

# Across Races and Nations: Social Justice Organizing in the Transnational South<sup>1</sup>

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Historically the “crucible of race” in the United States (Williamson, 1984), the South is undergoing a fundamental transformation in its black-white divide. Immigrants from all over the globe, above all from Mexico and other countries in Latin America, are entering the region in record numbers (Capps, Fix and Passel, 2002; Elizabeth Greico, 2003). Racial/ethnic diversification opens up the fixity of the South’s bipolar racial construct; however, it also raises perplexing questions for social justice activists and their organizations, virtually all of which grew out of or were profoundly influenced by the southern civil rights movement. How might activists’ strategies include new racial/ethnic groups, while still addressing the historically entrenched racism directed at African Americans in the South? Can “civil rights” encompass the goals and demands of diverse people of color in the region? In view of the workplace exploitation experienced by many undocumented immigrants, what is the potential for multi-racial/ethnic organizing among southern workers? In short, on what bases might black and white Southerners who are committed to social justice unite with new arrivals, especially working-class Latino immigrants?

This chapter addresses such questions by drawing on the findings from a community-based research project, “Across Races and Nations: Building New Communities in the U.S. South,” involving the Center for Research on Women (CROW) in Memphis, the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, and the Southern Regional Council, headquartered in Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> The latter two collaborators are among the oldest region-wide social justice organizations in the South. Founded in 1932 as a popular education workshop center, Highlander supports efforts to build movements for economic justice and democratic participation. During the civil rights movement, Highlander offered a space where interracial groups could share stories of their struggles and generate strategies for resistance and change. The Southern Regional Council, founded in 1919 as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, works to promote racial justice, protect democratic rights, and broaden civic participation in the South. Together with CROW, an academically based research unit, these two organizations sought to identify points of potential conflict as well as collaboration between their historic constituencies (primarily African American Southerners and working class whites) and new Latino immigrants.

As director of the Center for Research on Women, I collaborated with the directors and staff of the Highlander Center and the Southern Regional Council in raising funds for this project and framing its initial design. I also served as the overall project director. Over the course of four years, 2000-2003, the three organizational partners analyzed national data on immigration and racial/ethnic change in the South, conducted interviews with some 177 individuals in the locations where each organization is headquartered, developed case studies of Latino immigrant settlement in Memphis and East Tennessee, and analyzed related struggles over the definition of “minority” in Georgia. We also convened or participated in countless meetings of social justice activists who sought to address diverse issues—from racial profiling to

access to driver's licenses—arising in the new context, and documented examples of successful multi-racial/ethnic collaboration. The findings from the project, including our internal deliberations and reflexive analyses of each organization's dilemmas in adapting to immigration and racial/ethnic diversification, form the database for this chapter.

The findings are not necessarily representative of cross-racial/ethnic interactions or of social justice organizations throughout the region, but they do illuminate the dilemmas and opportunities that activists encounter in three distinct sub-regions of the South. Memphis, sometimes called “the capital of the Delta,” is a majority-black city in the Deep South, and its history exemplifies the overt white supremacy and racial contestations commonly associated with this sub-region. East Tennessee, where the Highlander Center is located, is in the majority-white, heavily working class Appalachian South. Atlanta, a historic center of civil rights activism, is now a burgeoning megalopolis that draws migrants of great racial/ethnic and national diversity. Although the results of our research may not be generalized in any statistical sense, they point to a complicated range of factors that influence the prospects for multi-racial/ethnic organizing in these three distinct contexts.

Of the many strategic approaches inclusive of new immigrants that have developed in the South since the mid-1990s, this chapter focuses on two of the most common:

- Collaborations of color, in which activism focuses on common experiences related to race discrimination (e.g., racial profiling). Such collaborations may also focus on apparently “race-neutral” issues (e.g., the quality of public education), which are nonetheless inflected with race due to the realities of de facto racial segregation and other forms of white privilege.
- Class-based collaborations among workers, frequently but not exclusively focused on workplace issues and sometimes inclusive of working-class white Southerners.

Neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, these two frameworks involve multiple challenges that inhibit the potential for success. Collaborations of color, for example, may depend on immigrants' conscious self-insertion into the U.S. racial hierarchy (e.g., whereby Latinos become “brown”), a process that does not occur automatically and the results of which are not necessarily mutual solidarity with African American Southerners. Class-based collaborations are fraught with tensions derived from many sources, such as perceived job competition, which unfold not only between working class African Americans and Latino immigrants, but also between both groups and working-class whites. Moreover, insofar as both approaches seek to define and incorporate immigrants within longstanding frameworks for organizing, they may neglect the self-defined priorities and identities of immigrants themselves, and evade the development of strategies that more directly address new opportunities arising from immigration and globalization more generally.

The next section provides an overview of the practical challenges facing southern social justice organizations, regardless of their strategic focus, which are seeking to foster collaborations inclusive of new immigrants. These range from limitations in organizational capacity, especially in operating across language barriers, to geo-political considerations that affect the reception of immigrants in the U.S. Subsequent sections analyze the two key strategic approaches—race-based collaborations of color, and multi-racial/ethnic class-based activism among workers—

which social justice organizations have begun to pursue. While successful in certain cases, these two approaches encounter significant though not necessarily insurmountable obstacles, which are examined in some detail. The conclusion summarizes the two strategies, and argues for additional organizing initiatives to address emerging global dynamics in the transnational South.

## **Organizational Dilemmas**

When immigration to the South began to escalate sharply in the 1990s, many social justice organizations were ill prepared to respond. Unfamiliar with the issues facing new immigrants—legal status, access to driver's licenses, language barriers, etc.—organizations both large and small were in many cases also preoccupied with fundamental questions of political direction and financial viability.<sup>3</sup> Years of conservative triumphs in electoral politics, assaults on affirmative action and the very legitimacy of race-based policy remedies, declining real wages and defeated unionization drives, plus the confounding implications of globalization—these and other trends were taking a toll on activists' morale. As effective strategies became harder to identify and tangible victories less frequent, fund-raising also became more difficult, and some organizations succumbed.

