

# IMMIGRANT ORGANIZING AND THE NEW LABOR MOVEMENT IN LOS ANGELES

RUTH MILKMAN

Department of Sociology, UCLA

## *Abstract*

This article traces the transformation of Los Angeles, which was considered a showcase of anti-unionism a century ago, into a key site of labor movement revitalization and a model of successful immigrant organizing. It traces the history of unionization in L.A. over time, and analyzes data from the 1990s on the characteristics of L.A.'s union members. Although immigrants are still less likely to be union members than native-born workers, this is because of their sectoral location, not because they are "unorganizable." On the contrary, in some respects foreign-born workers tend to be more receptive to unionization efforts than their native-born counterparts, despite the vulnerability non-citizens and undocumented immigrants often experience. Here the dynamics of recent immigrant organizing successes in L.A. are analyzed, highlighting the importance of Latino immigrants' propensity for militancy, on the one side, and the key role of the new activist leadership of a number of key unions, on the other. While the recent successes are impressive in quality, they have not had much impact on union density in L.A., which remains low. Yet they indicate the potential for a larger-scale transformation.

To the surprise of many observers, Los Angeles emerged in the 1990s as a key site of labor movement experimentation and as a showcase for successful immigrant organizing, an embryo of the broader revitalization effort that the new AFL-CIO leadership and its allies are currently attempting to jump-start. While the long-term prospects for that effort remain ambiguous, L.A. labor has won a series of important union organizing victories in recent years, with over 90,000 new members recruited in 1999 alone. (Meyerson 1999) The L.A. County Federation of Labor has also become a formidable political force, launching massive voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns among newly enfranchised immigrants that have been pivotal in a wide variety of local, regional and even statewide electoral contests.

Immigrant workers, mostly from Mexico and Central America, comprise the overwhelming bulk of the working class in contemporary southern California, which has more foreign-born residents than any other part of the nation. Although many of the region's Latino immigrant workers are undocumented, and despite the widespread belief that such workers are extremely difficult to organize, they have been at the core

of the L.A. labor movement's revival. In a range of low-wage blue collar occupational settings, from janitorial work, to construction, to home health care, to name only the most prominent examples, Latino immigrants have swelled the ranks of unions in L.A. and have demonstrated a capacity for militancy that is second to none.

This article traces the metamorphosis of L.A.—once a legendary citadel of the open shop—into what Mike Davis (2000: 145) recently called “the major R&D center for 21st-century trade unionism.” It analyzes the relationship between immigration and unionization and exposes the dynamics that have galvanized foreign-born Latino workers into such a vital ingredient of L.A.'s model of labor renewal. And it examines the other crucial ingredient in the mix: the new activist leadership of key unions at both the local and national levels, and of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, who have cleared a path out of the wreckage of union decline and sclerosis that marked the 1970s and 1980s, developing key prototypes of innovative organizing in the 1990s.

### *Historical Background*

“There is probably no city in America where such unfriendly sentiment obtains against organized labor as in this beautiful city of Los Angeles,” a printing union official commented in 1912. (Stimson 1955: 426) Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, L.A. had a reputation as a “company town,” where the powers that be were intransigently anti-union. The classic comparison was to San Francisco, once the state's largest metropolis, where unions gained a foothold early on and where public sympathy for labor was widespread. L.A.'s labor history was quite different, as economist Ira Cross pointed out in 1935. There, “almost a century passed [after the city was founded in 1781] before unions appeared, and at no time have they played an important part in the industrial or political life of the community.” (Cross 1935: 268)

Indeed, in the early 1900s, the city was a proud bastion of the open shop whose economic and political elite, led by notorious *Los Angeles Times* proprietor Harrison Gray Otis, was unabashedly hostile to unionism. Anti-labor animus was not just Otis' personal idiosyncrasy, but rather was woven into the very fabric of L.A.'s political economy, as Carey McWilliams pointed out long ago (1973 [1946]: 276–77):

Otis and his colleagues were quick to realize that the only chance to establish Los Angeles as an industrial center was to undercut the high wage structure of San Francisco . . . Having land to burn, the Southland

dangled the bait of “cheap homes” before the eyes of the prospective homeseekers. “While wages are low,” the argument went, “homes are cheap.” . . . From 1890 to 1910, wages were from twenty to thirty and in some categories, even forty percent lower than in San Francisco. It was precisely this margin that enabled Los Angeles to grow as an industrial center. Thus the maintenance of a cheap labor pool became an indispensable cog in the curious economics of the region. For the system to work, however, the labor market had to remain unorganized; otherwise it would become impossible to exploit the homeseeker element. The system required—it absolutely demanded—a non-union open shop setup. It was this basic requirement, rather than the ferocity of General Otis, that really created the open shop movement in Los Angeles.

Periodic forays into the city by unionists in northern California who hoped to organize their southern brethren accomplished little. “Los Angeles, in spite of its name, is a wicked city and sadly in need of someone who can point out the benefits of trade union organization and the iniquities of rampant capitalism,” the San Francisco building trades publication *Organized Labor* lamented in July 1910. (cited in Kazin 1987: 202) The catastrophic bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building later that year, which killed twenty people, only served to dramatize labor’s weakness, particularly after two union men unexpectedly confessed to what Otis called “the crime of the century.” (see Stimson 1955: chapter 21) Two decades later, despite periodic efforts to revitalize the local labor movement, the situation was virtually unchanged. As Cross (1935: 287–88) summarized:

There have been continuing and costly attempts to unionize the workers in various occupations [in L.A.], but for the most part with no tangible results. Strikes, usually insignificant in extent, have been called only to be lost because of the overwhelming supply of laborers and the anti-union attitude of employers, the newspapers, and the community.

