WILL THE FOLLOWERS BE LED?
Where Union Members Stand on Immigration

Immigration is roiling American politics, with ongoing controversy and no clear solution in sight. As all parties concur, the system is broken, frustrating new, would-be, and established Americans, while yielding substantial social costs and tensions from the Mexican to the Canadian borders and just about everywhere in between. Beyond this point of agreement, however, dissonance is all that can be heard. Among the voices is that of American labor. While unions have emerged as foremost advocates of immigrants’ rights, they haven’t managed to escape immigration’s divisive impact. Legalization for undocumented immigrants has widespread support across the labor movement. Far more difficult is the question of just how far to compromise in the quest for that goal, with the Change to Win coalition accepting a guest worker program as the price for legalization and the AFL-CIO unwilling to go so far.

From within the labor movement, these cleavages on how best to deal with the immigration dilemma loom large. They take on less significance in the big picture, however, where labor’s overall stance puts it at variance with the majority of the American public—which wants less, rather than more, immigration. The danger is that unions have gone too far ahead of the rank-and-file, providing the right-wing with yet another opportunity to divide the liberal base.

This paper explores this question through
a detailed analysis of a 2006 survey of national opinion, conducted by the Pew Research Center, that provides the unusual opportunity to spotlight the opinions of union members. The

Unions haven't managed to escape immigration's divisive impact.

results signal a warning light, as they show the views of union members turn out to be very different from those advanced by their leaders.

THE IMMIGRATION IMPASSE

Immigration policy is now at an impasse, with no prospect of change until a new Congress and new President arrive in Washington in 2009. But it was not too long ago that informed observers saw a likely resolution to America's long, contentious struggle with immigration.

George Bush entered the presidency in 2001 as a seemingly pro-immigrant Republican, precisely the type of politician whose connections to business and sensitivity to Latinos might fuse the wide-ranging coalition needed to broker an immigration deal. What looked possible, even likely, on September 10, 2001, disappeared the next day. The problem didn't go away, of course, but the nation's priorities changed, at least temporarily. Once attention finally returned to immigration, it became clear that the political constellation had fundamentally changed. The president, still a pro-immigrant, pro-business Republican, stood severely weakened. The Republicans' social-conservative base, moreover, was in revolt, clamoring for draconian measures and equally dead-set against the goals of both the pro-immigrant left—legalization of undocumented workers—and pro-immigrant (business-oriented) right—importing guest workers for employment at both high- and low-skilled levels. The pro-immigrant right and left remained hopeful that comprehensive immigration reform, if supported by the president, could combine Democratic backing with sufficient Republican support to make it through Congress. For a moment, in 2006, it appeared that the social conservatives had overplayed their hand, promoting punitive legislation that triggered immigrants' rights marches throughout the country. But the immigrants, if not voiceless, turned out to be voiceless, and neither followers nor leaders could figure out what they could effectively do after marching.

The social conservatives, however, knew where to turn, mobilizing Americans' immigration anxiety, as well as their long-held preference that immigration either be diminished or at least kept at present levels. The immigration reformers backed right, holding onto a plan for gradual legalization, but one that entailed a heavier emphasis on border enforcement and employer sanctions than many immigrant advocates would have liked. However painful the concessions, they proved fruitless, alienating supporters on the left without winning allies on the right. The president was no longer a player; he could hold the Republicans in line on Iraq, but not on immigration. Reform's other notable Republican champion, Senator John McCain, ran into a buzzsaw, as conservative opposition to immigration almost killed his run for the White House. In the end, comprehensive immigration reform was put to sleep in summer 2007, with little hope that it could be revived until a new administration came into power. And those who banked on a new day for reform were clearly looking at the future through rose-tinted lenses.

With comprehensive immigration reform postponed for the immediate future, now is a good time to think through labor's side of the immigration dilemma. The political fissures generated by immigration take a peculiar form, yielding "strange bedfellow" alliances that threaten to separate labor from its usual allies and are never easy to navigate. As described by political scientist Aristide Zolberg, commitments to expansion or restriction fall out along the two dimensions of identity, on the one hand, and interests, on the other. Identity motivates both nativists and nationalists, with nativists seeking to exclude foreigners, and immigrants and their descendants, whose nationalist affinity with the people that the nativists see as aliens motivates them to keep America a welcoming place for newcomers. By contrast, interests impel employers, on the lookout for foreign labor that is more skilled or more tractable than what can be found locally. The very same factor has

The views of union members turn out to be very different from those advanced by their leaders.

historically galvanized workers here at home who have often viewed themselves as competing with newcomers for jobs. Consequently, left and right have often combined, with immigrant advocates aligning with capitalists and big-city workers and their unions coalescing with small-town xenophobes.

