



---

## Immigrants and Immigration

*Adapted from Paul Kivel, Uprooting Racism, revised 4<sup>th</sup> edition, New Society, September 2017*

Immigration is a racial issue. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials do not stop and interrogate white people or conduct raids to stem the flow of large numbers of illegal Canadian, British and eastern European immigrants. There are not hundreds of miles of barbed wire fencing between Canada and the US. And vigilante groups do not patrol that border.

Obviously, it has been to the advantage of Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia to welcome the presence and contributions of new immigrants. But not all immigrants and not all the time. Recent immigrants have always been both feared and disdained by older residents. And immigrants of color, during the short periods when they were allowed to enter these countries, have always been treated differently than lighter skinned arrivals.

Throughout most of US history the immigration of Asians, Africans (except those enslaved), South and Central Americans and people from the Middle East has been restricted if not totally forbidden. Citizenship and therefore voting rights was explicitly limited to being white. Not all Europeans were welcomed either, and many returned to their countries of origin because of the harsh treatment they received. But over the last 400 years, there has been almost continuous opportunity for white Europeans to arrive and settle in the US, find jobs, establish families and build communities.

Many of us in the West like to think of our countries as magnets for immigration because of the opportunity to be found here. Many of us believe that our countries are the most civilized in the world, with coveted resources that everyone else is desperate to gain access to. This misperception has allowed us to construct a fantasy about alien invasion – hordes of people massed at our borders, frantically trying to sneak across only to overrun our communities, take our jobs and use up our social services. To complement this image we have constructed metaphors of immigrants as carriers of disease, infection, vermin – or simply as invaders. This is a story we tell ourselves but it is not accurate.

Most immigrants from dedeveloped countries migrate to other dedeveloped countries, not to industrialized ones. Less than 2% of the world's migration ends in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Many factors fuel immigration including war, natural disaster, famine and lack of work. The United States is a major cause of migration around the world because its foreign policies have disrupted stable social and economic systems in many countries. There are many Southeast Asians in the US because we engaged in war in Southeast Asia and then welcomed those who supported our

cause. There are immigrants from Cuba and Haiti here because we have supported dictatorships in those countries in the past, and corporate exploitation and trade embargos have led to these countries' impoverishment. There are Mexicans and Central Americans here because corporate agribusiness, manufacturing and extraction industries have invaded and severely disrupted both rural and urban economies, concentrated wealth among an elite and forced people to migrate to urban areas or out of the country in search of work to support themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the US has promoted International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment policies, World Bank loans for large-scale agricultural modernization projects and "free trade" agreements that have forced millions of people to move from rural areas into cities and from one nation to another in search of food, work and safety. Women in developing countries have been particularly hard hit by these practices. When women are displaced from their land or unable to continue farming because of policies emphasizing export agriculture, they end up migrating to cities to work in textile, manufacturing or electronic industries, or traveling to other countries to do nursing, domestic, textile or sex work.<sup>3</sup>

The United States has generally not been against immigration as much as it has been about the exploitation of immigrant communities and against the long-term development of non-white immigrant communities. English and Irish immigrants were brought over to clear and settle the East Coast, Chinese laborers were brought over to build the railroads and Mexican labor was brought in to work the fields of the Southwest in the Bracero program. The labor of all groups was exploited, but there was still a color line at the border. People of color were not expected or encouraged to stay. During the limited period when Chinese men were given permission to immigrate, no Chinese women were allowed into the country, and even during great labor shortages, Mexicans were only given short-term visas. No such restrictions applied to English and Irish immigrants.