Only in the late 1930s and 1940s, when industrial unionism swept across the nation, did organized labor finally penetrate the city of angels’ heavily guarded gates. By 1939, L.A. Mayor Fletcher Bowron could state, “Even the most conservative manufacturers have come to realize that workers must organize, that bargaining cannot be with individuals, and that the effort to maintain the open shop is a lost cause.” (Perry and Perry 1963: 521) As the city, already California’s largest metropolis, grew rapidly under the spur of the World War II economic boom, union density rose steadily. After the war, L.A.’s unionization rate gradually approached that in the state as a whole. In 1951, 34% of nonagricultural

wage and salary workers in L.A. were union members, compared to 41% statewide; and at the 1955 peak, the figure was 37% in L.A., just below the state level of 39%. While organized labor was still far stronger in San Francisco (51% unionized at the 1955 peak), the north-south gap was much smaller than in previous decades. (California Department of Industrial Relations, 1956)

L.A.'s historic reputation as an anti-union town persisted well into the late twentieth century. But in fact, from the mid-1950s on, its unionization rate was similar to that in California as a whole, as Figure 1 shows, and close to the national average. As was the case throughout the U.S., union density in L.A. gradually fell over the following decades, and by the time the state stopped collecting unionization data in 1987, it had dropped to only 19.6%, half the 1955 peak. This was actually slightly above the state figure of 19.1% for 1987, however, and the decline reflected national as much as local and regional developments. The collapse of basic industries like auto, steel, and later aerospace, along with the national employer anti-union offensive that began in the late 1970s, fueled the deunionization process in L.A., as elsewhere.

#### *Unionization Patterns in Contemporary L.A.*

In the 1990s, despite the revitalization of the local labor movement described here, the overall level of union density in L.A. continued to decline, as ongoing membership losses and rapid economic growth in the nonunion sector more than offset the gains from new organizing. As Figure 2 shows, in 1998 only 15.2% of L.A. workers were union members (in between the national average of 13.9% and the state average of 16.1%).<sup>1</sup> L.A. lagged slightly behind both the state and the nation in the private sector, where only 9.0% of workers were union members in 1998 (compared to 9.5% nationally and 9.8% in California), and more sharply in manufacturing, where only 7.7% of workers were union members, half the national figure. However, public sector workers were more highly unionized in L.A. than in the state or the U.S., with well over half (54.8%) counted as union members in 1998. (Hirsch and Macpherson 1999) With nine out of every ten private sector workers entirely outside the ambit of organized labor, L.A. was once again a citadel of the open shop—although there was nothing distinctive about this by the end of the century.

The few unionized enclaves that remained were mostly relics of an earlier era. Figures 3, 4 and 5 highlight some of the basic characteristics of L.A.'s union members in the 1990s, using a merged data from

the Current Population Survey for 1994–97.<sup>2</sup> As Figure 3 shows, unionization is distributed extremely *unevenly* through the city's economy. For example, only 10% of L.A.'s workers are employed in education, but 25% of all union members work in that sector. By contrast, 18% of all workers, but only 11% of union members, are employed in manufacturing. This unevenness is an artifact of the highly peculiar U.S. industrial relations system, which since 1935 has been based not on individual decisions about union affiliation, but on instead the requirement that entire workplaces be unionized through the arduous and increasingly employer-dominated winner-take-all electoral process administered by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Thus the pattern of unionization shown in Figure 3 reflects that fact that some industries, at some point in the past, have been successfully organized, while others never have (or if they have, were deunionized subsequently). And crucially, these data tell us nothing about the current preferences of individuals, much less the preferences of categories of workers, in regard to union membership. In short, given the structure of the NLRB system, and the erosion resulting from the past few decades of deunionization, the main determinant of whether a given individual is a union member today is where he or she happens to be employed, and whether that workplace became (and remained) unionized at some previous point in time—regardless of his or her pro- or anti-union sympathies.

The data on unionization levels among immigrants and native born workers and among various ethnic groups, shown in Figure 4, must be interpreted with these caveats in mind. There is no question that immigrants are less likely than the native-born to be union members in contemporary L.A.: although native-born whites comprise only about half of all employees in the area, they account for 57% of its union members. In contrast, foreign-born Latinos are 16% of all employees in L.A., but only 9% of union members; similarly, foreign-born Asians are 11% of all employees, but only 5% of union members. (On the other hand, L.A.'s African-Americans are over-presented in union ranks: 10% are union members, although they are only 6% of L.A. employees.)

Figure 5, which shows unionization rates and employment distribution by nativity and ethnicity separately for the highly unionized public sector and the largely nonunion private sector, suggests the underlying dynamics. The public sector is far more highly unionized than the private sector not because public sector workers have a more favorable attitude toward unions (though they may), but because there is far less resistance to unionization when the employer is the federal, state or local government than when it is a private sector corporation. Indeed,

as Figure 5 reveals, *regardless of race, ethnicity or immigration status*, public sector workers are far more extensively unionized than their private-sector counterparts. Indeed, the unionization rate for foreign-born Latinos employed in the public sector in L.A. is 62%—the same as for native-born blacks, and only slightly below the 66% rate for native-born whites! However, only 5% of the area's foreign-born Latinos work in the public sector (compared to 31% of native-born blacks and 20% of native-born whites), which all by itself goes a long way toward explaining the relatively low immigrant unionization rate.

That rate is also affected by the fact that recently arrived immigrants are less likely to be union members than those who have been in the U.S. longer. Among L.A.'s foreign-born Latinos, only 7% of those who arrived in the U.S. after 1980 were unionized in 1994–97, compared to 16% of those who arrived before 1980. The latter figure is only slightly below the overall unionization rate of 19% for this sample.<sup>3</sup> This reflects the distinctive employment patterns of newcomers, who are far less likely to obtain jobs in unionized workplaces than their more settled compatriots. Newcomers are virtually excluded from public sector employment and generally relegated to the bottom of the labor market where unions are, almost by definition, unlikely to exist.

