

# Day Laborers and Dock Workers: Casual Labor Markets and Immigration Policy

Peter Skerry

# Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2007

**Abstract** The situations of nineteenth century dock workers and today's immigrant day laborers bear striking similarities and challenges, especially for those seeking to organize them into labor unions. The obstacles confronting such organizing efforts also underscore the legitimate concerns many Americans have about the threats to social order posed by immigrants today.

**Keywords** Day laborers · Dock workers · Immigration · Union organizing

Crowds of men congregate, some on the off-chance of being taken on, whilst others, I am inclined to think,

an outreach coordinator with a local church, told Professor Janice Fine:

The major complaints of the community were that, (a) they couldn't walk in the streets because the men were





there are also important differences, most of which underscore how day labor markets are even more difficult to order and rationalize than the docks. For instance, longshoremen typically work in teams, or gangs, while day laborers usually hire themselves out as individuals. To be sure, they hang out with one another at hiring sites. But in this setting they are likely to be rivals and competitors. Day laborers lack the opportunities to build the resilient bonds of fellow-feeling and solidarity that develop when individuals work intensely in close physical proximity on common goals or objectives, especially involving risk like miners or infantrymen. On the other hand, the bonds of language and culture that day laborers share as Latino immigrants in the United States might compensate for weak work-based solidarity.

More important is that day labor markets do not have a few highly capitalized employers. Indeed, the opposite is

already. Despite the federal government's increased vigilance, our borders remain highly porous.

Whatever the realities on the ground, immigrants typically believe that they will not remain here permanently. They tend to regard their stay as temporary, during which time they will work hard and save a lot of money.

their home countries, or viewed their situations as temporary and for that reason, tolerable.

This analysis suggests that organizing efforts among day laborers will be of limited success. Rather than looking and functioning like traditional unions, immigrant worker centers will assume a more defensive posture, focused more directly and immediately on getting day laborers off street corners, where they create the congestion and commotion that has antagonized so many Americans. Given what we have seen here, this will be difficult enough to accomplish.

One need not be a union supporter to be sobered by these findings. If experienced labor organizers are daunted by the