

Labor Organizing Beyond Race and Nation: The Los Angeles Hilton Case

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Since the 1960s, the American economy has witnessed both a massive influx of immigrant workers and a sharp decline in organized labor. While some have blamed immigrant workers for the decline in labor unions, others have argued that immigrant workers represent one of the most promising possibilities for revitalizing the labor movement. In their struggle to organize, immigrant workers and their supporters have sought to overcome their structural disadvantages with innovative strategies that include community-based organizing and multi-racial coalition building. Moreover, as the American economy becomes increasingly open to transnational dynamics, labor unions have struggled to build a movement that transcends national boundaries by forging cross-national strategic alliances. While these represent Herculean tasks, there are nevertheless individual cases of success. This study examines the struggles of Latino workers in Los Angeles Hilton and Towers in 1994 and offers it as one such case in the politics of possibility.

Immigrant workers and labor unions have a complicated relationship in the United States. On the one hand, immigrant workers have been viewed as an anathema to organized labor. Historically, American labor unions have viewed immigrant workers as a source of cheap and pliable labor that threatened the economic and political power of native workers. In reaction, the most powerful and mainstream American labor unions historically supported exclusionary and racist immigration policies, a pattern that lasted until the 1960s (Saxton 1971; Bonacich 1972; Almaguer 1994). On the other hand, immigrant workers have contributed mightily to American labor movements. Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrant workers played a central role from the formative stages of modern American labor movement to its height in the 1940s (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000). During the 1960s, through their collaborative effort in the United Farm Workers, Mexican and Filipino immigrant workers linked their labor activism with immigrant rights and interracial unity and provided a moral vision for the labor movement (Almaguer 1994).

Since the passage of the landmark Immigration Act of 1965, organized labor and immigration have taken dramatically divergent trajectories in the United States. As so many have documented, the American labor movement has undergone a long and steep decline since the 1960s. From 1960 to 2000, the rate of unionization in the private sector declined from 30 percent to 9 percent (Milkman 2000). During this same time, the number of immigrants rose dramatically: from 1960 to 2001, over 24 million immigrated to the United States with the vast majority of the immigrants coming from Asia, Mexico, and Central America (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2003). In California, the state that has received the largest share of immigrants, this international migration has transformed the workforce. From 1970 to 2000, California's total workforce more than doubled from 6 million to 13.5 million. During this same time, the number of Latino workers grew over 500 percent while Asian American workers grew over 800 percent. By 2000, approximately 30 percent of California's work force consisted of Latino (19 percent) and Asian (11 percent) immigrants (Lopez and Feliciano 2000).

In recent years, the connection between these two developments has become intensely debated. In their contribution to one of the most significant studies of this relationship, Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000) posed the following provocative question as the title of their chapter, "Immigrant Workers and American Labor: Challenge or Disaster?" After noting that the heyday of American labor coincided with the most restrictive immigration policies of the 1930s and 1940s, they nonetheless argue that the relationship is highly complex and warns against facile approaches that posit causal relationship between large-scale immigration and the decline of labor unions (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000: 49-50). Indeed, within the contemporary setting, studies have demonstrated that while immigrant workers are less likely to have unionized jobs, they have spearheaded some of the most successful and innovative labor campaigns, ranging from the 1992 Southern California Drywall Strike that involved thousands of Mexican immigrant construction workers to the more broadly based campaign that won "living-wage" for the predominantly Latino and African American home health care workers in New York (Milkman and Wong 2000; *New*

York Times 2002). In addition to participating in formal labor unions, immigrant workers have also founded advocacy organizations to politically advance their interests. Initially founded as a response to the neglect of immigrant workers of color, these organizations have become increasingly important in protecting immigrant worker's rights and as important partners to labor unions in successful campaigns. Organizations such as Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) in New York and the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in Oakland, California, have become prototype immigrant worker's advocacy organizations that bring intimate knowledge of ethnic communities in their activities, including in their collaboration with labor unions (Louie 2001; Kwong 1997). Reflecting both the demographic changes in the work force and the strategic importance of immigrant workers, the leadership of American organized labor has recently come to a consensus that the future of labor unions is inextricably tied to their ability to organize immigrant workers (Sherman and Voss 2000).