### *The Myth of Immigrant Unorganizability*

If, for historical reasons, immigrant workers are less likely to be unionized in contemporary L.A. than their native-born counterparts, what are the prospects for organizing them today and in the future? The conventional wisdom, widely accepted until very recently, is that immigrants are vulnerable, docile persons who are intensely fearful of any confrontation with authority; who accept substandard wages and poor working conditions because their standard of comparison is drawn from their home countries; and who therefore are extremely unlikely to actively seek unionization. For the undocumented, the assumption that immigrants lack real potential as union recruits is especially widespread. As Hector Delgado reported in his case study of a successful union organizing drive among undocumented Latino immigrants at an L.A. factory that took place in the 1980s, "The unorganizability of undocumented workers because of their legal status has become a 'pseudofact.'" (Delgado 1993: 10, citing Merton 1959)

Because of their vulnerability to deportation, one might indeed expect undocumented workers to be fearful about the risks involved in union organizing, particularly when confrontations with state authority are

likely. Yet Delgado found that this was far less of a problem than is generally presumed. In the case he studied:

Undocumented workers' fear of the "migra" did not make them more difficult to organize than native workers or immigrant workers with papers employed in the same industries. Workers reported giving little thought to their citizenship status and the possibility of an INS raid of the plant. . . . A forklift driver at Camagua [pseudonym for the company] claimed that he had never been afraid of the INS, adding, "I've never seen them here. Only in Tijuana." . . . [Another worker] said that he had a better chance of 'getting hit by a car'—and he didn't worry about either. . . . In response to the prospect of deportation, Camagua's workers responded that if deported they would have simply returned (in some cases, "after a short vacation"). Julia Real [pseudonym], a sewer, commented, "They're not going to kill you! The worse [sic] thing they [the INS] can do is send me home, and I'll come back." (Delgado 1993, pp. 61, 63)

Recent efforts to tighten restrictions on immigration and renewed initiatives to deport the undocumented may have altered the climate in the years since Delgado did his fieldwork. Yet the findings of his pioneering study are confirmed by developments in the 1990s, when Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented, emerged as the central protagonists of the new unionism in L.A. and elsewhere. Indeed, among the dozens of union organizers Kent Wong and I interviewed in the course of our fieldwork over the past several years, not one endorsed the once-conventional wisdom that immigrants were more difficult to recruit than natives (see the examples in Milkman and Wong 2000b).

On the contrary, despite the large numbers of undocumented immigrants among them, there is survey evidence, albeit fragmentary, suggesting that foreign-born workers'—especially Latinos'—attitudes are actually more favorable toward unions than are those of native-born workers. (DeFreitas 1993) "It's not true that immigrants are hard to organize," a northern California hotel union organizer told a researcher. "They are more supportive of unions than native workers." (Wells 2000) One reason for this may be that many recent immigrants—especially those from Central America—have some positive experiences of unionism in their home countries. Although there is no systematic evidence on this point, it is striking that many of the new rank-and-file immigrant union leaders have a history of union activism and/or left-wing political ties in their native lands. (Acu a 1996: chapter 8 cites several examples) And although many immigrant workers are from rural backgrounds, a substantial number arrive in the U.S. far better acquainted with the idioms of unionism and class politics than their native-born

counterparts. Among the workers involved in the L.A. Justice for Janitors campaign, for example, organizers reported “a high level of class consciousness,” as well as a willingness to take the risks involved in organizing that was shaped by experiences back home. “There, if you were for a union, they killed you,” one organizer noted in discussing the role of Salvadorans in this effort. “Here, you lose a job for \$4.25 an hour.” (Milkman and Wong 2000b: 24)

The fact that immigrant workers rely so heavily on ethnic social networks for such basic survival needs as housing, jobs, and various other forms of social and financial assistance, may also make them easier to recruit into the labor movement than native-born workers. Southern California is famous for its highly atomized social arrangements and weak sense of community, but that reputation is based entirely on the “Anglo” experience. In contrast, L.A.’s working-class immigrants have vibrant ethnic networks and communities rooted in extended kinship ties as well as the shared experience of migration from particular communities in their countries of origin. The intricate web of social connections among immigrants can be a key resource in building labor solidarity, particularly if unions can identify and recruit key actors in kin and community networks.

Yet another factor that may enhance the appeal of unionism is the shared ordeal of immigration itself and the persistently high level of stigmatization foreign-born workers are forced to endure in their adopted home. The sense of being under siege in a hostile environment, rather than generating passivity and fear as the conventional wisdom assumes, may actually foster solidarity. In this context, if labor unions extend a helping hand to immigrant workers, offering economic and political resources that can be utilized to ameliorate the conditions of daily life, they may be received far more enthusiastically than by native-born workers who do not feel so entirely excluded from access to other opportunities for improving their economic situation.

For all these reasons, immigrant workers have proven ready recruits to labor unionism in recent years, and the once-ubiquitous assumption that they are unorganizable seems to be dying. Indeed, the *New York Times*, the nation’s newspaper of record, attributed the success of a 1999 strike at a Washington state meatpacking plant, where 90% of the workers were foreign-born, to “the receptivity that many immigrants feel toward union activity and their growing confidence that . . . the potential benefits of pressing for better wages and working conditions outweigh any risks.” (Verhovek 1999) Similarly, the *Times*’ account of the historic 1999 union victory at the Fieldcrest Cannon textile plant in



Kannapolis, North Carolina—where over the past quarter-century several previous efforts to unionize that plant had failed—presented the success as due in part to “growing numbers of immigrants in the work force who tend to be more likely to support unionization.” (Firestone 1999) And many unionists today endorse the view that workplaces with large concentrations of immigrants—especially Latinos—are among the most promising organizing targets. An L.A. janitors’ union activist put it forcefully: “We Latino workers are a bomb waiting to explode!” (Waldinger et al. 1998: 117)

*Immigrant Organizing and the New Labor Movement in L.A.*

Latino immigrants are the economic lifeblood of the sprawling metropolis that is contemporary L.A. Fully a third of the labor force is foreign-born (compared to about 10% nationally), and the proportion is far higher in blue-collar industrial and service jobs. (see Lopez and Feliciano 2000) The new arrivals who poured into southern California over the past few decades, mostly from Mexico and Central America, have been rapidly incorporated into the increasingly deregulated and deunionized regional economy. Latino immigrants are the core of contemporary L.A.’s burgeoning low-wage, nonunion workforce, much like the native-born migrant “homeseekers” that Carey McWilliams described for an earlier era. Employers, although often skeptical initially, quickly became enamoured of the new immigrants’ apparent willingness to work hard, at long hours, for minimal (sometimes subminimal) pay. In contrast, L.A.’s organized labor movement, which suffered steep membership declines in the 1970s and 1980s, initially was hostile toward the newcomers who were arriving in vast numbers during precisely those years, fearing that they would undercut hard-won wages and labor standards.