Most notably, organized labor has converted to the expansionist camp. To be sure, the movement away from restrictionism has been long in coming. The CIO broke decisively with the AFL's adamant opposition to immigration of any type; the merged AFL-CIO later provided crucial support for the mid-1960s legislation that ended the National Origins Act, which in turn opened up America to immigrants from all over the world. Although it supported both diversity and modest expansion of legal immigration, however, labor continued to oppose other types of migration—whether undocumented movements or legal, temporary programs—that seemed to threaten American workers. In the early 1970s, organized labor was at the forefront of a coalition seeking sanctions against employers of undocumented immigrants, a legislative push that almost, but never quite, made it. Later in the decade, some unions, realizing that the immigrants—documented or not—were here to stay, began to take a new approach. The Ladies' Garment Workers' Union—a predecessor to today's UNITE HERE—positioned itself as one of the first advocates of undocumented workers' rights. The rest of the labor movement followed soon enough: by the early 1980s, the AFL-CIO endorsed an amnesty for undocumented workers, though its legislative support hinged on an enactment of employer sanctions, a key provision of the amnesty bill approved in 1986.

Twenty years later, the political choices have taken a different, more difficult form. On the one hand, with immigrant density throughout the unionizable workforce at historically high levels, all sectors of organized labor have unambiguously embraced immigrants' rights.
Though there are now 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States—as opposed to the roughly 4 to 6 million present on American soil two decades ago—labor is an advocate of a generous legalization program, indeed one far more generous than anything that might loom on the near horizon. On the other hand, the price required to maintain the type of left-right coalition that might gain majority support is heavier than it was in the 1980s and more than all unions are prepared to bear. The problem is that immigration is now so deeply embedded in the American economy that business wants it reshaped in ways that favor its interests. As reflected in the 2007 effort at comprehensive immigration reform, that plan would take a two-pronged approach: a guest worker program for the low-skilled sector and, for the users of skilled labor, an expansion of occupational migration, paid for by scaling back family migration. Moreover, popular opposition to immigration is so intense that reform can do no more than offer a road to legalization, not the quick conversion to permanent legal residency involved with the amnesty of the mid-1980s. Although the immigration reform considered in 2007 promised to expand immigration policies in ways that would promote business ends at the expense of immigrants' rights, the possibility that Congress would approve a package including legalization was enough to secure significant labor support. But not all of organized labor could follow the same line: though ardent in its defense of legalization, the AFL-CIO could not support the guest worker program that the immigration reformers sought to pass.

If the view from the top suggests that organized labor can't completely embrace today's immigration-reform agenda, the view from the bottom may tell a very different story: namely that all the leaders, whether full-throated or half-hearted about comprehensive immigration reform in its last form, have greatly outpaced their members. For one thing, immigration trends have been consistently out of sync with what the public wants, with great majorities preferring either less immigration or at least a leveling off of immigration growth. Though public opinion has never put immigration at the top of the agenda, its salience has risen, as the newcomers have burgeoned, their presence has been felt nationwide, and political (as well as media) entrepreneurs have learned to tap into immigration anxiety. While the dimensions of the undocumented population, as well as the ties linking the undocumented to illegal residents and naturalized citizens, would seem to make legalization the only rational course of action, one can readily enough understand the reasons for hesitation. After all, the results of the last amnesty do not point to a reassuring precedent, as it is clearly easier to legalize undocumented immigrants than to successfully manage, let alone choke off, the flow of undocumented border crossers or travelers who legally come to the United States and decide not to go home. Immigration reformers did respond to the public's disquiet by shelving talk of amnesty and proposing a cautious, gradual, legalization instead, but the idea never had much traction. The politics of immigration have become exceedingly complicated; the painful trade-offs to which immigrants' rights advocates have acceded involve uncertain, hard-to-predict, and hard-to-understand consequences. Under these circumstances, it would not be surprising if the labor rank-and-file—like the rest of the American file—demurred from the policies advocated by their leaders. Put starkly: could immigration be the Republicans' next wedge issue, separating the Republicans' next wedge issue, otherwise unhappy with eight years of Republican rule—from the next Democratic presidential candidate?

To date, this is a question about which we know too little. Though the public is endlessly surveyed about immigration, most surveys don't include a question about union membership when collecting information on their interviewees' socioeconomic status. Fortunately, there is a recent exception: a 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, which, in addition to querying about a broad variety of immigration matters, asked respondents whether they were union members or lived in a household where someone else belonged to a union. Using the results from the survey's nationally representative sample of two thousand Americans, we'll now look closely at the attitudes of the respondents—14 percent of the total—who said that they lived in a labor union household and compare them to their counterparts in non-union households, as well as to a variety of other groups likely to form part of any politically progressive coalition.