These pressures framed many internal organizational debates over how to respond to the immigrant presence. The conclusion that immigration warranted new strategies and alliances was not self-evident, and activists were by no means unanimous in their support for such initiatives. Civil rights organizations like the Southern Regional Council, historically defined by the African American freedom struggle, faced difficult internal debates among board, staff and long-time supporters over the advisability of devoting organizational resources to Latinos and other immigrants. Was the long-range goal of racial justice best served by focusing on the needs of their historic constituency, especially at a time when civil rights gains were threatened and many working-class African Americans were in crisis, or by expanding the scope of their activism to include new people of color?

Social justice organizations that decided to initiate collaborations inclusive of new immigrants soon found that there were few formal, immigrant-based organizations in the region with which to coalesce. Although Latino immigrants typically migrated to the South through dense social networks, their arrival was so recent that they had rarely developed their own formal organizations to address domestic issues in the U.S. Common in many locales were new coalitions of service providers, frequently led by a U.S.-born or highly acculturated Latino professional, who sought to serve the new immigrant population; however, such organizations were not immigrant-based. To the extent that ferment was developing among Latinos, it often focused on issues specific to their immigration status, such as access to driver's licenses, which were far removed from the priorities and experiences of existing social justice groups.

As a consequence, several organizations developed programs to support leadership and organizing among Latino immigrants themselves. The Southern Empowerment Project hired Latino organizers who developed a new activist group, Latinos Unidos, with chapters that addressed the injurious treatment of new immigrants (e.g., abuse by police, non-payment of wages) in several locations. The Highlander Center brought together Latino activists across the region for mutual education, support and strategizing in a new program called Pueblos. The struggle

over driver's licenses (access to which has traditionally been controlled by the states and may require identity documents that immigrants do not possess) eventually yielded a new statewide organization, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition; a similar though more narrowly focused group, Georgians for Safer Roads, developed in that state. In these and other coalitional settings, social justice activists and their organizations struggled to work across differences in race, ethnicity and national origin. Even when groups established separate programs for Latinos alone, they faced struggles among their diversified staff, who together sought to forge unifying political frameworks for internal multi-racial/ethnic collaboration.

In addition to the many political complexities that attended such efforts, some of which are analyzed in the subsequent two sections of this chapter, practical difficulties also arose. The most consistent and significant was the language barrier. Language difference prevented basic communication between Latino immigrants and native Southerners; it also strained the capacity of organizations that sought to provide materials in languages other than English and, when necessary, interpretation during meetings. Although English-speaking staff in many organizations began taking classes in Spanish, their fluency was rarely adequate to engage in complex conversations, and the requirement of bilingual communication tended to fall on Latino participants and newly hired Latino staff.

Language represented not merely a practical barrier, however, but also a symbol of racial/ethnic/national difference and as such a potential flashpoint of tension. This was true among not only the individuals who were interviewed for the project (whose political perspectives and social experiences with relevant forms of diversity varied widely), but also the activists and staff who were committed to the various collaborative initiatives. Native English speakers' perception that speaking Spanish in public (or during meetings) was intentionally exclusionary and therefore rude was strikingly common across racial groups, rural/urban locations and political settings. The perception that Spanish speakers actually knew more English than they let on—but feigned ignorance in order to secure unnecessary assistance, evade a job assignment, slow the speed of production, or gossip about the English speakers in their presence—was voiced repeatedly. Although such observations implicitly recognized that language is a form of power, most black and white Southerners did not acknowledge, much less challenge, their own relative power as native speakers of the dominant language.

One vignette, which occurred during a statewide meeting of African American and Latino activists who sought to frame a common agenda, illustrates this problem. As the meeting opened, one African American participant requested that English only be spoken during the collective discussions:

The situation was resolved by agreeing to speak English during the meetings (fortunately, all Spanish-speaking participants also spoke English), while simultaneously acknowledging people's right to speak their native language in other social contexts over the weekend. Although this allowed the meeting to go forward, requiring people to forsake their own language is neither feasible nor ideal as a solution to language differences. We gradually learned that language is a form of power that those who speak the dominant language in any particular situation may too easily ignore (Smith, Williams and Johnson, 2004: 6-7).

Related tensions arose in the wake of 11 September 2001 and the shift in political atmosphere and federal policy regarding immigration. When the project began, early in 2000, those involved viewed the challenge of immigration above all within the framework of southern racial politics and the implications of racial/ethnic diversification for the black-white divide. However, the events of 9/11 re-framed political discourse, both nationally and within the region, in terms of national security, federal immigration policy and various geo-political considerations, including access to citizenship, border control, the legal rights of undocumented immigrants and, of course, terrorism. On the one hand, these developments opened up new possibilities for alliances—after all, civil rights and the legal protections and benefits of citizenship were longstanding themes in the southern freedom struggle. On the other hand, incorporating national origin and citizenship status into the political understandings and strategies of activist organizations was neither easy nor straightforward.

For Latino immigrants, including several of the newly hired staff at the three collaborating organizations, citizenship and immigration status (including the legal right to hold a job in the U.S.) was the fundamental determinant of discrimination and opportunity. For African American staff and activists, however, race tended to trump other dimensions of inequality, with the possible exception of class. National immigrant rights advocates' appeals for solidarity based on the assertion that "we're all a nation of immigrants" did not always help matters, since forced migration through the slave trade hardly seemed an instance of immigration, at least as commonly understood. Meanwhile, the events of September 11 emboldened the white supremacists of the South, who began holding Klan rallies and other events protesting the "growing non-white flood of illegals." In short, the larger context for multi-racial/ethnic collaboration inclusive of new immigrants deteriorated as the project proceeded.

Despite these and other obstacles, social justice activists persisted in seeking issues and strategies for collaboration. In addition to the new coalitions in support of immigrant rights, which though critically important are not the focus of this chapter, existing social justice organizations that have sought to include new immigrants have tended to pursue one or both of the following strategies: race-based collaborations of color; or class-based collaborations among workers. The sections that follow take up these two frameworks, and analyze the potential and limits of each in turn.