As the numbers of immigrants grew, however, and as they became the bulk of the workforce in industry after industry, union leaders slowly began to change their views. Necessity being the mother of invention, over the years L.A. became a national laboratory for a series of experiments in immigrant unionization. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) was the first to explore this terrain, beginning in the late 1970s, and although its efforts yielded few lasting results in terms of union membership, it served as a crucial training ground for the new generation of local Latino labor leaders who would go on to lead a rich variety of immigrant organizing efforts in later years. (Milkman and Wong 2000b: 3)

The real breakthrough in organizing L.A.'s foreign-born workers on a significant scale, however, came more than a decade later, with the 1990 strike victory of the Justice for Janitors (JfJ) campaign. This was a successful effort by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to recapture its old base in building services, in this case janitors cleaning large office buildings. During the late 1970s the SEIU had about 5000 of L.A.'s private sector janitors among its members, but by the mid-1980s the figure had fallen to only 1800, even as the number of janitors in the city had grown. As wages and conditions deteriorated with deunionization, native-born workers left janitorial work in droves and were quickly replaced by recently arrived Latino immigrants. These were the workers the SEIU successfully recruited in the late 1980s, culminating in the 1990 strike. As a result of JfJ's triumph, by 1990 the SEIU had more than recouped its janitorial membership in the city, which now stood at 8000.

This was the largest private sector immigrant organizing victory since the United Farm Workers' successes in the 1970s. It has since become the gold standard for immigrant organizing, not only in L.A. but nationally. (It is even the focus of a feature film by British director Ken Loach, *Bread and Roses*, which premiered in L.A. to an audience of janitors on the tenth anniversary of the 1990 strike victory.) It dramatically demonstrated not only the potential for galvanizing immigrant workers into a militant, solidaristic force for labor movement revitalization, but also the critical role of union leadership in that process. The JfJ campaign combined grassroots rank-and-file mobilization, on the one hand, with careful strategic planning on the part of experienced union leaders with access to extensive financial resources as well as expertise, on the other. It would not have succeeded without both elements. (Milkman and Wong 2001)

The L.A. campaign was part of a national JfJ organizing drive spearheaded by then-SEIU president John Sweeney (who became president of the AFL-CIO as part of the "New Voice" leadership slate in 1995), but L.A.'s effort proved to be the most successful anywhere in the U.S. The organizers deliberately avoided the traditional NLRB electoral system in favor of an innovative approach that combined careful research into the power structure of the industry, strategic planning, and militant, media-savvy rank-and-file mobilization tactics, (see Waldinger et al. 1998, Savage 1998 for details)

The JfJ effort not only showed that immigrants could organize successfully on a large scale, but also, and equally important, that their initial organizing successes could be sustained. Indeed, despite difficult

internal conflicts in the local union in the aftermath of the initial breakthrough, the L.A. janitors went on over the course of the 1990s to consolidate their success, holding the line against the ever-restless building owners and office cleaning companies, winning a series of contract improvements, and keeping union members active, informed, and involved in the internal life of the union. (Fisk et al. 2000)

In April 2000 the L.A. janitors launched another spectacularly successful strike to improve their wages and to narrow geographical pay differentials. As they had done ten years earlier, the SEIU not only mobilized rank-and-file janitors on a huge, highly visible scale, but also used the occasion to skillfully expose and critique the social inequality and ethnic polarization that is so deeply embedded in contemporary L.A. In the context of a period of unprecedented prosperity for the city as a whole, the union's demands for improved pay and conditions for low-wage Latino immigrant workers whose daily labor involved cleaning up after mostly native-born "Anglo" lawyers and other professionals in the city's glitzy office towers immediately captured the moral high ground, and the strike won unprecedented public support. (see Meyerson 2000)

The janitors' success remains unmatched in its scale and visibility, but it is part of a larger set of pathbreaking unionization efforts that emerged in the 1990s among L.A.'s vast immigrant workforce. Two years after the janitors' 1990 breakthrough, a five-month strike by thousands of Mexican immigrant drywall hangers (workers who install the sheetrock panels that make up the interior walls of modern buildings) halted residential construction throughout southern California. (see Milkman and Wong 2000a) This yielded a union contract that doubled drywallers' wages in the region and brought 2400 previously nonunion Mexican immigrant workers into the Carpenters' Union. One important element in the campaign was the legal assistance coordinated by the California Immigrant Workers' Association (CIWA), an AFL-CIO sponsored organization founded in 1989 (but abandoned not long after this strike) that was staffed by a group of talented labor and immigration activists and attorneys. Although the aftermath of the drywallers' campaign was far more problematic than in the case of the janitors, with the Carpenters' union failing to sustain the market share it had won at the time of the strike settlement and also leaving the internal structure of the union untransformed, this example too shows the potential for organizing success among Latino immigrants when rank-and-file militancy and experienced union leadership are coordinated. (Milkman and Wong 2001)

