

## **Handout 5.1 - Don't Be Fooled: Immigration is NOT the Real Problem**

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Many Americans have a love-hate relationship with immigrant workers. We sometimes hate immigrants who take "our" jobs. At the same time we love low prices, prices that may depend on the very low wages paid immigrant workers. But when native-born workers are in conflict with immigrant workers, we all lose. A good society can only be built on justice for all – for immigrant workers and for workers born in the U.S.

Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico and the former home of many immigrants. A typical coffee farmer in the highlands lives in a tiny house with a dirt floor and a single dangling light bulb. Everyone is well acquainted with poverty and hardship. But as a tidal wave of economic destruction has washed over the highland villages, people have been forced to travel north seeking work. Loved ones left behind experience the destruction of their family and community life. When asked to identify their greatest problem, the villagers name immigration.

Coffee farmers in Chiapas and many other workers around the world are losing their livelihoods and ways of life due to biased international agreements that favor corporations over workers. Skewed economic policies are forcing people to leave their homes to seek work and refuge from a tsunami of economic globalization.

Workers in the U.S. are also confronting this tidal wave of economic change and destruction. Globalization has brought stagnant or falling wages, a shift from well paid manufacturing jobs to lower paying ones, financial insecurity, and competition by immigrants for jobs. Immigration has become a hot-button issue. But the real problem is not immigrant workers. They are often victims of a system that serves neither native-born nor foreign-born workers.

A few years ago, the U.S. Department of Labor found that none of the poultry processing plants they examined paid employees for all the time they worked. In meat packing, more than one in every ten workers has a significant injury each year. Both these industries employ large numbers of immigrant workers. And immigrants from Mexico are killed on their jobs in the U.S. at a rate 75% higher than that of workers who were born here.

The problem for American workers is not immigration but weak and poorly enforced workplace protections. Most firms do not exploit workers, immigrant or native-born. But some do. If these companies can pay less than is required by law, violate safety standards, fire a worker or get him deported if he tries to form a union, and do so with minimal penalties or none at all, then we will see more firms exploiting workers. Wages will continue to fall, benefits will continue to disappear, union membership will continue to decline, and American workers will become more financially insecure. The rich will get richer and the poor, poorer.

The answer is not hostility to immigrants. Instead, we must demand that politicians strengthen and enforce workplace protections for all of us. And politicians must revise biased international agreements that benefit multinational corporations and harm workers here in the U.S. and around the world.

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/immigration/immigrant-workers.html>