Immigrants in the Construction Industry

by
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University of Utah
What Have Construction Unions Said About Immigration?

- “[We should] restrict Immigration. My reason is, that when business in our trade is brisk, the crowd of masons that come here to work from England is awful. They work during the summer here, live poorly, bank all they get, fill our positions and take all they earn back to England, to come again next summer.”
  
  – Edward F. O'Brien, the Secretary of the Bricklayers and Masons' International Union Local 32
  
US Immigration Number & Rate
1820 to 2010 (based on doubling 2005 data)

Legal immigrants
Italian & Eastern European Immigration
Irish Immigration
Hispanic Immigration

Number of Immigrants
Rate per 1000 US Pop.

Year Range
1820 to 1830
1831 to 1840
1841 to 1850
1851 to 1860
1861 to 1870
1871 to 1880
1881 to 1890
1891 to 1900
1901 to 1910
1911 to 1920
1921 to 1930
1931 to 1940
1941 to 1950
1951 to 1960
1961 to 1970
1971 to 1980
1981 to 1990
1991 to 2000
2001 to 2010

= 2005 data doubled

Number  Rate per 1000 US Pop.
Union Attitude Is Not Racist

• “We recommend restriction of immigration, for our trade suffers greatly from foreigners coming here and undermining the American citizens by working for whatever they can get. At the present time you will find that most of the carpenters out of work are citizens of the United States; while those employed are foreigners, especially Swedes.”

  – A Brooklyn writer for the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Local 258 said:

It Is Fear of Economic Competition

• “Our wages have been brought down to $2.75 per day and less, by the amount of foreign labor in the market, mostly Swedes and Danes.”
  – A Brooklyn writer for the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators Local 110
But It Can Have Racial Overtones

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—First Immigration Law Based on Race
Current Opposition to Immigration Has Some Racial Overtones

DMV MEXIFORNIA
DMV
DRIVER LICENSE
8763678911
CLASS: ILLEGAL ALIEN
EXPRES: NEVER
JOSE GOMEZ, JR (512878)
1234 CAMINIO DEL TORO
LOS ANGELES, MEXIFORNIA
SEX: MUCHO HAIR: BRN
HT: 5'4" WT: TOO MUCH
DOB: NOT KNOWN
Entitled to: Drive
Attend College
Purchase Guns
Vote
Signature
X
What Is Going On In Construction Today?

• 1 out of every 5 construction workers is an Hispanic immigrant
• 1 out of 3 newly arrived Hispanic immigrants go into construction
• There are more Hispanic immigrants in construction in Southern and Western states
• But immigrants are spreading out rapidly
To Exclude or to Organize?

• What does history tell us?
• What is possible in today’s world?
Basic Theme of This Presentation

- When the US has been open to world trade, the US has also been exposed to immigration.
- The 1920 to 1970 period of low immigration was a period when the US was also closed to free trade.
- Free trade is the underlying cause of increased immigration.
- To stop immigration you would have to stop free trade.
- The alternative to stopping immigration is to organize immigrants.
Immigration and Openness 2

![Chart showing immigration and openness over time]

- Openness (X+M)/GNP
- Number of Immigrants

Series2: Exports & Imports as a Percent of GNP
Immigration and Openness 2

Graph showing the number of immigrants and openness (X+M)/GNP from 1870 to 2000. Key events include the 1924 Immigration Law and the Great Depression.
The Closed Economy:
A Deal between Capital & Labor

- “The protective tariff …saves the American market for the products of the American workmen. [Restrictive immigration law] …saves the American job for the American workmen.”
  – Calvin Coolidge 1924

Republican President Calvin Coolidge (1924-28)
Context of Grand Bargain

- World War I Cut Off Immigration from Europe
- Isolationism Strong Response to WWI
- US Was a Closed Economy
- US Was a Growing Economy
- US Capital Wanted to Keep Out Foreign Competition Through High Tariffs
  - That is how labor got this “deal” in the 1920s from a conservative Republican President and Congress when unions were weak
Can We Turn Back the Clock?

• US Is an Open Economy
  – NAFTA  1995
  – World Trade Organization
  – World-Wide Increase in Trade
  – Immigrants Now from Next Door
    • No ocean barrier
• US Capital Has No Incentive to Make This Deal Today
• World-Wide Increase in Immigration
  – Moroccans in Spain; Turks in Germany; Peruvians in Japan; Burmese in Thailand
What You Will Learn in This Video

• Background on US Immigration
  – History of Immigration
  – History of US Immigration Laws

• Construction Immigration History
  – History of Immigrants in US Construction
  – Concerns About Immigrants’ Effect on Natives
  – Calvin Coolidge and Protected Borders
  – Borders Fall After 1965

• Current Construction Trends and Views
History of Immigration

- **1600 to 1840**—English, Scottish, German—Protestant
- **1840’s**—Irish Potato Famine—Catholic—leads to public school system
- **1850s**—California Gold Rush—Chinese immigrants
- **1890s-1910**—Southern-Eastern Europeans
- **1920s to 1960s**—Big Cutoff of Immigration
- **1965+**—Latinos and Asians
History of US Immigration Law