And there are others. The L.A. local of the Hotel Employees and

Restaurant Employees (HERE) union, although it has yet to achieve an organizing victory comparable in size to those of the janitors and drywallers, has been highly effective in smaller-scale recruitment among immigrants. It is now headed by Maria Elena Durazo, who rose to power in 1989 after a challenge to an old-line union bureaucracy that, among other things, had refused to translate the union contract or union meetings into Spanish. Under her leadership, L.A.'s HERE local has become a leader in "internal organizing," that is, activating its existing membership to both strengthen the union where it is already entrenched and to organize new workplaces. (see Milkman and Wong 2000b: 11–22)

Even in manufacturing, often seen as a hopeless sector in which to organize, given its vulnerability to capital mobility, there have been some successful unionization efforts among L.A.'s immigrant workers. The largest involved 1200 Latino wheel workers who launched a wild-cat strike at the L.A. American Racing Equipment factory in July 1990, leading to a union victory in a representation election held later that year, and in 1991 to a union contract. This was a rank-and-file initiated campaign and the resulting local union, International Association of Machinists Local 1910 (named for the year the Mexican Revolution began) remains vibrant and highly independent, and has won significant contract improvements over the years since the strike. (see Zabin 2000)

All these initiatives notwithstanding, the story here is still one of *potential* rather than actual transformation. Even the 90,000 new union members (most of them low-wage immigrants) recruited in 1999 are a drop in the bucket, hardly likely to turn the tide of union decline.<sup>4</sup> After all, L.A. is the nation's second largest metropolis with a labor force of over six million, a third of them foreign-born, and in the private sector over 90% of workers remain outside the union fold, as we saw earlier. And while a few unions, most importantly SEIU and HERE, have developed tremendous dynamism, the rest remain staid fortresses of labor bureaucracy and do hardly any organizing at all. Still, the recent experiments that have occurred in L.A. have assumed importance beyond that suggested by the numbers of workers and unions involved, for at least two reasons.

The first reason involves timing. The janitors, drywallers, and American Racing successes all antedate—but by only a few years—the 1995 coup in the AFL-CIO, which brought former SEIU President John Sweeney, who had overseen the JfJ campaign, to the helm of the federation. Sweeney and his "New Voice" leadership slate came to power with a commitment to making organizing central to the labor movement once

again, as the SEIU itself had done under his leadership in the years immediately preceding. The displays of militancy in L.A. during the period just before Sweeney's ascent and his intimate familiarity with the case of the JfJ campaign there in particular therefore have generated considerable attention at the highest levels of the U.S. labor movement (Cleland 1999). Even the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project, an effort to develop industry-wide organizing strategies for L.A.'s vast manufacturing sector, although it was never fully funded and was abandoned entirely in 1997, only three years after its official establishment, continues to be an important reference point in discussions among the hopeful architects of new labor. (Delgado 2000) While historically L.A., with its notorious reputation as a company town, was barely on the radar screen for the national labor movement, in recent years it has captured the imagination of the many progressive unionists who ally themselves with labor's revitalization efforts in the Sweeney era.

The second reason the immigrant unionization breakthroughs of the 1990s are of greater significance than their modest scale would otherwise warrant is that they have so radically transformed L.A.'s political scene, in which labor is now a formidable presence. The L.A. County Federation of Labor—headed since 1996 by Miguel Contreras, a former farmworkers' organizer widely respected in the Latino community—has become a key power broker thanks to its repeated mobilization of newly enfranchised Latino immigrant voters. The County Fed has been extraordinarily successful in translating its affiliates' past organizing successes into political power, and in a virtuous circle, that political leverage in turn has become a resource helping to foster further organizing.

Ironically, California's passage of Proposition 187 in 1994, which involved a variety of restrictions on immigrant rights, led to a surge in naturalization among the eligible foreign-born population, producing thousands and thousands of new citizens with the right to vote. The Latino proportion of all California voters doubled over the four years that followed Prop. 187, reaching 12% in 1998. (Pyle et al. 1998) And because the proposition had been sponsored by Republican Governor Pete Wilson, the new voters tended to gravitate toward the Democrats. These developments, combined with the longstanding political apathy on the part of L.A.'s native-born citizenry, created an opportunity for Latinos to become a significant electoral force, and the County Fed has nearly single-handedly turned that opportunity into a palpable reality. As veteran L.A. political journalist Harold Meyerson (2000) recently noted:

Since Contreras assumed its leadership in 1996, the federation has intervened in 17 district races—all hotly contested, at all levels of government—and has prevailed in 16 of them. . . . [There is] a new order in the political firmament of Latino California. The janitors, in tandem with the hotel workers, have supplanted the United Farm Workers as the political powerhouse and moral beacon of local Latino politics.

In 1996, five of the six County Fed-backed Democratic candidates for the state legislature won their races, helped by \$160,000 in union campaign contributions. (Rodriguez 1998) The following year the County Fed orchestrated a whole series of political victories: in a head-on confrontation with Republican Mayor Richard Riordan, labor candidates won a majority of seats on the elected city charter reform commission; the City Council passed a union-backed “living wage” law; and former SEIU official Gil Cedillo was elected to a state assembly seat. The most impressive Latino-labor electoral showing of all came in June 1998, when labor—again led by the L.A. County Fed—mobilized successfully to defeat Proposition 226, a ballot measure designed to curtail the use of union dues for political purposes. The measure was defeated by a narrow 53 to 47 margin, and might well have passed if not for the fact that 75% of Latinos voted against it, according to exit polls. (Pyle et al. 1998)

L.A. labor has parlayed its political clout, in turn, into leverage in ongoing worker organizing efforts. The April 2000 janitors strike once again provides the shining example. The SEIU launched the strike with official endorsements from 48 local elected officials, and by the end had won support from politicians across the board—including members of both houses of the state legislature, the entire city council (some members of which were arrested for civil disobedience in support of the strike), and even Republican mayor Richard Riordan. The strike became a litmus test of loyalty to the formidable County Fed. for L.A.’s politicians, and above all for aspiring Latino politicians, for whom “to have been missing in action, or deemed insufficiently pro-janitors, would have amounted to political suicide.” (Meyerson 2000)

Labor’s accumulating political influence has also been translated into organizing breakthroughs in other arenas in the past few years. For example, in a political *quid pro quo*, Riordan recently appointed Contreras to the Airport Commission, a useful point of leverage in the ongoing “Respect at LAX” campaign which has made considerable headway in its efforts to win union recognition for baggage handlers and other airport service workers. Another example is the City Council’s worker-retention ordinance, which protects workers’ jobs when a new contractor

takes over work directly under contract to the city, and which was extended in 1999 to cover recipients of economic development grants as well. (Meyerson 1999) Thus by the late 1990s organized labor had not only become “the 800-pound gorilla in local politics,” as the *Los Angeles Times* reported (Schuster 1998), but also had managed to create effective links between its newfound political power and the continuing uphill struggle to build its organizing capacity—the most critical task in labor revitalization.

