a focus on advocacy for low-wage workers – a group that typically includes Mexican-born and other foreign-born Latinos. Most of these organizations focus explicitly on immigrant workplace rights, especially for domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) and day laborers with little or no access to conventional unionism (see Gottlieb et al 2005: 45-48).

The broad spectrum of “worker centers,” of which Janice Fine’s comprehensive national study identified 135 by 2005 (up from only 5 in 1992), typically focus their appeals on the ethnic identities of low-wage immigrant workers, and advocate for workers’ rights using rhetorical and organizational forms distinctly different from those historically associated with unionism. Mexican-born workers are a key constituency for these groups; although few are limited to any particular nationality, the vast majority (120 of Fine’s 135 centers) focus on immigrants. (Fine 2005; and see Gordon 2005)

Although they are not unions themselves, most of the advocacy efforts of these CBOs and worker centers aim to improve wages and working conditions for immigrant workers, putting direct pressure on employers and/or governmental agencies responsible for enforcing wage and hour laws and other legal protections for workers. Some of these groups have close ties to organized labor, others are more distant from (and in some cases, critical of) unions, but in practice their goals are strikingly similar to those of organized labor’s mainstream; it is mainly their strategies and tactics that differ. Both

provide a variety of direct services to workers, advocate for both individual workers and groups facing similar problems, organize immigrants politically and educate them about their legal rights.

If the goals of unions and these CBOs/worker centers are similar, their organizational forms are quite different. Although some worker centers have “members,” for example, they are small organizations, typically funded by foundations rather than their own memberships. And as Fine points out, worker centers (like other CBOs) define their boundaries in terms of geography, while unions are usually tied to a worksite, occupation or industry. As a result the geographical spread of worker centers mirrors that of the immigrant population itself more directly than is the case with the labor movement. Historical artifacts like patterns of union density that were built up over long periods of time (and which, as noted above, have a major impact on patterns of immigrant unionization) are only indirectly relevant here. Thus while these organizations are widespread in California, which was home to 26 of the 135 worker centers Fine identified in the U.S. in 2005 (Fine 2005), their geographical concentration is far less extreme than that of immigrant union membership (see discussion above).

Another organizational form that deserves mention here is the immigrant hometown association (HTA). Although most Mexican (and other) HTAs began as largely apolitical groups, whose normal activities revolved around beauty pageants and sporting events, they have been increasingly drawn into the world of workplace advocacy and political mobilization (Zabin and Rabadán 1998, Rivera-Salgado and Escala Rabadán 2004, Hecht 2005). As in the case of worker centers, which in a minority of cases do take on some organizational features of traditional unions, hybrids that merge the typical

activities of HTAs and unions emerge at times as well. Not only have HTAs become increasingly engaged in advocacy impacting the workplace, but some labor unions – especially at the local level – take on the functions traditionally assumed by HTAs. David Fitzgerald (2004) has documented one fascinating example, a local union in southern California whose membership is overwhelmingly Mexican-born and whose activities include not only political mobilization on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border, but also extensive interplay between union politics and HTA-like activities and networks.

Further stimulating these developments was an extraordinary process of Latino immigrant political mobilization in the 1990s – a process both rooted in and contributing to the immigrant organizing efforts of unions and CBOs. The catalyst here, ironically, was Proposition 187, a ballot measure proposed by California’s then-governor Pete Wilson in 1994 and approved by the state’s voters that would have denied public services – including schooling – to undocumented immigrants and their children, had it not been found unconstitutional. The Proposition 187 campaign had a dramatic and entirely unintended impact on voting rates among first- and second-generation immigrants in California (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001: 892-893; Citrin and Highton 2002: 22), as well as on their grassroots mobilization. In Los Angeles, the street protests against the initiative were larger than any since the anti-war demonstrations of the Vietnam era. Although Mexican immigrants were not the only protesters, they were in the majority. Mexican HTAs also were drawn into the fray, indeed this was a moment of transition for many of them from a largely social focus to a more political one.