While there is a growing willingness on the part of labor unions to organize immigrant workers, there is also a deep recognition that this represents a monumental task. In this regard, two elements that are seen among the most intractable barriers to organizing immigrant workers are the racial and ethnic diversity of immigrant workers themselves and the increasing globalization of the American economy that has resulted in the exportation of American jobs and importation of foreign transnational corporations. In her study of unionization of San Francisco hotel industry, Wells (2000) explores the challenges of organizing Asian American and Latino immigrants who bring with them diverse immigration histories and legal status, class and cultural differences, and varying levels of labor militancy and ideological "receptivity" to labor unions. In addition, unlike European immigrant workers who framed their ethnic interests through the racialized "wages of whiteness" (Roediger, 1999), Asian and Latino immigrant workers are more likely to view themselves as competitors rather than partners in the labor market (Hossfeld 1988, Park 1999).

Despite the structural and political challenges, immigrant workers have successfully organized in the last decade. Indeed, as Milkman, Raba-

dan, and Wong (2000) point out in their study of Southern California dry-wall strike, organizing immigrant workers has been one of the few bright spots in the labor movement in recent times. In addition, organizing immigrant workers have reconnected labor activism with grassroots-based mobilization—a connection that has been largely missing in the recent past. On this front, Los Angeles has emerged as an important center for immigrant labor organizing and activism (Silverstein 1996). In addition to receiving the largest number of post-1965 immigrants, Los Angeles witnessed a number of innovative campaigns led by immigrant workers. In the 1990s, the successful Justice for Janitors (JfJ) campaign carried out by Service Employees's International Union (SEIU) Local 399 captured the imagination of the national labor movement by demonstrating that immigrant workers can be successfully organized on a massive scale (Fisk, Mitchell, and Erickson 2000). JfJ campaign also brought greater attention to the strategy of “community-based organizing” that emphasized linking labor unions with social service organizations, immigrant rights groups, and social protest. The success of JfJ as well as the drywall strike has inspired other efforts by Los Angeles labor unions including efforts to organize the auto equipment industry, the garment industry, and in 1995, a nine-union effort to organize immigrant manufacturing workers in the city's historic Alameda Corridor (Zabin 2000; Bonacich 2000; Delgado 2000).

In addition to campaigns mounted by labor unions, Los Angeles during the 1990s witnessed countless drives by worker's advocacy organizations, immigrant rights groups, and social service organizations that collectively sought higher wages and better working conditions for immigrant workers. Organizations such as Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, Thai Community Development Center, Asian Pacific American Legal Center, The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles focused their activities in notoriously abusive industries, including the Jessica McClintock campaign and the El Monte slave-shop incident that brought national spotlight to the plight of immigrant workers in the garment industry (Louie 2001; Su and Martorell 2001).

As global dynamics have brought immigrant workers to the United States, American companies have exported millions of jobs overseas. More than any other single factor, the runaway shops—particularly in the manufacturing sector—have been implicated in the decline in labor unions (Milkman 2000). However, there is a flipside to this process. In the past three decades, there has been an explosion of foreign transnational corporations that have heavily invested in the United States and have become major employers in the American labor market, employing over 4.7 million workers in 1990 (Graham and Krugman 1995; Tolchin and Tolchin 1988). Despite their growing size, labor unions have failed to gain any traction in organizing this segment of the labor market. The difficulties of organizing workers in foreign companies are due to a host of factors including the political insularity of foreign companies to domestic political pressures, location decisions in right-to-work states (states that make joining and paying dues to labor unions voluntary) and the fact that the foreign companies have entered the United States market when the labor movement overall is in retreat (Casey 1998; Nissen 1999). Nevertheless, the ever-increasing scale of direct foreign investment in the American economy and the concomitant growth in this segment of the labor market make foreign transnational corporations yet another important site for labor organizing.