## **Collaborations of Color**

The struggle against the institutionalization of racism and white supremacy in the South stretches back for centuries, to Native Americans' battles against colonialism and genocide in the various "Indian wars" and to Africans' first slave revolts. Even the many contemporary organizations that trace their lineage to the recent, post-World War II civil rights movement tend to draw on a deep historical consciousness that recalls slavery, lynching and the extreme brutality of anti-black racism in the region, as well as the centuries-old struggles for freedom. Any serious examination of the challenges and opportunities posed by Latino immigration for anti-racist organizing in the South must recognize this legacy.

The possibility that the goal of civil rights—including the continuing struggles over black political power, voting rights, treatment by the courts and police, and the growing "prison-industrial complex"—would coincide sufficiently with that of

immigrant rights to produce sturdy, mutually beneficial collaborations between African American activists and Latino immigrants informed this project from its inception. Although far more knowledgeable about civil rights struggles than about immigration and the related convolutions of federal policy, our attempts at self-education seemed to vindicate that initial hope: racism was evident throughout the history of federal immigration policy—for example, in exclusionary definitions of citizenship, entry requirements and national origin quotas that favored Europeans—just as the anti-racist influence of the civil rights movement was clearly a decisive factor in immigration reform during the 1960s (DeLaet, 2000). The events of September 11 and its aftermath reinforced these parallels. The racial profiling of immigrants and egregious violations of their civil liberties seemed to recapitulate the state-sanctioned discrimination against African Americans in the South.

However, as we recorded the struggles of those who are seeking to build collaborations of color inclusive of immigrants, engaged in our own internal debates, and interviewed southern workers, public officials and activists, we began to develop a more complex and grounded appreciation for potential linkages and disconnections between diverse social justice agendas and the needs of new immigrants. In-depth interviews with 22 black activists in Atlanta, including seven youth under the age of 20, were particularly revealing regarding the range of attitudes that can attend collaborations of color.<sup>4</sup>

The interviews were conducted against the backdrop of dramatic change in Atlanta, a metropolitan area that has drawn more than 60 percent of Georgia's burgeoning Latino population and is also home to numerous civil rights veterans and their organizations. Although hailed as a "black Mecca" during the 1980s and 1990s, more recent developments complicate that image. Gentrification has reversed a decades-long trend of white flight from the city, but it has also driven lower-income, disproportionately African American residents from their homes. The racial/ethnic composition of the city has been changing so rapidly through in-migration from various origins that the word on the street in some quarters is that current mayor Shirley Franklin "will be the last black mayor of Atlanta."

Not surprisingly, certain African American activists in Atlanta spoke with bitterness about the prospect that "we are going to be displaced." One avowed nationalist argued, "Looking externally [toward collaborations with Latino immigrants] ...is up for debate, but definitely I don't see that as a priority. I see that ...as a way to infiltrate, co-opt, and manipulate different movements." More frequently, we encountered openness to and interest in collaborations with Latinos on broad issues of social justice—affordable housing, quality public education, neighborhood development—as well as more explicitly race-defined issues, particularly those related to criminal justice (e.g., racial profiling, differential incarceration rates). Indeed, the visions and concerns of many African American activists spilled so far beyond a focus on "civil rights" per se that the civil rights-immigrant rights linkage was far less relevant than we anticipated. Although sympathetic to the great vulnerability and exploitation that undocumented immigrants in particular can experience, most black activists were more interested in the potential for black-brown electoral coalitions and broad collaborations of color than in immigrant rights or, for that matter, a narrowly defined goal of civil rights. Many invited deeper alliances with Latino immigrants than we had expected, but the issues they sought to address were in some cases more relevant to Latinos as potential citizens of color than as recently arrived immigrants.

African American activists' emphasis on Latinos as racial allies, rather than as new immigrants, was evident in the rhetoric of inclusion that they used to promote collaboration. Re-framing the familiar "we're all a nation of immigrants," one activist asserted, "I want this to truly become a nation of minorities." Quoting Whitney Young, another stated, "We may have come over on different ships, but we are all in the same boat now." Although some activists' affirmations of commonality included such considerations as political position and/or class, race remained a central focus of their analyses and strategies, particularly in regard to electoral politics. This is not surprising in view of the civil rights movement's unintended consequence in the South: the transformation of the "solid (Democratic) South" into the regional base of (white) Republicans. One civil rights veteran commented with irony, "It is because we sort of mopped up the South, basically cleaned it up, that it can be believable to the rest of the nation. So, we made it possible for them [Republicans] to be in power...." Demographic and political shifts that yield similar results at the municipal, county and state levels, where black elected officials made significant inroads in the wake of the civil rights movement, are clearly unsettling, and they undergird interest in black-brown coalitions.

There are, however, practical barriers to collaborations of color between African Americans and Latinos in the South. Those focused on electoral politics have limited potential in the near term, since immigrants do not possess the right to vote in U.S. elections (although their U.S.-born children are automatically citizens). More subtly, race-based coalitions may require Latino immigrants to self-identify as "brown" or in other terms compatible with the U.S. racial hierarchy, and then to be accepted by African Americans as racially oppressed "people of color." Neither development is automatic, and both are fraught with complex questions about racial identity and the very meaning of race. In the case of Latino immigrants, the tangled nexus of race, ethnicity, class, citizenship and immigration status is also at stake.

Moreover, in cities like Memphis and Atlanta, the most vocal Latino proponents of their own recognition as an oppressed racial "minority" are often American-born or at least highly acculturated business owners who seek to access the benefits of affirmative action in public contracting. This tendency, which may be specific to leadership during the early years of the Latino immigrant influx, ironically can mitigate potential collaborations of color insofar as it foregrounds class differences and aggravates African American suspicions of opportunism in Latinos' racial identity claims. The next sub-sections address these two dilemmas—the meaning of race, and the complicated race-class dynamics in controversies over the definition of "minority"—that must be addressed for collaborations of color to succeed.

