

IMMIGRANTS, EMPLOYMENT, AND LABOR UNIONS: NASHVILLE



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The challenges of immigrant integration have stimulated the development of a range of advocacy networks and organizations.

by William Canak

Five years ago, the 2002–03 Immigrant Community Assessment of Nashville determined that Davidson County’s foreign-born population had tripled to almost 10 percent of its 600,000 residents during the 1990s. Middle Tennessee’s robust, full-employment service economy and moderate cost of living have made it an attractive destination community for immigrants and refugees over the past two decades. Since the census of 1990, Nashville has become transformed by a strong and diverse set of immigrant and refugee streams, especially from Latin America but also from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Today Nashville’s percentage of foreign-born residents approximates the U.S. average for all cities. Most of these foreign-born Nashville residents (75 percent) are not citizens, and 24 percent fall below the poverty line, twice the rate for Nashville as a whole. The poverty rate of

Nashville’s foreign-born is similar to that of African-Americans and Hispanics, who constitute 25 percent and 5 percent of Nashville’s population, respectively (Cornfield et al. 2003; Cornfield 2004; Swarns 2003).

The challenges of immigrant integration have stimulated the development of a range of advocacy networks and organizations. These include umbrella organizations for social justice, advocacy, and information sharing; ethnic community organizations and religious institutions including mosques and cultural centers; neighborhood organizations in Nashville’s southeast quadrant (along Nolensville and Murfreesboro roads), where the majority of the foreign-born of many ethnic backgrounds reside; and progressive, culturally sensitive, professional social service and resettlement service providers (Cornfield et al. 2003; Cornfield 2004). The 2002–03 Immigrant Community Assessment of Nashville

suggests that immigrants are not addressing their employment issues by unionizing. Instead, immigrants have developed their own ethnic enclave economies, especially Latino and Asian immigrant groups, informal networks for job referrals and childcare arrangements, paid homework, and English-language acquisition (Cornfield 2004).

In the summer and fall of 2004, we conducted intensive semistructured interviews with a sample of 25 immigrant rights advocates and union officials.¹ Follow-up interviews with selected leaders in 2008 were used to gather information on recent changes in coalition building. Our interviews with leading activists and leaders in Nashville’s immigrant rights and labor movements suggest the available configuration of cultural and organizational resources can inspire and facilitate immigrant–labor coalition building in Nashville. The newness of immigration in Nashville and short history of contact between these two local social movements, however, present cultural and organizational barriers that need to be surmounted for immigrant–labor coalitions to form. An emerging, as yet inchoate and fragmented immigrant rights movement lacks cultural and organizational resources—especially economic leverage and access to the polity it can obtain from the local labor movement that can address immigrant workers’ employment challenges. At the same time, the declining local labor movement lacks the requisite cultural and organizational resources for organizing immigrant workers it can obtain from the immigrant rights movement and thereby revitalize and strengthen itself as an advocate for working families. In short, the available configuration of cultural and organizational resources in Nashville lends itself to the formation of immigrant–labor coalitions based in a mutually beneficial exchange of cultural and organizational resources between the two local social movements.

Coalition-Building Frameworks

The potential for local unions to develop effective immigrant-oriented organizing initiatives relates to their role in labor markets and ties to parent international unions whose resources and experience could provide important mobilizing resources. For example, some unions, notably those in skilled crafts, recruit and train members, contract with employers to provide workers, and act as a “hiring hall” bringing together workers

and employers. Other unions rely on employers to hire workers who may then seek to be represented by a union. In addition, some local unions have close and constant ties to their parent national associations, with continual flows of information, training, funds, and strategic resource support for innovative initiatives. Others function with an affiliation but few resources and little day-to-day contact or accountability. Union-centered, tightly coupled local labor organizations are more likely than other local unions to undertake initiatives that incorporate information, strategic models for coalition building, and nonlocal resources aimed at coalition building. In contrast, leaders of employer-centered, loosely coupled local labor unions perceive coalition building as a cipher, although they are not resistant or antagonistic to the prospect of coalitions with immigrant communities in Nashville. They cede to established and institutionalized community organizations such as religious organizations or the United Way the role of defining coalition building, setting agendas, and defining objectives.