The Case Study of Los Angeles Hilton and Towers

On October 28, 1994 the employees of the Los Angeles Hilton and Towers—one of the largest hotels in Downtown Los Angeles catering to mainstream conventioners and tourists—received a notification from the Hilton Hotel Corporation that they would lose their union contracts on New Year's Day, 1995. The owner of the building—Hanjin International—failed to come to terms with Hilton Hotel Corporation over renewing the terms of the two-year old management contract and decided to manage the Los Angeles Hilton itself (Silverstein 1994; Los Angeles Hilton and Towers 1994). As the first order of business, Hanjin International decided to cut labor costs by terminating the union contract between Hilton and the 575 mostly Latino employees who were represented by Local 11 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union. Coming only two-and-a-half years after the

devastating Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992, this event had all of the trappings of yet another volatile racial conflict, this time pitting a large and powerful Korean corporation against a small but activist Latino labor union. Given the potential for a bitter and divisive fight, the incident received almost immediate media coverage and the city braced for another racially charged incident (Silverstein 1994; Kang 1994; Garcia-Irigoyen 1994).

Hanjin International's venture into Los Angeles real estate market came at the tail end of a decade-long Asian buying spree of high-profile properties. The Japanese began the trend during the mid-1980s with high profile purchases, including the Rockefeller Center in New York and the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles (Casey 1998). Even though the commercial real estate market was taking a steep downturn during this time, Asian investors, flush with cash from their booming economies, acquired numerous buildings throughout the country. As a latecomer, Korean companies joined others from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Indonesia and bought some of the major buildings in Los Angeles (Cho 1992).

In purchasing the Los Angeles Hilton, Hanjin Group—the fifth largest Korean corporation of which Hanjin International is a wholly owned subsidiary—sought to add American real estate to its massive multinational business interests that included shipping, construction, energy, and, its crown jewel, Korean Air (Kim 1997). Hanjin Group's purchase also reflected its own sense of economic vulnerability in South Korea. With growing democratic changes and the ensuing labor militancy of South Korean workers, Hanjin Group was no longer protected by the pro-growth policies of the South Korean government that had previously banned independent labor unions (Kim 1997). Indeed, their purchase of Los Angeles Hilton coincided with one of the largest labor struggles in South Korean history when workers from Hanjin Shipping Company successfully formed an independent labor union in 1992. A major incentive for the Hanjin group to purchase the Los Angeles Hilton and Towers at this time was that Los Angeles seemed far removed from the politics of South Korean labor relations. Despite their high hopes, Hanjin Group saw its investment in Hilton drop precipitously as the Los Angeles tourist industry became devastated in the

aftermath of the civil unrest of 1992. With its investment shrinking by the day, Hanjin Group, through Hanjin International, decided to take over the management of the hotel and cut costs by eliminating the unionized workers.

Most of the Latino workers in Hilton were represented by Local 11, led by Maria Elena Dorazo, who had a well-earned reputation for innovative and principled organizing in the city (Cho 1992; Cranford 2001). In Los Angeles, Local 11 has become one of most active labor unions in the region with firm ties to community-based organizations, a history of multiracial coalition building, and a reputation for direct action and media savvy (Cranford 2001). Fearing that the event could become a racially-charged incident in a city that saw too many racially divisive conflicts, Dorazo called on Roy Hong, the Executive Director of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) and a former organizer for Local 11, to help with the case. Modeled after the Chinese Staff and Workers Association and founded with direct support of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, KIWA was a major presence not only in the Korean American community but also within the in the broader progressive organizations in Los Angeles, having earned its reputation by organizing both Korean and Latino immigrant workers in Koreatown businesses (Omatsu 1994; Park 2002). With KIWA's involvement, Local 11 hoped to defuse the racial dimension of the Hilton campaign as well as utilize KIWA's connections to the Korean American community and to the labor movement in South Korea that could directly bear on the success of the Hilton campaign. KIWA immediately signed on as a full and open partner in the organizing campaign. It is important to note that this was not the first time Local 11 and KIWA collaborated. Since 1992, Local 11 and KIWA had worked on a number of campaigns and issues, including the firing of union workers when Koreana Hotel purchased the Wilshire Hyatt Hotel and the widespread wage violations in Koreatown restaurant industry that employees a large number of Latino workers (Cho 1992; Louie 2001).