Organized labor in Los Angeles was uniquely positioned to seize this moment of opportunity. In 1994, the same year that Proposition 187 was placed on the ballot, the

L.A. County Federation of Labor (to insiders, “the Fed”) underwent a metamorphosis from an insider ally of the city’s Democratic Party establishment to an independent political force with extensive capacity for grassroots mobilization. Among other things, the Fed began to devote extensive resources to helping immigrants eligible for naturalization become citizens (and thus potential voters), which many were eager to do in the fearful atmosphere created by the Proposition 187 campaign. Meanwhile, Miguel Contreras, a former UFW organizer who had been on the staff of HERE since 1977, became the Fed’s Secretary-Treasurer. Contreras deepened the Fed’s commitment to the Latino community, and soon built it into the most important single force in L.A. politics.

Contreras took the helm at the Los Angeles County Federation in the spring of 1996. Since then ... the Fed has built a political operation the likes of which Los Angeles has not previously seen. Mobilizing thousands of member volunteers, with the most loyal and hardworking invariably provided by two almost entirely immigrant locals – HERE’s hotel workers and janitors affiliated with the SEIU – the Fed has plunged itself into 23 hotly contested congressional, legislative and city council races around Los Angeles in the past five years and has won 22 of them.... Characteristically, a Fed campaign – which involves mail, phone banks, precinct walking, and work site proselytizing – has two target audiences: union members and new immigrant voters (Meyerson 2001: 20).

Indeed, the key to the Fed’s success was its ability to incorporate the city’s huge Latino immigrant population (the majority of which was Mexican-born) into the political arena.

The Fed had not only the organizational capacity to mobilize at the grassroots level, but also the economic resources to be politically influential not only in Los Angeles, but also statewide. Given the extraordinarily high cost of California political campaigns, and the limited resources of the Latino immigrant community, no other entity representing this constituency could aspire to play such a role. Labor’s growing political clout led to a seismic shift in Los Angeles’ electoral landscape, as the new cadre of

Latino labor leaders rapidly edged out the old-guard Mexican-American political leadership. One pivotal example was the 1994 election of progressive union organizer Antonio Villaraigosa to a state Assembly seat representing northeast Los Angeles. Two years later, the Fed helped the Democrats regain control of the state Assembly, conducting field and direct mail campaigns for three Democratic challengers, all of whom were elected. In 1997, the Fed backed Gilbert Cedillo, then a politically unknown SEIU official, in a special election for an Assembly seat in a heavily Latino downtown L.A. district. Cedillo came from behind to win this contest by a huge margin (Frank and Wong 2004: 160; Gottlieb et al 2005: 160-61).

In 1998, organized labor throughout California campaigned successfully to defeat Proposition 226, which would have prohibited union dues being used for political purposes without annual written authorization from members. This measure was defeated, with Latinos voting against it 3 to 1. In the same election, the Democrats won back the Governorship in the person of Gray Davis, and Cruz Bustamante was elected Lieutenant Governor – the first Latino to win statewide office in the entire twentieth century. A year later Villaraigosa became the Speaker of the California State Assembly (a job that would later be held by another Latino with a labor background, Fabian Nuñez, former political Director of the L.A. County Fed, who is the Speaker at this writing). In May 2005, Villaraigosa was elected mayor of Los Angeles.⁶

These were only the most important of labor's many electoral success stories in the 1990s, which became legendary throughout California (Tobar 1998; Frank and Wong

⁶The untimely death of Miguel Contreras preceded this election by 11 days. The Fed officially backed the incumbent (Jim Hahn) in this race, although the fact that four years earlier labor had so enthusiastically supported Villaraigosa's unsuccessful bid for the mayoralty not only helped produce his 2005 victory but also meant that few labor activists were inclined to actively campaign for Hahn. (see Meyerson 2005)

2004: 160-62; Meyerson 2001). Broadly defined to include not only traditional workplace-based unions, but also CBOs, HTAs and mobilization in the realm of electoral politics, the state's labor movement has effectively shown its capacity to mobilize the vast and supposedly "unorganizable" Latino (and primarily Mexican-born) immigrant population of California. Although these developments have yet to emerge on the same scale elsewhere in the U.S., the geographical dispersion of immigration may change that in the coming years. In any case, as traditional unions, CBOs, and the immigrant rights movement continue to engage in coalition-building, and as more and more immigrants themselves are galvanized into organized activity, the developments of the 1990s on all these frontiers are likely to blossom and grow.

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