

National Immigrant Worker Conference

Session Descriptions

Addressing Language Needs

Apprenticeship programs have established in-house English as a Second Language (ESL) classes but find they are continuously challenged by workers' different levels of literacy—in English as well as in their native language. Some unions have set up successful Spanish language programs only to get an influx of workers who speak a different language. This workshop will look at different models for addressing language needs, including in-house programs, creating ties to adult education/community college ESL programs; resources for teaching safety terms and on-the-job English.

Addressing Cultural Needs

Immigrant workers often have limited or negative experiences with unions in their native countries. Not only do they need to be oriented to the benefits U.S. unions can provide them, they also need to understand the expectations that their fellow union workers have of them, and develop trust with the union structure and union leadership. On the other side, non-immigrants need to understand that many immigrants are living a bi-national life, working here to send money home and to spend significant time in their home country. With different goals, they approach working in the United States differently.

Building Alliances

Those who have tried to organize immigrant workers have learned, sometimes the hard way, that the process can take more time and effort than routine organizing drives. Distrust and lack of understanding of what unions are all about, and fear of job loss or worse, makes this a tough nut. Building alliances in the immigrant community and working with trusted organizations such as churches, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and worker centers is a crucial step before organizing can even be attempted. Learn about how some unions built successful alliances and some of the challenges they overcame.

Providing Effective Health and Safety Training- Protecting Immigrant Workers on the Job

What's the best way to provide solid health and safety training to a population whose English language and literacy skills are limited? Are there innovative methods to deliver the training? How best to translate existing texts into other languages? Computer-based and multi-media resources? This workshop examined the pros and cons of how various programs have provided training to immigrant workers.

Working with Day Laborer Programs

This year, the AFL-CIO entered into an agreement with the National Day Labor Organizing Network to work collaboratively to strengthen and expand the work of local day laborer organizing groups and develop successful models for organizing immigrant contingent/temporary workers. Examples of the ways unions are collaborating with day labor programs from the national to the local level, and the challenges and successes they have encountered will be given.

Round Table Discussion: How to Get Support in the Union

Each RT could brainstorm the most common barriers and then brainstorm strategies to respond to barriers. Goal is to get everyone talking in a solution oriented way about these issues. (There will be NO report back.) Some of the issues included:

- Facing the barriers
- Negative attitudes of contractors/ tough on-the-job experience
- Negative views of immigrants held by members/leaders
- Negative views of unions held by immigrants
- Culture differences
- Resistance in union to new programs
- Immigration status (who's the cop?)

Models for Recruiting and Organizing Immigrant Workers

With a journeyman's card, a worker can get a job anywhere. But what if a worker has journeyman's experience, but no card to show for it? How do we recognize that experience and bring them into the union "through the back door?" Looking at the success of Poland's Solidarity Union, another project has utilized the Labor Market Organizing Model to create a "culture of solidarity." What other models are out there?

Developing Leadership

Our current membership needs strong leadership now and into the future to guarantee their hard-earned pensions and retiree benefits. As the membership in our unions becomes increasingly immigrant based, what are we doing to develop immigrant leadership and train these members to run the union and be effective trustees on the Health and Welfare and Pension Trusts? How do we sell this to current members? And what about the formation of all-immigrant unions? Are these being supported by, and offered leadership development by their International unions?

From Apprenticeship Programs to the Worksite

For many immigrant workers, the apprenticeship program is a “safe place,” where they are surrounded by instructors who want them to succeed through providing services and training in their native language. However, while they spend about 10% of their time at the training center, they spend 90% on the jobsite where they often encounter contractors and co-workers who may be hostile about more than the language limitations. How do we protect our apprenticeship investment by creating a better on-the-job work experience for immigrant workers?

Exploring Legal Issues: What the Law Says and the Responsibility of Unions

From having a drivers’ license to a green card, immigrant workers and our unions face numerous legal issues. How do unions address the issue of immigration status and what can they do to help immigrant workers gain legal status?