Organizing Beyond Race and Nation

Almost immediately, the coalition between the Latino Local 11 and the Korean American KIWA brought increased visibility to the campaign. To a city

that was wracked with racial divisions, the coalition between the two organizations won political support from mainstream political institutions (Sonenshein 1993). In particular, the Los Angeles City Council, at the urging of four of its most progressive members—Rita Walters, Jackie Goldberg, Mike Hernandez and Mark Ridley-Thomas—used the Hilton campaign as a forum to discuss the city's race relations and to protest the loss of unionized jobs (Los Angeles City Council 1997). After celebrating this important example of multiracial coalition in a divided city, the City Council urged Hanjin International to renew the labor contract with the workers. The public and visible support of the City Council brought added attention from others, including the media (Kang 1994; Garcia-Irigoyen 1994). In this way, one very real resource for the campaign was the coalition itself: by crossing the racial line, the campaign won important political support and visibility.

In addition, KIWA used the Korean American ethnic media to rally support from the Korean American community. In particular, KIWA exploited the conglomerate nature of Hanjin Group as it went after the most visible and vulnerable part of the Hanjin Group's presence in Los Angeles—Korean Air that is dependent on the Korean American traveling public. In campaign flyers and in *Korea Times* editorials, KIWA implored Korean Americans to boycott Korean Air to punish Hanjin Group for its bad corporate citizenship and signed on numerous social service and religious organizations, including the Korean Methodist Church and the Korean American Interagency Council (an umbrella organization of Korean American social service agencies), to commit to a boycott (Kang 1994; Local 11 1994a, 1994b). Indeed, one of the major actions that the campaign undertook was at the Thomas Bradley International Terminal of the Los Angeles International Airport where members of KIWA and the supporters of Local 11 distributed a flyer that was addressed to the customers of Korean Air, asking the question "what will happen to 500 Hilton workers when the new year comes?" (Local 11 1994d). Coming at the height of the travel season, the campaign effectively put tremendous economic pressure on Korean Air, and, in turn, the Hanjin Group.

It is critical to note that the involvement of KIWA was essential in applying this economic pressure. By targeting Korean Air, the campaign had effectively mounted a “secondary boycott”—an activity that Local 11 as a labor union is strictly forbidden to engage in under the Section 8 (b)(4)(i) of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). However, KIWA—as a non-profit “worker’s advocate organization”—was able to mount a secondary boycott of the Hanjin Group (cf. Fisk, Mitchell, and Erickson 2000; Wong 1992).

As the campaign reached a fever pitch with direct actions in Los Angeles, including picketing and civil disobedience, KIWA relied on its international ties with South Korean labor unions to pressure Hanjin International to settle (Sierra 1994; McDonnell 1994). In November 1997 KIWA hosted a fact-finding visit by Nam Sang Oh—a reporter from *The Korea Labor News*, based in Seoul, Korea. With close consultation with KIWA and Local 11, *The Korea Labor News* published numerous stories regarding the Hilton campaign in Korea (Oh 1994). On the heels of this publicity, the Committee for the Struggle to Reinstate Hanjin Dismissed Workers was formed in Korea under the leadership of Kyong Ho An, a veteran of Hanjin labor strikes. By calling the 575 Latino workers in Los Angeles “Hanjin” workers, the Korean labor activists powerfully articulated their sense of cross-national alliance. Citing both the class-based solidarity with Latino workers in Los Angeles and the long-term self-interest of preventing Hanjin Group from exporting unionized Korean jobs to unorganized workers abroad, the Committee threatened the Hanjin Group with sympathy strikes and actions in Korea (Durazo 1995; Hong 1995). In this sudden transnational move, Hanjin Group faced the real prospect of its multi-million dollar problem in Los Angeles growing into a multi-billion dollar problem in its own backyard.