**IMMIGRATION ANXIETIES**

The public surveyed in the spring of 2006 was not a contented lot. Among all respondents, 62 percent (71 percent among labor households) said they were unhappy with the ways things were going in the country, and more than half (63 percent among labor households) disapproved of President Bush. Concern was linked to a variety of problems, and immi-

**Could immigration be the Republicans' next wedge issue, separating the Democratic base... from the next Democratic presidential candidate?**
majority of native-born respondents, foreign influences were generally troubling; more than half—among labor as well as non-labor interviewees—thought that “the American way of life needed to be protected from foreign influence.” Anxiety about broader trends and their linkage to immigration may explain why relatively few respondents had a reliable perception of the immigrant phenomenon itself. More than half of labor and non-labor households thought that the immigrant population was at least twice its actual size. Though higher estimates were more common among those residing in neighborhoods of higher immigrant density, the great majority of interviewees lived in areas where there were relatively few immigrants; regardless of the local facts on the ground, they typically exaggerated the population’s size. Likewise, almost half of all respondents, and over half of the labor households, reported that they often came into personal contact with immigrants who speak little or no English. Whether contact of such high frequency is a matter of reality or of perception is hard to determine. Nonetheless, these do seem to be contacts that are fraught with sensitivity. Almost half of the respondents who said that they often or sometimes came into contact with immigrants speaking little or no English reported that they were “bothered” by the encounter. On average, moreover, immigrants comprised only ten percent of the neighborhoods in which native-born respondents reported frequent exposure to non-English language speakers, suggesting that the meaning of the encounter may count more than its frequency. For three-quarters of the native-born respondents, immigrants are still alien: just under a quarter, among non-labor and labor households alike, report having friends or relatives who are recent immigrants.

With personal ties limited, but contact charged, it should not be surprising that many respondents took a dim view of immigrants as thought that immigrants were making local services worse (though only 6 percent thought they were yielding a positive effect). Answers of this sort suggest that much of the non-immigrant public may consist not of ideological restrictionists, but practical accommodationists: that is to say it’s a constituency that will react allegorically to the Tom Tancredo of the country, but is unlikely to follow the expansionist path urged by the advocates of comprehensive immigration reform.

More than half [of all interviewees] thought that “the American way of life needed to be protected from foreign influence.”

THE PUBLIC’S POLICY PREFERENCES

The peculiar politics of immigration led the proponents of immigration reform on the search for a grand bargain, capable of pleasing left and right. But if business was especially keen on increasing legal opportunities for permanent skilled immigrants, as well as expanding guest worker programs aimed at high- and low-skilled workers, the public seemed to have different concerns. To begin with, support for increasing legal immigration—a goal to which business, like many immigrant advocates, is dedicated—has scant public appeal. Four out of ten native-born respondents thought that legal immigration should instead be decreased, with almost as many thinking that it should be kept at present levels. While not happy about current levels of legal immigration, the public appeared far more concerned about illegal immigration. When asked which of the two types of migration—legal or illegal—was the bigger problem, almost two-thirds of native-born persons mentioned illegal immigration, with close to another quarter saying “both equally,” and no differences on either count among the labor and non-labor respondents. Those who flagged illegal immigration had a number of concerns: job competition ranked first, but the worry that illegal immigration “increases the danger of terrorism” was mentioned almost as frequently. Overall, more than half of those who identified illegal immigration as the bigger problem cited non-economic issues as their “biggest concern.”

With anxiety again looming in the background, it is not surprising that the solutions endorsed by the respondents matched up poorly with options preferred by immigrants’ rights advocates. Only a minority of respondents (40 percent of the total sample and 37 percent of the native-born) supported the idea that “immigrants now living in the U.S. illegally . . . should be granted some kind of legal status that allows them to stay here,” with most instead wanting the undocumented to “go home.”

Illegalization, even in this mild, watered-down form, was an idea to which the labor respondents proved particularly averse (see Table

More than half of those who identified illegal immigration as the bigger problem cited noneconomic issues as their “biggest concern.”

1). Indeed, interviewees from union households were significantly less likely to support legalization than their non-union counterparts. That
difference held strong after applying statistical controls for a wide range of background factors, whether related to ethnicity, generation, gender, or other sociodemographic traits. As with their non-union counterparts, interviewees from union households were more likely to endorse legalization if they had an immigrant presence in their neighborhood. But that relationship took a weaker form among the labor than among the non-labor respondents, as those union members living in higher density immigrant neighborhoods were far less likely to support legalization than their non-union counterparts.