Once they arrived in the US, why did white immigrants fare better than immigrants of color? Immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Spain, Greece and various regions of Eastern Europe faced violence, discrimination and social prejudice and limited access to jobs, housing and education, just like immigrants from other regions of the world. However immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, both men and women, were able to come in significant numbers. Although they faced discrimination, these immigrants were not driven out of trades, professions and other occupations the way African Americans and immigrants of color were. "White" immigrants were able to become citizens, could vote and therefore were able to develop political strength. There were few laws preventing them from participating in civil society or from owning land and businesses. The government established public schools, hospitals and other services specifically to help them assimilate into US society. And while they did occasionally face violent attack, it was nowhere near as brutal and sustained, nor was it supported by the government as was the violence experienced by immigrants of color. Immigrants of color had as little status and government protection as African Americans and Native Americans, and therefore were subject to discrimination, hate crimes, and mob violence. They were often killed with impunity, oftentimes with state or national government collusion or active participation.<sup>4</sup>



Today the selective control of immigration to serve economic needs continues, as technology workers from South and East Asia enter the US on special visas to serve the interests of the computer industry, and women of color are imported from economically exploited countries as nurses under the Nursing Relief Act of 1989. Large communities of Mexican, Central American and Asian immigrants provide the labor force for the textile, computer, food harvesting and service sectors of the US economy. Businesses are not interested in eliminating illegal immigration – heavily exploited immigrant labor is a source of great profit to them. They are interested in controlling it, using the system to undermine immigrants’ ability to organize against workplace exploitation and keeping citizen workers alienated from and unable to unite with immigrant workers. As writer and historian Grace Chang notes, “immigration from the Third World into the United States doesn’t just happen to a set of factors but is carefully orchestrated – that is, desired, planned, compelled, managed, accelerated, slowed, and periodically stopped – by the direct actions of U.S. interests, including the government as state and as employer, private employers, and corporations.”<sup>6</sup>

Studies show that high levels of immigration do not increase joblessness even among the lowest-paid workers, and there is little correlation between immigration and wage level. While immigrant labor does bring down wages in low-wage sectors by about 5%, this impact is more than offset by the increased demand for goods and services they create which creates more jobs and a subsequent increase in wages.<sup>7</sup> Nor do immigrants bring disease or reduce health standards. Even though most immigrants come from countries poorer than the United States, recent immigrants are healthier than the US-born population in general, and babies born to immigrant mothers are healthier than those born to US-born mothers.<sup>8</sup>

Immigrants do not drain our social services. In fact, just the opposite is true. In general, children, the elderly, the infirm, and those with disabilities do not emigrate. Immigrants come as adult workers, having been raised and educated at the expense of their country of origin. In addition, language barriers, fears of deportation, and the generally poor level of social services offered in the United States mean that immigrants use fewer public services than comparable groups of citizens. Immigrants illegally in the U.S. collectively contribute nearly \$12 billion each year to state and local tax coffers, primarily in the form of income, property, and sales or excise taxes.<sup>9</sup> Undocumented immigrants also pay sales taxes, gasoline taxes and all the taxes that everyone else pays. The reality is that US citizens of all races benefit significantly from the economic and cultural contributions of recent immigrants, including those that are undocumented.

Despite the presence of 19,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials with a budget in 2016 of over \$6 billion, many employers do not generally comply with immigration laws or report illegal workers unless those workers are demanding higher wages, safer working conditions, basic benefits or the right to form a union. ICE is used as the threat and enforcement tool to deport workers who are asserting worker’s rights. If immigration laws were vigorously and consistently enforced, much of the dirtiest and poorest-paid agricultural fieldwork, manufacturing, textile, food processing and maintenance work throughout the US would immediately come to a halt. The intent of immigration laws is not to stop the work, but to maintain the highly exploitive conditions under which it is done.<sup>10</sup>