With mounting pressures from all sides, Hanjin International decided to settle with Local 11 on January 6, 1995. In the settlement, Hanjin agreed to renew the labor contract with Local 11 and to rehire all of the workers with their seniority firmly in place (Kang 1995; *Los Angeles Times* 1995). At a time when labor unions had been in full retreat nationwide, Local 11

won an important victory for its 575 workers against what had initially appeared to be impossible odds. Moreover, the Hilton campaign provides important lessons and possibilities for multiracial coalition building, including coalition building beyond the nation. In a letter to An, Durazo (1995) writes, "we believe that efforts like the Hilton campaign will play a vital role in the future to link struggles of workers in all parts of the world."

Conclusion

While the diversity of immigrant workers and the growing presence of foreign transnational employers have been viewed as barriers to organizing, the case of Los Angeles Hilton and Towers provides an alternative perspective. As the case study demonstrates, under the right circumstances and leadership, these very factors can create new possibilities for organizing and strength mobilization. First, the diversity of immigrant workers makes possible the forging of coalitions that can transcend race and ethnicity (Louie 2001). In the context of contemporary American society that is still struggling with race and ethnic relations, the creation of coalitions in itself can generate political support (Sonenshein 1993). In the case of Los Angeles Hilton and Towers campaign, elected officials leaped at the chance to be associated with a campaign that brought Latinos and Korean Americans together in universal terms of jobs security and corporate responsibility. Moreover, the mainstream media-particularly *The Los Angeles Times*-found the coalition dimension of the campaign to be one of the central newsworthy elements of the story. Their consistent coverage gave unprecedented visibility to the campaign and worked to apply pressure on Hanjin Corporation to settle.

Second, along with the racial component, the Los Angeles Hilton and Tower campaign was a coalition of a labor union (Local 11) and a worker's advocacy organization (KIWA). As Louie (2001) has convincingly shown, immigrant workers and their supporters have responded to the long-term decline of American labor unions through establishment and support of advocacy organizations. While their growth has been in response to the vacuum created by the retreat of labor unions, they nonetheless can become an important partner in labor mobilization (Bonacich 2000; Fisk, Mitchell, and

Erickson 2000; Milkman and Wong 2000). In this particular case study, KIWA, as an advocacy organization, and not a labor union, was able to mount a secondary boycott of Hanjin International, most notably Korean Air that maintains their most important overseas hub in Los Angeles. In this way, the diversity of immigrant workers means that there are a variety of organizations that can be marshaled into a campaign, each bringing different set of possibilities for organizing strategy.

Finally, foreign transnational corporations are not impenetrable. In the case of Hanjin International, their wide-ranging business interests, typical of transnational corporations, exposed them to a variety of mobilization. In addition to the boycott of Korean Air, other actions that took advantage of both the stature and size of Hanjin International included the protest of the South Korean Consulate in Los Angeles and picket lines at Hanjin's core business in shipping. In addition, the most intriguing part of the case study is the forging of transnational labor solidarity between Local 11 and Hanjin labor unions in South Korea. Of course, organizing workers across national boundaries has been one of the enduring visions of labor movements (Frundt 2002; Gapasin and Bonacich 2002). While the exporting of manufacturing jobs since the 1970s has added an intense sense of urgency for American labor unions to engage in transnational organizing, this effort has been largely symbolic and limited to fostering solidarity among workers in similar industries and sectors (Craver 1993; Nissen 1999). The Los Angeles Hilton and Towers campaign represents an interesting possibility on this front. KIWA and Local 11 were able to show that it is possible to internationally link employees of one transnational corporation and to use this linkage strategically to win a labor campaign. Despite the unique set of participants and conditions, the Los Angeles Hilton and Towers campaign holds important lessons on the possibilities of a truly "new" labor movement.

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