

Competing for Work?

by Michael Prokosch

Are immigrants competing with native-born workers for jobs and driving down their wages?

Economists disagree. A recent study by economist David Card, at the University of California Berkeley, comparing heavily immigrant cities like Los Angeles to other cities with few immigrants, has found little job or wage competition. But a recent study by economists Borjas and Katz says that actually, Mexican immigrants *did* pull down the wages of native-born high school dropouts by eight percent between 1980 and 2000.

It's not clear who is right. Still, it's hard to imagine that you can add 12 million mostly working immigrants to a labor market and not affect some people's wages or jobs. Among African-Americans, in particular, there's a debate over job competition with immigrants.

And what to do about it? Rev. Hurmon Hamilton of Boston's Black Ministerial Alliance and the Ten Point Coalition captures the challenges well:

" . . . how do we prevent ourselves from being pitted against one another for the limited unskilled jobs in a service economy?

" . . . how do we [African-Americans and immigrant communities] avoid becoming pawns of economic or corporate interests that would welcome substandard wages, for both native and foreign-born workers? . . .

" . . . how do we ensure that our immigrant status or ex-offender status is neither a barrier to employment nor an invitation to exploitation? And how do we make sure that all of our children have access to the educational resources and opportunities that they need? These challenges underscore all the more why we must work closely with one another as opposed to turning on another in our time of need."

Rev. Hamilton makes a crucial point: the

choice that immigrant and native workers face is the choice they always face. Workers can compete with each other and let employers drive their wages down or they can unite to face employers together and take their wages out of competition. The starting point for workers has to be unity, and that is the approach that some labor unions and community organizations like Mothers on the Move in the South Bronx are following.

But if unity is the best road for blacks and immigrants, the first couple of miles will have to be spent learning each others' histories. Immigrants need to learn about racism in the U.S. economy. They need to see how employers make people of different races compete and drive down everyone's wages. Most important, they need to know that waves of immigrants have passed blacks by, giving employers new people they can hire instead of blacks.

Writing about South L.A., *Los Angeles Times* columnist Erin Aubrey Kaplan says, "Many blacks also feel as if they've been pushed out of jobs that then go to Latino immigrants. But what's too often overlooked is that the immigrants didn't do the pushing, the employers did.

"For many employers, illegal immigration is a double winner. They get to hire cheap labor, and they don't have to hire blacks, whom they were loath to hire in the first place. . . .

"None of this negates the real things black and brown folks have in common, or the need for unity. (In fact, it makes that need much clearer.) But before coming together, we have to look unflinchingly at the forces keeping us apart."

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