In middle Tennessee, union coalition building with immigrant organizations and associations remains limited and intermittent for both union- and employer-centered local unions. Even local unions whose international unions have well-established and effective strategic models for coalition building with immigrants in other regions of the U.S. have lagged in immigrant organizing. Coalition building has developed, however, during the past few years through initiatives of the Tennessee AFL-CIO state labor council and other community groups under the umbrella name *Nashville Movement*. The coalition is modeled on Memphis’s Interfaith Coalition for Economic Justice. This recent effort to build a progressive union/community alliance in metropolitan Nashville links unions with numerous community service organizations. These groups include the Tennessee Alliance for Progress, Jobs with Justice, Middle Tennessee Interfaith Alliance, Tennessee Immigrants Rights Coalition, and Urban Epicenter.

The Tennessee AFL-CIO state labor council received a grant of \$320,000 from the Public Welfare Foundation to fund a three-year project establishing a worker center (Fine 2006), hire staff, and coordinate long-range planning. Early initiatives have included organizing drives with

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600 West African taxi drivers, a campaign with homeless temporary workers employed at sports facilities, and the hiring hall functions for day laborers. A traditional organizing model doesn't work with this population of entertainment and tourism workers, taxi drivers, and temporary workers, who frequently work for agencies committing wage and hour violations.

Through this worker center, the objective is to establish an affiliation with the Central Labor Council and work with some unions, such as the United Steelworkers and United Auto Workers, and other community groups. Immigrants commonly lack resources to navigate the legal and bureaucratic infrastructure that regulates work relations. A worker center can help immigrants to navigate initial communications with unions in the building trades, manage an 800 number for complaints, and provide counsel for EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) or ERISA (Employee Retirement Income Security Act) violation and back-wage cases. In addition, through work with faith-based groups, worker center staff can link immigrants to craft union pre-apprenticeship programs or Southern Migrant Legal Services. Finally, these new coalitions provide a durable structure for Nashville's Living Wage Ordinance initiative.

As a globalizing city of the U.S. interior, Nashville exemplifies opportunities and constraints facing union revitalization and potential avenues for collaboration and coalition building between immigrant communities and local labor unions. These opportunities for collaboration and support have been dormant. Nevertheless, Nashville's immigrant communities and labor unions have built and sustained organizational and cultural resources. These leaders place responsibility on themselves and also on economic and cultural factors that rationalize immigrant workers' decisions to remain nonunion. Second, national unions provide a range of resources, including training programs and union documents that have been translated into immigrants' native languages. Third, local union leaders recognize that their ability to communicate with immigrants has been limited by their own lack of knowledge and familiarity with language and cultural practices, including immigrant gender relations and religious beliefs. Fourth, local union leaders have considerable experience and well-established formal relationships with local community service organizations that address immigrant community interests. Finally, local union leaders are familiar with union programs developed elsewhere in the U.S. that have successfully built coalitions with immigrant communities and may support future coalitions.

Modeled on programs successfully established in other regions, coalitions could open a path for a mutually beneficial exchange of cultural and organizational resources between the immigrant rights and labor unions in Nashville. Such organizational exchanges and joint projects can dispel fear and prejudice, create mutual trust and awareness, and improve the prospects of further coalition building between these two movements in Nashville.

Finally, the specific exchange of organizational and cultural resources within and between these movements favors a specific union organizational model for immigrant union organizing in the globalizing U.S. interior: the current Nashville initiative to found worker centers effectively extends the union-centered local labor organization model to local conditions. In the past, Nashville labor unions have established preliminary links to the immigrant community and contributed resources to such community groups as United Way and Good Will, but these efforts have tended to become disassociated with organized labor and frequently provide subsidies to nonunion employers. In contrast, the developing union-centered worker centers in immigrant communities may institute a viable resource exchange and collaboration between Nashville unions and immigrant rights advocates for addressing immigrant employment needs and issues and revitalizing the labor movement. ■

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Note

1. This report incorporates data from a 2004–05 research project conducted by author and professor Daniel Cornfield, Vanderbilt University. Results of this research were published in “Immigrants and Labor in a Globalizing City: Prospects for Unionization in Nashville, Tennessee,” *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*, Lowell Turner and Daniel Cornfield, editors, Cornell University Press, 2007.

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