### *Conclusion*

As the L.A. examples illustrate, immigrant workers, undocumented or not, are highly receptive to organizing efforts. The major impediment is not a lack of interest in unions on their part, but rather, the still relatively limited efforts to tap that interest on the part of the labor movement—itsself reinforced by the intensely anti-labor environment which makes organizing workers of any type extremely difficult in the contemporary U.S. But since 1995, the new AFL-CIO leadership has signaled a strong commitment to recruiting new members and has poured unprecedented resources into the effort. Such leadership support from the top is an absolutely critical ingredient in the innovative unionism that has emerged in the 1990s. (Voss and Sherman 2001) And the AFL-CIO’s historic announcement in February 2000 of a new immigrant worker policy initiative, calling for blanket amnesty for undocumented immigrants and an end to sanctions against employers who hire them, is a bold step that should help foster new organizing among immigrants in particular. (Greenhouse 2000)

Yet what has been achieved so far remains fragile, and the obstacles to further progress are formidable. The AFL-CIO’s affiliated unions vary widely in the extent to which they are willing to embrace the national leadership’s new initiatives, and while it can reward compliance, the Sweeney administration cannot force it on the many affiliates that remain captives of the old guard. For all the sterling examples of new immigrant organizing strategies offered by unions like the SEIU and HERE, there are at least as many cases of campaigns that failed due to union ineptitude, a lack of strategic leadership, or unrelenting employer opposition. (see Milkman and Wong 2001) Moreover, many unions still are not seriously undertaking new organizing at all. Even those that are successfully recruiting immigrant workers often fail to move on to the next step, namely transforming their internal organizational and leadership structure in such a way as to fully incorporate

immigrant workers and their specific concerns. This is a critical task if immigrant unionism is to have any lasting significance—and is often as difficult as new organizing itself.

If the labor movement is to survive into the new century, however, it has little choice but to take on these tasks. To be sure, the odds are very heavily stacked against unions in confrontations with employers in this historical period. If JfJ and some of the other examples mentioned here show that winning is possible, even in such an unlikely venue as L.A., once a redoubt of vicious anti-unionism, no one can argue that it is easy. Ironically, however, the surge of low-wage Latino immigration that was generally presumed to be a threat to organized labor until quite recently, may be one of the few trump cards that could help New Labor beat the odds.

#### Notes

1. Note that the 1998 figures in this paragraph are taken from a different data series (part of the U.S. Current Population Survey) and are not strictly comparable to the 1951–87 data cited above. (In 1988, 16.4 percent of L.A. workers were union members, in the CPS data series—whereas the California state data found a 19.6% unionization rate for 1987.) Like the 1951–87 data, however, the figures cited here include only union members, and not workers covered by union contracts who are non-members. Obviously these 1998 data do not include the 90,000 new union members recruited by L.A. area unions in 1999. For details about the 1998 data, see Hirsch and Macpherson 1999.

2. Thanks to Roger Waldinger for providing access to this special merged data set. Because the local sample sizes for each year in the CPS are very small, the merged four-year set is especially valuable. Even here however the numbers of observations are quite small, so these data should be interpreted with caution. In the merged data set,  $n = 1194$  for the five-county L.A. workforce (including L.A., Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura Counties), and for union members in the five counties,  $n = 232$ . For further discussion and analysis of this data set see Waldinger and Der-Martiosian 2000.

3. This figure is higher than those cited earlier because the sample includes not only union members but workers who are covered by union contracts under agency shop and other such arrangements, even though they are not union members. The data cited above from Hirsch and Macpherson are for union members only, as mentioned in note 1 above.

4. Moreover, 74,000 of the 90,000 new members recruited in 1999 were *public sector* home health care workers who became SEIU members after an eleven-year campaign that mainly involved lobbying and other political efforts to make unionization legally feasible. (See Greenhouse 1999 and Cobb 1999)

