

**Remarks by
Bob Balgenorth, President
State Building & Construction Trades Council of California
To Conference on Immigration and Labor
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Good Morning, Brothers and Sisters!

My name is Bob Balgenorth. On behalf of the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, I want to welcome you to this conference on Immigrant Workers in Construction.

And I want to thank the co-sponsors of this event – the Center to Protect Workers’ Rights and the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program.

We are here to discuss ways for building trades unions to work with and organize a vast new immigrant workforce. Because immigrants today are the construction workforce of today and tomorrow.

Now let me ask a question: How many of you are Native Americans?

Okay, that would make all the rest of us immigrants...
either first generation immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

I think it is safe to say that immigration is one of the most “cutting edge” issues of our time. Immigration is important to everyone.

It is important to people whose families have been citizens for generations...
It is important to people who are newly naturalized citizens...
It is important to people who are here without documentation...
And it is important to the future of the building trades unions.
Looking back through American history, new immigrants have always struggled...
and when they found their footing...
they have always played a key role in revitalizing this country and giving
it new vision and new direction.

One of the earliest groups of immigrants were brought here against their will.

It has been estimated that between the years 1500 and 1850, nearly 430,000 Africans were brought...
as slaves...
to the American colonies and the early United States.

At the same time that hundreds of thousands of Africans were brought here as slaves, many Europeans and Asians were coming voluntarily.

They came for many reasons in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries...

the Irish famine...,

a revolution in Germany...,

the Opium Wars in China...,

the Mexican Revolution of 1910... and so on.

They also came because they saw the opportunities that existed in the United States.

And these immigrants found their way into our unions. The California Building Trades Council was founded by Patrick Henry McCarthy—an immigrant from Limerick, Ireland.

For many years, Irish, German, and Italian workers formed the bedrock of California's construction unions.

At the time, these immigrant workers were seen as outsiders by the rest of society, but they created a place for themselves...

only men carrying the Building Trades' "working card" could pick up a tool at a San Francisco building site.

They developed apprenticeship training programs and found ways to integrate their native languages and cultures into the culture of the Building Trades.

Over the years, new waves of immigrants have found their way to the construction industry and to our unions.

Integrating these new waves hasn't always been smooth and easy, but it's happened anyway.

In 2007, official estimates place the number of immigrants in this country at 34 million, with somewhere between 12 million and 15 million of them undocumented.

A huge majority of them are from Mexico and Latin America.

As in the last two centuries, there are many reasons for this new influx of immigrants.

Globalization and trade deals like NAFTA and CAFTA promised positive changes...

but instead, they have caused vast unemployment and destroyed lives and communities in this country and every nation south of the US border.

They have created a stagnant economy in their native country that makes it very hard to support their families.

Wars and civil unrest have also displaced many from their homes...and the lure of jobs in the United States has brought huge numbers of immigrants to this country... both legally and illegally.

As all the other waves of new immigrants have experienced down through the years..., there has been a surge of resentment in some quarters against the newcomers.

Attacks..., evictions..., job site arrests..., deportations..., attempts to segregate..., denial of education and health care...,

all these tactics have been used to discourage these immigrants.

These actions were used to criminalize them... and exclude them from mainstream America.

Our members and many in union leadership find it all too easy to justify those tactics.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say that the immigrants are stealing our jobs and driving wages down.

But I suggest to you that immigrants may very well be the salvation of the union movement.

Immigrants make up a huge pool of unorganized workers.

With union density in the workforce decreasing steadily, unions are in danger of losing their ability to collectively bargain for higher wages...,

health care...,

pension plans...,

and all the benefits that have created the middle class in this country.

Rather than trying to exclude them from the mainstream of our society..., it would be far smarter and far more beneficial to this nation... if the labor movement would organize this new immigrant workforce and help them become productive citizens.

Where do we find immigrant workers today?

They came first to the border states...

California...,

Arizona...,

Texas...

but now you'll find immigrant workers across the nation.

Most of them in the construction field are working non-union and in residential construction.

They are not getting the high quality training that union apprenticeship programs offer..., which means they are getting injured on the job at much higher rates than union-trained workers.

In California, immigrants make up 60 percent of all new construction workers.

I suggest that we need to find ways to integrate them into our unions...,
train them...,
and prepare a new generation of working men and women for the
challenges of the global economy.

I am not suggesting it will be easy.

We are challenged by a workforce that has not mastered English... yet.

We know that those who are bi-lingual will be best able to rise in leadership... on the job and in their unions.

They will need to be able to run jobs and communicate with their co-workers in either language. So we are challenged with finding the most effective ways to teach them English.

And unlike the immigrants from Europe and Asia, those who come from Mexico are bi-cultural.

Because Mexico is our next-door neighbor, they are able to maintain their close connections to both countries.

As union leaders, we will have to reach out and be more flexible and creative than we were in the half-century that followed World War II.

If we do it right...,
recruiting these new immigrants into our unions will give us an opportunity to
unite and build alliances to strengthen the union movement and revive the
shrinking American middle class.

If we do it right...,
this effort will reach across unions and build alliances between labor...,
churches...,

and community organizations.

We will also have to find ways to deal with the traditional union issues of wages, benefits, and jurisdictional disputes that could accompany a surge of new union members.

And organized labor will need to work politically to ensure that our elected and appointed officials adopt immigration policies that are fair and equitable.

I believe these are the right things to do.

The purpose of this conference is to discuss many of these issues in some detail...,
to start developing best practices and finding ways to integrate immigrants into
our unions...,
into our leadership...,
into our trust funds...
and give them a shot at the American Dream.

I will say again that unions have the potential to take immigration...
which many people see as a huge stumbling block...
and turn it into a stepping stone for the union movement.

Thank you for coming, and now let's get down to business.