### *Racial Identity and the Meaning of Race*

Those who launched the "Across Races and Nations" project in 2000 anticipated that contention would arise from the distinctive forms of racial oppression directed at African Americans and Latinos in the United States; indeed, we initiated the project because we knew that Latino immigration was transforming the southern black-white divide in historic ways, and we sought to analyze the implications for social justice organizing. However, we did not realize that this very framing of the issues at stake would appear inaccurate and one-sided to certain immigrant staff hired for the project and to some immigrant rights advocates with whom we sought alliances. In contrast to our preoccupation with racism and racial division, recent arrivals from Latin America,

we were told, neither defined themselves in terms of “race” nor viewed their own difficulties in the U.S. in terms of “racial justice.”

The ensuing internal debates among project staff over racial identity and the meaning of race illuminate some of the dilemmas facing social justice organizations throughout the region. Latino staff whose families originated from different nations in Latin America disagreed about the extent of racial prejudice and race discrimination in their specific countries of origin and in Latin America more generally. Although they concurred that discrimination against indigenous peoples is widespread, the extent of anti-black racism was a matter of dispute. Moreover, all of the staff joined in on disagreements about whether any of this discrimination represented, in effect, U.S.-style white supremacy, or was more accurately interpreted as class exploitation overlaid with ethnocentrism. Although these debates may sound obscure or academic, they had significant political implications. Were Latino immigrants familiar with racism, and had they experienced race discrimination in their countries of origin? Did they define themselves in racial terms, and could they be appealed to as “people of color” for purposes of organizing?

Language differences aggravated the contention. To some foreign-born Latino staff for whom Spanish was their first language, the English term “race” denoted hierarchical biological divisions among human beings—and was therefore an inherently racist concept. For them, all of the staff debate over race was a frustrating and offensive waste of time. They pointed to the existence of multiple “races” within the U.S. Latino population (which ranges from white to black in skin color) to contest the validity of race in general and the legitimacy of a “brown” Latino identity in particular. For U.S.-born staff, however, regardless of race or ethnicity, the dismissal of race as a fundamental social inequality bore worrisome parallels to neo-conservative calls for color-blindness—i.e., the evasion of racism through disingenuous appeals to egalitarianism.

Complicating Latino immigrant staff and interviewees’ interpretation of their own racial/ethnic status were the considerations of citizenship and immigration status as far more powerful determinants of their own unequal treatment in the U.S. The implied hierarchy of oppression, wherein race was less significant than national origin and legal immigration status, sometimes generated tension with others, both black and white. To African American staff and activists in particular, the implication that their own U.S. citizenship represented a form of privilege was unpersuasive, even offensive, since racism was far more significant in their own experience and made them targets of discrimination despite the fact that—indeed, in a sense, because—they were black citizens of the United States.

African American acceptance of Latinos as people of color, regardless of their immigration status, was also fraught with complexity. None of the southern social justice activists and staff whom we interviewed dismissed Latinos as white (despite the tendency for many “Hispanics” to so identify on the census), but some did view Latinos as a “preferred minority” whose experiences of racism were far less severe than those of African Americans. The fanfare over census reports of Hispanics becoming the largest minority in the U.S., coupled with Republican overtures to gain the Hispanic vote, only contributed to this perception. However, African American activists drew opposite conclusions from these developments: some took them as confirmation of their skepticism regarding alliances with Latinos, while others redoubled their commitment to outreach and the formation of electoral coalitions. As one civil rights veteran stated, “My point is to reach for them [Latinos], ...or they are going to create their thing independent of us and see no need for us. The natural thing



to do then is for them to move toward white people, because that's where the real power is."

Even as the prospect of Latinos "moving toward white people" is obviously problematic, the claims of Latino businesspeople to official "minority" status also generate complex racial crosscurrents. Minority set-aside programs, presided over by black elected officials in cities like Atlanta and Memphis, are important symbols of the gains that activists hoped to achieve through the struggle for voting rights. These include not simply electoral participation, but the extension of economic opportunity to black workers through the civil service system and to black-owned businesses through government contracts. The question of Latinos' official inclusion as minorities, who are thereby entitled to share in the benefits of affirmative action, has become a flashpoint of tension at the municipal level in Memphis and other southern cities, and at the state level in Georgia. These struggles lay bare the divisive power of racism as it intersects with class, and further illuminate some of the complexities confronting collaborations of color.

### *Who Is a Minority?*

The race-specific policy remedies that ensued from the civil rights movement typically require potential beneficiaries to identify themselves in racial terms.<sup>6</sup> Their eligibility criteria thus reflect and implicitly endorse certain conclusions about the racial oppression inflicted on different groups and the appropriateness of redress via government action. Efforts to change the official definition of racial groups eligible for affirmative action inevitably raise complex and potentially division questions about the meaning of race and the relative historical disadvantage of different groups.

That was clearly the case in Memphis, for example, when Latino business leaders approached African American mayor W. W. Herenton about their inclusion in special contracting programs for minorities. Herenton repudiated their claims by referencing the history of African American slavery and Jim Crow segregation, and suggesting that Latinos' experience of racial oppression was insufficient to legitimate redress through government affirmative action.

Complicated racial politics, including most importantly the stubborn persistence of white supremacy, lay behind the dispute. Herenton had won election in 1991 as the first black mayor of Memphis after a heated campaign in which white fears of "black rule" were widespread (Pohlmann and Kirby, 1996). Although re-elected handily, he has presided over a city of deep and seemingly intractable black poverty, at a time of declining federal assistance and escalating white flight. These and other problems of course confront public officials, regardless of race, in large urban centers all over the United States. A black mayor like Herenton, however, can appear to champion the interests of the African American constituents who elected him, even as he fails to generate more substantive improvements in their quality of life, when he repudiates Latino claims to affirmative action. White contractors' efforts to exploit the dispute to rid different city agencies of affirmative action programs in public contracts altogether seemed to legitimate Herenton's exclusionary stance and further embittered the city's racial power relations.