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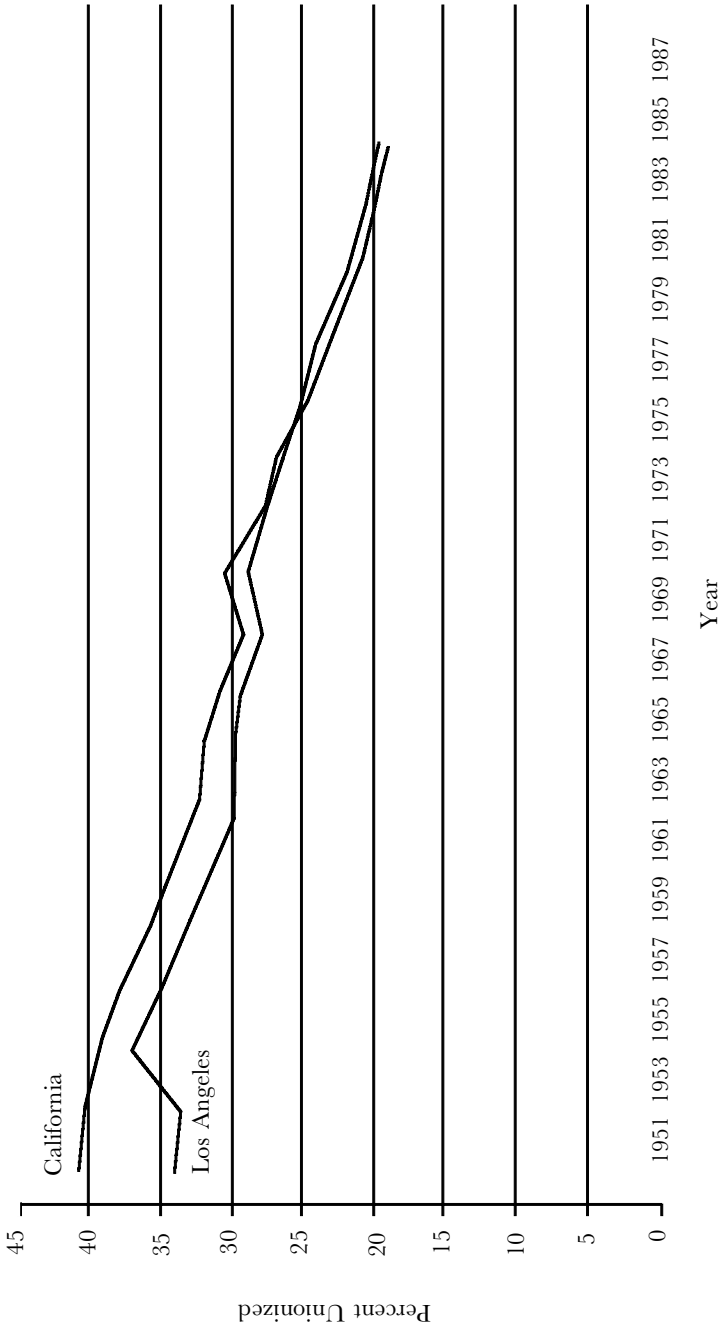
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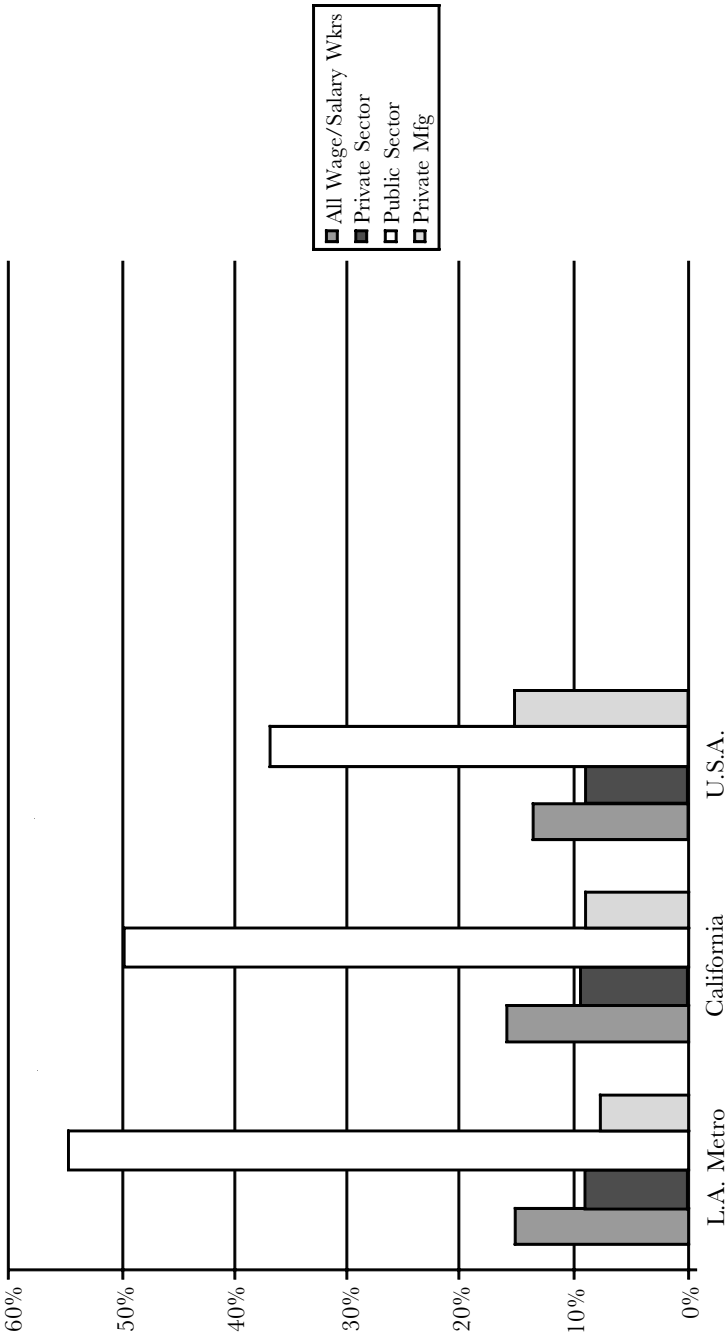
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Figure 1. Union Members as percentage of nonfarm wage and salary workers, 1951-1987



Source: California Department of Industrial Relations, *Union Labor in California*, various issues

Figure 2. Union Density by Sector, L.A., California, and U.S., 1998

Source: Hirsch and Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book* (1999 edition)