Many white people say that they are in favor of legal immigration and only against undocumented immigration. Today's immigration laws favor those who have family who are US citizens or permanent residents. This translates into the reality that most people of color in the world are permanently excluded. Those who arrive here without documents are no more "illegal" than people of color were who could not vote or use public facilities before the Civil Rights movement. Racially discriminatory laws arbitrarily designate the actions of people of color illegal when they try to access the same rights and opportunities as white people.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been placed under the Department of Homeland Security which leads more and more people to confuse the regulation of immigration with protecting ourselves against terrorism. Because ICE is part of Homeland Security, under the Secure Communities program, 287(g) and other programs, local law enforcement agencies are being pressured to enforce immigration laws, something they are ill-prepared to do and which diverts much-needed resources from routine law enforcement activities. In addition, when local police become ICE agents, it seriously compromises their relationships with immigrant communities and makes normal crime prevention and criminal investigations more difficult. Under these programs, hundreds of thousands of immigrants who have no criminal record and pose no identifiable threat to anybody have been detained and deported.<sup>11</sup> Deporting busboys, gardeners, domestic workers, and car wash workers for not having legal papers with them when they are stopped by officials leads to broken families, separation of parents and children and fearful and devastated immigrant communities. It does nothing to protect us from terrorism. Laws like Arizona's SB1070 go even further, mandating local law enforcement officials to stop anyone who they have reasonable suspicion might be an unlawful immigrant. Although parts of this bill were declared unconstitutional by the courts, other states have passed similar legislation.<sup>12</sup>

Like all attempts to monitor, control and punish communities of color, current immigration policies target individuals and communities and throw up further racial barriers to full participation in US society. These policies lead to insecure communities, disrupted lives and families and further hardship to already stressed communities. They provide convenient scapegoats for economic problems that leave the real causes and culprits unnoticed. They make a mockery out of our claims that all people are treated equally.

The only way fully to incorporate immigrants into our communities is to normalize their status and provide them with full rights and benefits. Until this occurs, employers' ability to exploit them will continue to depress wages, and set working people against each other, contributing to the further exploitation of all workers and the continuing harassment of Latinx, African, Asian and South Asian communities under the guise of immigration enforcement.

We are heavily indebted to immigrants, both those with and those without legal documents, for our daily well-being. At the same time, these workers are some of the most highly exploited people in our society. To change this we can begin to work for full rights and protections for immigrants and refugees. All immigrants and refugees should enjoy:



- Full legal rights regardless of status
- Access to education and healthcare programs regardless of status
- Access to permanent residency
- Clear and uniform standards for the granting of refugee status regardless of country of origin
- Standards that include vulnerability to domestic violence, femicide and female genital mutilation as criteria for refugee status
- Elimination of employer sanctions and an end to visas tied to employment
- Release if they have been held without charges or denied legal rights

We should also work for:

Resolution of the backlogs of visa applicants

Demilitarization of the US-Mexico border

Non-governmental oversight of Immigration and Customs Enforcement

The end of arbitrary and unnecessary detentions and deportations that break up of families

A general amnesty for those presently in the country

An end to the use of private companies for housing or providing services for immigrants

An end to individuals and militia groups patrolling the borders

## Endnotes

1. Grace Chang. *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. South End, 2000, p. 2.
2. Aviva Chomsky. *"They Take Our Jobs!": and 20 other myths about immigration*. Beacon, 2007, pp. 5-7.
3. For a detailed description of how this process works over several job sectors see Chang, *Disposable Domestic*.
4. For detailed accounts of how immigrants of color were treated see Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, especially Chapters 10 on Asian Americans and 12 on Latinx.
5. Chang, *Disposable Domestic*, pp. 3-4.
6. Sen with Mamdouh, *The Accidental American*, p. 160.
7. Southern Poverty Law Center. "Intelligence Report: The Immigrants: Myths and Reality." Issue 101 (Spring, 2001), p 12.
10. "Undocumented Immigrant's State and Local Tax Contributions," by Lisa Christensen Gee, et. al. Institute on Taxation & Economic Policy, updated February, 2016 [online]. [cited November 26, 2016]. <http://www.itep.org/pdf/immigration2016.pdf>.
11. Statement of The Honorable Mark W. Everson, Commissioner, Internal Revenue Service, Testimony Before the House Committee on Ways and Means, July 26, 2006.
12. Sen with Mamdouh. *The Accidental American*, pp. 58-9, 140-1.
13. For more on Arizona SB1070 see Randal C. Archibold. "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration." *New York Times*, April 23, 2010. [online]. [cited February 24, 2011]. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html?_r=0).