Not only were labor respondents more resistant to legalization than their non-union counterparts, but they also took a harder line than all of the other likely components of the progressive base. To be sure, only Hispanics (native or foreign-born) and immigrants themselves gave legalization overwhelming support, with most liberals and most immigrant offspring also favoring legalization, though by smaller majorities. In the main, blacks, self-declared Democrats, and former Kerry voters rejected legalization, though by smaller proportions than among labor households.

Wanting sterner measures against undocumented immigration, labor households also thought that tougher treatment of employers was the best way to reduce illegal immigration from Mexico: most endorsed increasing penalties on the employers of undocumented immigrants, making for a statistically significant difference when compared to the responses among non-union respondents. Further analysis showed that the labor preference for increased employer penalties persisted, even after taking account of a variety of background factors. In this case, labor respondents resembled some of the other groups whose support will be needed by any progressive coalition: blacks, Democrats, and former Kerry voters. But here again, one detects immigration's potential for splitting the Democratic base, as Hispanic and immigrant support for tougher penalties hovered around the 30 percent level.

Union respondents were even more emphatic in endorsing the idea that every job seeker possesses "a new kind of driver's license or Social Security card that proves they are U.S. citizens or are in the country legally." In this respect, they resembled not only their non-union counterparts, but every other group as well, including immigrants and Hispanics. Still, labor respondents were the most likely to think that identification should be required of every job seeker.

Most union respondents, like their non-union counterparts, also favored a "new government database of everyone eligible to work" that employers would be required to check before making any new hire. As with the proposal for a mandatory identification card, this was an idea around which majorities of all groups coalesced, including Hispanics and immigrants, with African Americans expressing especially strong support.

### Table 1. Immigration policy preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Database for Everyone Eligible to Work</th>
<th>Increase Penalties on Employers</th>
<th>Illegal Immigrants Be Allowed to Stay</th>
<th>Identification Cards for Every Job Seeker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union household</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-union household</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All native-born</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd generation</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Hispanic</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Kerry in '04</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percent responding yes; weights applied; shaded area shows statistically significant differences between labor and non-labor households.


CONCLUSION

The push for comprehensive immigration reform died in the summer of 2007, unlikely to be revived until a new administration emerges in Washington, and perhaps not even then. While comprehensive change is clearly out of the question, there is no single replacement. The Bush administration has failed at the issue, loudly announcing efforts to step up workplace enforcement, but quickly backing off. Immigrants' rights advocates have sought to advance those parts of their agenda that would have the greatest appeal, such as the DREAM Act, which facilitates citizenship for undocumented immigrants who arrived in America as children and enroll in college or serve in the military, but so far, this effort has been rebuffed. For the moment, the initiative appears to have shifted to the state and local levels, where restrictionists as well as immigrants' rights advocates are busily trying to shape policy. Elected officials are tugged in diverging directions, wanting to respond to the popular clamor to "do something" about immigration, while also often realizing that immigrants, undocumented or not, are de facto members of the community with needs that have to be serviced. Meanwhile, the presidential candidates are trying to navigate the immigration waters. The Republicans have all turned toward a hard line to please the social conservatives, while Democrats are simi-
larly distancing themselves from the defense of immigrants' rights, while trying not to sound like the Republicans.

The left's worry is that immigration will turn into the right's next wedge issue, splintering the progressive base and turning one group against another. For labor, the problem is particularly compelling: immigrants seem to represent the most organizeable of the unorganized; immigrants' rights are also a central commitment of many of its core allies, especially among Latino and African American groups.

But while leaders from both wings of organized labor endorse legalization, the evidence from this national survey suggests that the rank-and-file are simply not following: indeed, they are dead-set against the idea. As the typical labor union member is wary of immigrants and wants less immigration, there is little inclination to favor the policy options that immigrants' rights advocates prefer. In this survey, rather, the labor households are inclined toward a hard line, with a special emphasis on workplace measures that will make it difficult for undocumented immigrants to find jobs. Though labor households take a particularly tough position, their views are widely shared, most notably, by Democrats, former Kerry voters, and African Americans. Only Hispanics and first-generation interviewees showed a strong commitment to legalization; and even these groups gave workplace enforcement a hearty endorsement.

Whether the labor leadership, as well as the immigrants' rights advocates, should listen to the base is a question for a different type of article. But there is a message here, and one that anyone paying attention to the Democratic decades of the past decades might want to heed. Moral leadership is vitally important, as is an adjustment to the fact that immigration is here to stay, but it would seem unwise to ignore the public's worries. It may simply be that most Americans, whether liberals, union members, or not, are not yet ready for legalization. If so, responsible progressive leadership will have to figure out what steps to take next.