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Figure 3. Employed Workers and Union Members in Greater L.A., 1994-97, by Industry  
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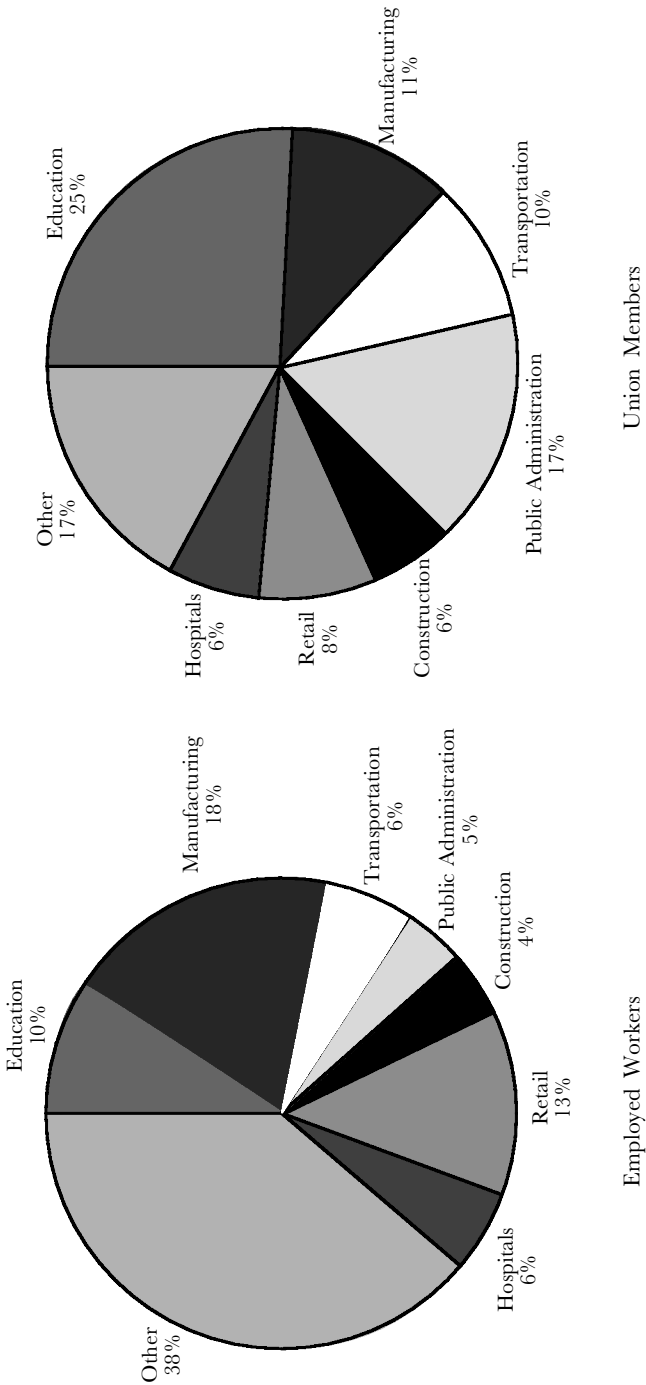


Figure 4. Employed Workers and Union Members in Greater L.A., 1994-97, by Nativity and Ethnicity

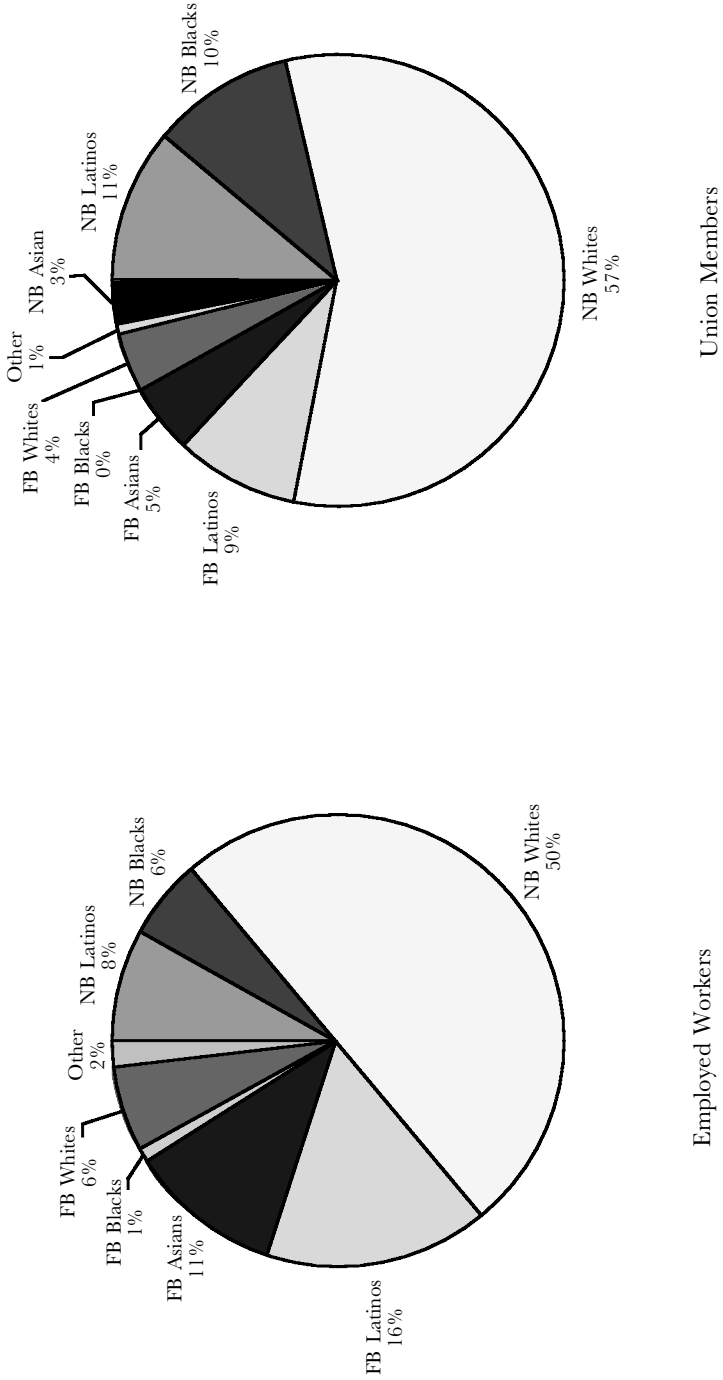


Figure 5. Employed Workers and Union Members in Greater L.A., 1994–97, by Sector, Nativity and Ethnicity