A similar controversy erupted in 2001 in the state of Georgia, when a progressive white legislator, without extensive prior consultation with her black colleagues, introduced a measure to expand the official definition of minority (see Spears, 2004, 2005). At stake was a small tax break granted to companies with state contracts that sub-contract to "minority"-owned businesses. The Black Caucus split

over its response. Recapitulating Memphis Mayor Herenton, one African American legislator argued, “Many Hispanics are not people of color. They are a language group, an ethnic group. These people never experienced the same things we did.” Others, however, such as civil rights veteran Rep. Tyrone Brooks of Atlanta, countered, “We’ve got to expand the tent.” White conservatives also divided over the proposed legislation. Some opposed an expanded definition of “minority” because they opposed affirmative action altogether while others, influenced by national Republican efforts to court the Latino vote, supported the proposal. In 2002, the bill was enacted into law.

Controversies over the definition of “minority” are often far more symbolic than substantive in their consequences. The number and size of contracts awarded through related affirmative action programs tend to be quite small. Nonetheless, efforts to expand the definition of “minority” have become occasions for highly visible, public debates about the status of and appropriate policies toward different racial/ethnic groups, particularly Latinos. As such, they represent important moments for intervention to shape attitudes regarding inclusion, exclusion and the desirability of collaborations of color. Unfortunately, the class privilege of those Latinos who publicly advocate for their own inclusion as minorities can obscure the disadvantages experienced by recent Latino immigrants, who typically are neither business owners nor well-to-do. For these working-class immigrants and their African American co-workers, class interacts with race in quite different ways to generate both division and unity.

### **Class-based Collaborations of Workers**

The hope that common economic interests can overcome racial division and white supremacy in uniting workers and low-income people—who have predominated historically throughout much of the poverty-stricken South—has invigorated many of the region’s progressive social movements. The southern labor movement, although often a tale of whites’ racist betrayals and workers’ defeat, offers examples of interracial unionism, of which the United Mine Workers achieved the most institutionalized success. The Populist movement of the late nineteenth century, which united small farmers and wage earners to challenge the growing power of banks, railroads and other corporations, briefly pursued a related vision of interracial class-based politics, though racism and the legal entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation soon undermined its “democratic promise” (Goodwyn, 1976).

Most contemporary organizations that are pursuing multi-racial/ethnic collaborations among workers, including new immigrants, position themselves at least in part within the tradition of progressive trade unionism in the South. These include certain labor unions, such as UNITE HERE, as well as broad, multi-issue organizations, such as Black Workers for Justice and the Highlander Center, which have ties to organized labor (Center for Research on Women, Highlander Research and Education Center and Southern Regional Council, 2004). For such groups, establishing commonality through class position and work-related experiences seems both promising and necessary in view of the historic super-exploitation of black labor in the South and the abusive treatment of undocumented immigrant workers by employers in certain industries. The grim and dangerous working conditions that black and Latino workers face in southern slaughterhouses, poultry plants and other

settings generate shared grievances and present a clear target for collective protest—the boss.

However, such a strategy also runs up against numerous obstacles. Among the most common and divisive is perceived job competition. Activists often counter workers' fear that "immigrants take our jobs" with the assertion that "immigrants take jobs nobody else wants." Despite its wide usage, this reassurance does not accord with many native workers' experiences in the labor market, and seems a shortsighted position for any worker justice organization to emphasize. Moreover, interviews with black and Latino workers regarding their cross-racial/ethnic interactions in the workplace indicate that other tensions, related primarily to the rate of pay and pace of work, predominate in at least some settings. Finally, a less visible but no less significant obstacle to multi-racial/ethnic collaboration among workers involves the role and actions of their employers, which are oddly neglected in exchanges over "rate-busting," working "like a Mexican," and who is "taking jobs" from whom. The sub-sections that follow examine each source of tension—job competition, workplace interactions, and the role of employers—in greater detail.

### *Job Competition*

The experiential sources of southern workers' fearful perception that immigrants are "taking" their jobs are complicated and numerous. Academic research into immigrant-native workers' job competition typically finds little empirical support for the direct displacement of native workers by immigrants (Borjas, Freeman and Katz, 1997; Hamermesh and Bean, 1998), but it also largely evades the origins of such perceptions. Regardless of their current employment status, southern workers, both black and white, witness Latino immigrant men working highly visible, outdoor jobs in construction and landscaping (where they have concentrated in the urban South), and may logically conclude that they are "taking our jobs." In sectors like manufacturing, construction and warehousing, where increasing numbers of immigrant workers are employed, the native work force may understandably fear that immigrants are or will eventually be replacing them, even if no direct or immediate displacement occurs. At the bottom end of the labor market, where turnover is high and job security low, immigrants may indeed find "jobs that nobody else wants," but they may nonetheless be jobs to which southern workers, especially white workers in rural areas and black workers everywhere, must resort in hard times.

The perception of job competition is not confined to non-professional blue- or pink-collar workers. Social justice organizations throughout the South, including the three collaborators on this project, face analogous internal debates and tensions over their own staffing patterns. In a setting of chronically limited resources, which is the case with most non-profits, the question of political priorities may become in part a matter of which race, ethnicity and gender will be preferred in any expansion of staff. Should the next hire be a recent Latino immigrant—or a seasoned African American organizer? Such difficult choices may complicate internal debates over multi-racial/ethnic collaboration. They illuminate the fact that the tensions we documented in the research for this project are not simply "external" dynamics that others face, but also our own dilemmas.

Although the perception of job competition was evident at all three research sites, it was most explicitly and frequently voiced among white workers in East Tennessee, in a rural county with a diversified manufacturing base that has been hard hit by deindustrialization.<sup>5</sup> Local plant closings have been partially offset by the

development of new factories, built in some instances by foreign investors, but increased automation and contingent labor practices have still meant periodic unemployment, job changes, wage decreases and general economic insecurity. Public opinion has tended to attribute the job losses to capital flight. As one African American woman commented, “[E]verybody ...thinks all the jobs have been sent to Mexico, and a lot of them have.”

Into this setting of insecurity and change, Latino immigrants began arriving in large numbers during the 1990s. From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population of the county grew by an astounding 1,785 percent to become six percent of the official census count of residents. Reactions within the overwhelmingly white population ranged from sharp hostility to sympathetic welcome. As Latinos moved into jobs in poultry processing, furniture and other manufacturing industries, local workers—perhaps especially those who for whatever reason had been laid off in recent years—often condemned the immigrant presence. “[T]hey don’t want me, they hate me,” commented one Latina of her white co-workers. In nearby counties of East Tennessee, local raids by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service during Operation South P.A.W. (for “Protecting American Workers”) in 1995 drew cheering crowds. A farmer who provided the land for a new Headstart facility for the children of migrant farm workers found his barn burned to the ground. The local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan sponsored a rally in January 2002, during which members railed against “American-hating foreigners” (among many other groups), while a much larger crowd protested the Klan.

Importantly, the overt expressions of racism evoked sympathy for Latinos from many quarters, and stimulated new alliances that sought to counter the propagation of hate. For the county’s black population, which Latinos quickly surpassed in size during the influx of the 1990s, the clearly racist elements in anti-immigrant sentiment generated a sense of commonality with the new arrivals. The contradictory impacts of the white supremacist appeals created a paradoxical potential in this county, but the task of combating white workers’ racism and sense of privileged entitlement to the available jobs—especially at a time of deepening economic and even physical insecurity across the nation—is enormous. For a strategy of multi-racial/ethnic class-based collaboration that seeks to include white southern workers, this is among the most serious challenges.

### *Workplace Interactions*

Contrary to the commonplace assertion that “immigrants take jobs nobody else wants,” white and especially black Southerners increasingly work alongside Latinos throughout the South. In rural areas of the region, counties with high Latino population growth tend to be heavily dependent on low-wage, labor-intensive manufacturing; into these industries, such as furniture and textiles, Latino immigrants have moved in large numbers (Murphy, Blanchard and Hill, 2001; Smith, 2003). In the urban South, Latino women and men work in hotels, warehouses, factories, construction sites and other locations. In majority-black cities like Memphis and Atlanta, their co-workers are often African American and, particularly in the case of the construction industry, white as well.

Interviews with 26 African American and 58 Latino workers in Memphis suggest a range of workplace interactions, both antagonistic and favorable, across racial/ethnic boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The most important sources of tension involve workers’ pay and the intensity of work effort. Black workers’ concern that Latino immigrants

potentially decrease their own rate of pay seems to have several origins. The most straightforward is the belief that immigrants accept lower pay than established local standards for specific jobs. “Mexicans work cheap” is a common allegation, which offends many Latino immigrant workers. Conflict over this issue appears to be most acute in the construction industry, where Latino men have created an employment niche and where wages are relatively high. More subtly, language difficulties and perhaps other complexities of cross-cultural interaction can decrease productivity in jobs where it is necessary to “make production” to earn an acceptable level of pay. This is true, for example, in certain distribution center warehouses, where packing and assembling on conveyor belts can be slowed or stopped altogether if communication difficulties between blacks and Latinos break the rhythm of production.

The appropriate intensity of work effort, sometimes framed as a racial/ethnic difference in “work ethic” (especially by employers, for whom the observation may have racist connotations—see below), is a source of tension and disagreement that deserves thoughtful examination. Latino immigrants’ allegations that black workers are “lazy” and “don’t really want to work” partake of obvious racist stereotypes, but they also point to the possibility that genuine situational and perhaps historical differences regarding work may be involved. A common retort of black workers—that they refuse to be “worked like a Mexican”—adds the further consideration that differences in work effort may represent disputes over the acceptable level of exploitation by employers, as well as effective strategies for workers’ resistance.

There is abundant evidence that Latino workers in the “Nuevo New South” have organized to protest what they consider unacceptable treatment by employers (Fink, 2003), and that undocumented immigration status does not necessarily impede collective action (Delgado, 1993; Milkman, 2000). Nonetheless, it is also true that the incentives for transnational migration—which prominently feature the desire for economic opportunity and the determination to maximize earnings during what may be viewed as a temporary sojourn—predispose immigrants to work extremely hard. Latino immigrant workers in cities like Memphis and Atlanta commonly seek to increase their own earnings and job security by being available for weekend and overtime work, and by putting forth great effort on the job. As one Latino immigrant, a construction worker, observed: “When we arrive, we work as fast as we can so we can be recognized. This is what bothers the American blacks, because in a certain way we are competing.” Although discrete employer actions—such as de-frauding workers of pay, gross violations of health and safety, or firing popular leaders—may become incentives for protest, daily contestations over the pace and intensity of work seem to be rare. Indeed, interviews suggest that out-performing American workers is a source of pride for some immigrants.

By contrast, the history of black workers’ super-exploitation in the South has produced strategies of resistance that involve ongoing contestation in precisely such arenas. Working at a pace and level of effort deemed commensurate with the quality of a job, including its working conditions, terms of work and treatment by the employer, is a fundamental form of resistance among black workers. Indeed, it is arguably the essential form of labor resistance short of the strike, especially for workers to whom legal equality, the right to organize, recognition of their skills and other conventional levers have been historically denied. This may be especially true in the South, where white supremacy and class domination have been so explicitly intertwined, e.g., in slavery, and where workers’ formal authority through collective organizations like labor unions has been so weak. Black workers may therefore condemn Latinos as “rate busters,” but they also sometimes seek to inculcate

immigrants with their own established practices regarding the pace and intensity of work. As one Latino immigrant commented, referring to his African American co-workers' advice on the job, "They say, 'slowly, take it easy.'"

Despite tensions over these and other workplace issues, certain Latino and African American workers also attest to perceptions of commonality. One black worker asserted, for example, that Latinos are "just trying to make a living like I am." Another added, "Just like anybody else, they need to work.... Who am I to say they shouldn't be over here?" Despite the language barrier, friendships and even romances develop between black and Latino workers who meet on the job, though the latter can also become a source of rivalry, especially among men.

Finally, among the greatest sources of both unity and division in the workplace are the actions of employers, whose power entails not only class but also, insofar as most employers are white men, race and gender. Just as white workers' racism can drive blacks and Latinos together, intolerable working conditions and employers' injustices can make allies of these two groups. As one African American worker commented of the Latinos in his workplace, "I can get along with them. I don't have a problem with them, I talk to them, laugh with them, smile with them... It's not *them*—do you know what I'm saying?"

### *The Role of Employers*

Although workers of various racial/ethnic groups may seek to assert a measure of control in the workplace through covert resistance as well as formal institutional channels, this terrain is ultimately under the authority of the employer. Hiring practices, rates of pay, job assignments and many other features of work are the employer's purview, especially in the non-union settings that typify the South, and they carry crucial implications for work relations among different racial/ethnic groups. All of the previously analyzed tensions that pit black, white and Latino workers against each other, such as job competition, wage rates and work effort, arise at least in part from employers' authority and actions, which too often go unrecognized.

Employers' decision-making regarding hiring, for example, underlies the perceived job competition that white and black workers express through the allegation that immigrants are "taking" their jobs. Research into the criteria that employers use to assess applicants for relatively unskilled jobs, in which such factors as education, credentials and prior work experience are deemed irrelevant, documents a tendency toward racial/ethnic "coding" (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Waldinger, 1997; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Interviews conducted in two cities outside the South, Los Angeles and Chicago, reveal that employers view Latino applicants as more compliant and desirable than African Americans—and in some instances whites—for jobs at the low-skill end of the labor market. By endowing different racial/ethnic groups with essential traits, and then providing favored groups access to jobs, employers (intentionally or not) perpetuate racial hierarchy and division in both ideological and material terms. These consequences occur regardless of the racial identity of employers; when black employers engage in racial/ethnic coding that leads to Latino immigrant employment, they not only contribute to anti-black racism, but also may aggravate intra-racial, class tensions among African Americans. Ironically, in locations where there is overtly racist antipathy to Latino immigrants, as among some white workers in East Tennessee, employers who hire Latinos appear magnanimous and "non-racist."

These racial dynamics acquire a stark potency in the Deep South, where the working class population has long been disproportionately African American and employers disproportionately white. Such is the case, for example, in Memphis, a majority-black city. Interviews with managers in the warehouses of the distribution sector, which anchors the Memphis economy, indicate that Latinos have rapidly become workers of choice for employers capable of operating across the language barrier. When asked to explain this preference, employers praise Latinos for their reliability, productivity and flexibility, i.e., their “work ethic” (Ciscel, Smith and Mendoza, 2003). Employers thereby transform the contextual work incentives of immigration, which apply across people of diverse ethnic and national origins, into racialized “character” traits, then use them to justify the repudiation of black workers and their established patterns of resistance. Employers’ decision-making power is thus at stake not only in the widespread contention over job competition, but also in contestations between blacks and Latinos over the pace and intensity of work. Moreover, their desire to access Latino immigrant workers acquires a distinctive racial meaning in this sub-regional context, where new immigrants alleviate employers’ historic dependence on black labor.

Similarly, employers’ wage-setting practices underlie African American workers’ allegation that “Mexicans work cheap.” Workers, of course, do not set their own rates of pay, and in non-union workplaces they have little recourse to low wages except to quit. The actual impact of immigration on local wages is a matter of some dispute among economists; whereas a large influx of workers at the low-wage end of the labor market may tend to drive wages down, population growth through immigration also tends to stimulate the economy, resulting in more jobs and a higher demand for labor (Borjas, 1995). In the research for this project, we found support for both positions: in Memphis, for example, Latino immigrants have clearly contributed to economic growth, but we also interviewed employers who acknowledged that they had lowered wages since the immigrant influx (Mendoza, Ciscel and Smith, 2000). However, this also underscores the point that it is employers, not immigrants, who set wages. Latino immigrants, like any other group of workers, would presumably prefer to receive more rather than less for their labor.

Despite the significance of their role, employers’ power over many aspects of work is often invisible. For example, the widespread use of temporary labor supply agencies, particularly in the industries where Latino immigrants are clustering, transfers the processes of hiring and racial/ethnic coding to a third party (Ciscel, Smith and Mendoza, 2003; Smith, Mendoza and Ciscel, 2005). Interviews with temporary agency staff indicate that employers routinely request Latinos, who are sometimes referenced through the coded phrase “bilingual workers,” but these transactions are of course invisible to applicants. Other employers, those who have not (yet) developed a bilingual supervisory capacity, will request “American” workers, who are almost invariably black. Workers display their implicit knowledge of these practices through their comments, as they wait in line at temporary agencies, about which group seems to be hired on any given day. At one agency applicants actually sorted themselves into separate lines by race/ethnicity/nationality, i.e., as American blacks and Spanish-speaking Latinos, as they waited to be processed by the staff.

In the workplace, separation by race/ethnicity persists, as employers sometimes create work groups that are entirely black or Latino. That is the case, for example, in certain warehouses where each “line,” i.e., conveyor belt, will be run by a homogeneous group of workers. Although often justified in terms of the language

difference, employers who hire large numbers of Latino immigrants typically have bilingual supervisors who could presumably communicate in both English and Spanish to a single group of workers. In any case, the consequence is racial/ethnic separation, which is also often evident in workers' self-segregation during breaks and mealtimes.

Although employers' actions may foment racial/ethnic division and distrust among workers, overtly differential treatment can also generate solidarity and resistance. In one recent incident in a Memphis factory, for example, Latino workers who were singled out for overtime on a Friday evening refused it en masse and left work at the customary time with their African American co-workers. The fact that this particular factory is unionized, and that workers acted under protection of a collective bargaining agreement, no doubt contributed to their resistance. Attaining such institutionalized solidarity is of course a major goal of class-based collaborations. Although the attitudes and influence of white workers remain critical impediments to such a goal, there is evidence that, as workers of color, blacks and Latinos have the potential to achieve solidarity through the powerful alignments of race and class.

## **Conclusion**

Social justice activists throughout the South are wrestling with the implications of Latino immigration for their organizational strategies and priorities. Many are devoting resources to the development of collaborations inclusive of new immigrants, which foreground unity as workers and/or as people of color. In some cases a product of their theoretical persuasion and political commitments, their strategic approaches are also practical responses to immigrant workers' exploitation by employers and the dynamics of racialization, whereby Latino immigrants, like it or not, are becoming defined as "brown" within the U.S. racial hierarchy. Residential and occupational segregation places Latino and African American working class people in close proximity, confronting related though not necessarily identical problems in many southern neighborhoods and workplaces. As one 19-year-old African American activist commented, "I see a lot of our communities [in Atlanta] being displaced and a lot of the history that has been there. But I see a lot of the communities of color mixing a lot more because we are being thrown into the same places due to our economic status."

In some respects, the dilemmas that activists confront in these increasingly multi-racial/ethnic contexts are familiar. They involve questions that generations of southern activists have sought to answer: How to promote race-based unity among African Americans or people of color more generally while combating the cleavages and inequities of class? How to unite workers across the divisions of race and ethnicity? How to combat white workers' racism in a region where white supremacy has been so powerful and overt? These and other questions cluster around the potentially divisive intersections of race and class. Although some activists operate in a relatively singular political framework—such as black nationalists who repudiate alliances with Latinos, or white trade unionists who insist that working class solidarity can readily overcome the "individual prejudices" of white workers—most do not. We/they seek answers that strategically comprehend the interplay of multiple forms of oppressions and possibilities for resistance.

The three sub-regions where this project was implemented contextualize and complicate these overall race-class interactions. In majority-white, working class East



Tennessee—contrary to assumptions that white workers are too privileged to feel threatened by job competition from presumably unskilled immigrants—we found the most explicitly racist reaction against immigrants, but these sentiments tend to stimulate sympathy from local African Americans. By contrast, in majority-black Atlanta and Memphis, relations between black and Latino workers are often uneasy but not necessarily hostile. Complex negotiations over rates of pay, the pace of work and other issues take place both within and between each group of workers. In both cities, black political power is hard won and vulnerable in the face of persistent white supremacy. Many African American activists are focused on electoral politics and neighborhood organizing; their interest in overtures to Latinos depends heavily on their political predisposition, with those seeking alliances tending to emphasize immigrants as potential citizens of color. Meanwhile, in all three places, employers play a largely invisible but no less significant role in shaping relations among racial/ethnic groups through their hiring practices and employment policies.

Although the challenges to social justice collaboration are unresolved and ongoing, there are yet other dilemmas attendant to immigration that many southern activists—and I include myself in this group—have barely begun to address. For all of our internal debate and committed exploration of collaboration, most of us involved with “Across Races and Nations” ultimately sought to make immigrants familiar and acceptable by incorporating them into domestic social identities and our existing political frameworks. Emphasizing their status as people of color and/or as workers, we sought to position immigrants within the traditions of progressive social movements in the South, which have focused predominantly on race and/or class.

It is not that this approach is wrong; rather it is insufficient to this historical moment. It avoids the particularity of Latino immigrants’ status as *immigrants*, who challenge and potentially alter our regional sensibilities and strategies.<sup>8</sup> Latinos have become the human embodiment of globalization, signaling the emergence of the transnational South. This is a South in which race is configured neither solely as black and white, though that divide remains foundational, nor exclusively in reference to the U.S. citizenry. Recalling previous eras in the history of the United States, national origin, citizenship status, ethnicity and even religion increasingly figure in the domestic racial hierarchy. This is a South in which employers’ historic dependence on the labor of African Americans and Appalachian whites is relieved by a labor market that transcends national borders. Although global exchange is nothing new—recall the Atlantic Passage of the slave trade—this transnational South involves new forms of exploitation, new cross-border interactions, and the potential for new geographies of solidarity.

Moreover, immigrants are foreign nationals, who are entering the United States at a time of violent, militaristic nationalism. If we sidestep this threatening reality by defining immigrants exclusively as workers or domestic people of color, we disarm ourselves in the face of a rising nativism and racist nationalism. These exclusionary sentiments are not peculiar to whites. For example, black workers who were recently laid off by textile plant closings in North Carolina have expressed sharp hostility toward Latino immigrants, whom they blame as foreigners who have taken their “American” jobs.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, although the dynamics of white supremacy create the potential for “black-brown” alliances in some contexts like East Tennessee, there is also an ironic and ominous potential for de facto black-white alliances against Latinos as immigrants.

A “southern internationalism” capable of challenging these trends may seem at first like an oxymoron, foreign to southern history and the regional preoccupations of

activists. Nevertheless, the South, like the United States, was born as a global enterprise, its racial hierarchy an amalgam of diverse nations and peoples, and its labor force a product of immigration and forced migration. Moreover, the current multi-generational ensemble of southern activists, heirs and veterans of the civil rights movement, possess a legacy of profound egalitarianism that contests and potentially transcends all systems of hierarchy and exclusion—even national borders. As one African American activist, a minister, articulated: “America is changing, and those of us in the civil rights struggle ...should learn from our past, but not be stuck in our past.... We should seek to be creative in how we can build this beloved community that we talked about...If it was good for black folks to be around the table, why shouldn’t it be good for Asian folks and Hispanic folks to be around the table?” Of all the challenges that attend collaborations inclusive of new immigrants—and they are many, as this chapter indicates—developing and promoting a more global sensibility for the pursuit of social justice in the transnational South may be the greatest.

## Notes

- 1 This paper will be published as a chapter in Heather A. Smith and Owen Furuseth, eds., *The New South: Latinos and the Transformation of Place*, forthcoming from Ashgate.
- 2 The written products from “Across Races and Nations,” on which this chapter is largely based, are available on the website of the Center for Research on Women, <http://cas.memphis.edu/isc/crow>.
- 3 This section draws heavily from Smith, Williams and Johnson, 2004.
- 4 Dwayne Patterson, former staff member of the Southern Regional Council, conducted the interviews with African American activists in Atlanta.
- 5 This section draws on Spears, 2004; see also Spears, 2005.
- 6 A more extensive analysis of these dynamics in East Tennessee may be found in Williams and Smith, 2004.
- 7 The interviews in Memphis were conducted primarily by Peter Walls, Marcela Mendoza and Federico Gomez Uroz.
- 8 This is especially true in those “new destination” areas of the Southeast where “Latino” and “immigrant” are conflated. Much of Texas and Florida are obvious exceptions.
- 9 This point was emphasized by Leah Wise, director of the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network, at a gathering in December 2004 at the Highlander Center sponsored by the “Across Races and Nations” project.

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