- The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first (and only) explicitly race-based immigration act.
- World War I—1914 to 1918
- The Immigration Act of 1924 aimed at freezing the current ethnic distribution in response to rising immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Asia. Total annual immigration was capped at 150,000. Asians were excluded but residents of nations in the Americas were not restricted.
- Bracero Program (1942-64) imports Mexicans to work in agriculture.
- The Immigration Act of 1965 discontinued quotas based on national origin, while preference given to those who have U.S. relatives. For the first time Mexican immigration was restricted.
- The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 granted amnesty to illegal immigrants who had been in the United States before 1982 but made it a crime to hire an illegal immigrant.
- The Real ID Act of 2005 created more restrictions on political asylum, severely curtailed habeas corpus relief for immigrants, increased immigration enforcement mechanisms, altered judicial review, and imposed federal restrictions on the issuance of state driver's licenses to immigrants and others.
US Similar to Most Developed Countries

Percent of Labor Force 2001
History of Immigrants in Construction

• How much of the construction labor force were (are) immigrants?
• Who were these immigrants?
• How skilled were they?
• How did they affect construction?
Soon FB Construction Workers Will Be One-Third of Labor Force

Percentage of foreign born workers in construction industry
These FB Workers Will Be Hispanic

The percentages of foreign-born construction workers by their birthplaces 1850-2000.
The percentage of illiterate workers among foreign-born construction worker and the percentage of illiterate workers among native-born construction workers

Lack of immigrant skills today similar to Italian & Eastern European immigrants of the last great wave of immigrants.

all native born construction workers = 100%
& all foreign born construction workers = 100%
Today 17%+ of construction immigrants do not speak English. Similar to 1910 when 26% of construction immigrants did not speak English.

Percentage of construction workers who do not speak English among foreign-born construction workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Don't Speak English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17</td>
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Construction Laborers: Changing Skill Composition in Construction

- Laborers as a percent of all construction workers rises until immigration is shut off and then gradually falls until immigration takes off again.

Foreign born workers were over-represented among laborers during both the early and the current wave of immigration.

Above the red line immigrants are over-represented.

Below the red line immigrants are under-represented.
For the first time, immigrants in construction are now the younger labor force. Natives are the older generation. Tomorrow’s workforce = immigrants
Current Immigration Trends in Construction

• Immigrants are concentrated in construction compared to other industries

• Most Hispanic immigrants go into construction
  – 1 out of 3 recent Hispanic immigrants is a construction worker

• One fifth of all construction workers is a Hispanic immigrant
  – 1 out of 5 construction workers is a Hispanic immigrant
Hispanics Are 14% of US Labor Market--Foreign Born=8%
All Hispanics = 25% of Construction
Foreign Born Hisp. = 19% of Construction
Recent Arrival Hisp. = 7% of Construction
Native Born Hispanics = 6% of Construction
In 2004 Hispanics Were 21% of Construction Labor Market
In 2006 Hispanics Were 25% of Construction Labor Market

Hispanic Share of Construction Labor Market

All the 4 percentage point increase in Hispanics from foreign born

Native Born Hispanic | Foreign Born Hispanics

2004 | 2006
Are the New Workers Old or Recent Immigrants?

Hispanic Share of Construction Labor Market

4 percentage point increase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Native Born Hispanic</th>
<th>Foreign Born Hispanics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The New Hispanic Construction Workers Are Recent Immigrants

Of the 4 percentage point increase in Hispanic share of construction almost all, 95% are new arrivals

Native Hispanic Construction Workers Have Not Increased Their Share of the Construction Labor Market
How Important Is Construction to Each Group?

1 out of 12 U.S. workers is a construction worker.
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1 out of 12 U.S. workers is a construction worker
1 out of 6.6 Hispanics is a construction worker
How Important Is Construction to Each Group?

Percent of Each Group Who Are Construction Workers

1 out of 12 U.S. workers is a construction worker
1 out of 6.6 Hispanics is a construction worker
1 out of 5 foreign born Hispanics is a construction worker
How Important Is Construction to Each Group?

Percent of Each Group Who Are Construction Workers

- 1 out of 12 U.S. workers is a construction worker
- 1 out of 6.6 Hispanics is a construction worker
- 1 out of 5 foreign born Hispanics is a construction worker
- 1 out of 3 recently arrived Hispanics is a construction worker
How Are Hispanics Spread Out?
2006

Nonunion areas of the South seem attractive
Hispanic Construction Workers Are Super Exploited

- Mexican workers are four times more likely to die on-the-job compared to native workers
- Mexicans are twice as likely to die compared to other immigrants
- Hispanic injuries are less likely to be reported
- Hispanic immigrants are more likely to be bogus independent contractors
Eighteen-year-old Carlos Huerta was told to stand in a trash container, which a forklift raised 10 feet so he could wash a brick wall. But the improvised platform wasn't secured to the forklift's prongs, and it soon toppled.

16-year-old Antonio Garcia Reyes was framing the roof of a new college dormitory in Alabama when he plunged three stories. He had no harness or other protection against a fall, accident investigators found.

In South Carolina, brothers Rigouerto and Moses Xaca Sandoval died building a suburban high school that, at 15 and 16, they might have attended. They were buried in a trench when the walls of sandy soil collapsed.

Accidents like these suggest that employers tell Mexicans to do the most glaringly perilous tasks, says Susan Feldmann, who fields calls from Spanish-speaking workers for an institute within the federal Centers for Disease Control. "They're considered disposable," she says.

Immigrants and Contractor Exploitation

OMAHA (AP) -- Miguel is paid by the hour. He is told when to start and finish his workday, when to take breaks and what to do on his shift. He didn't bid for the job of hanging drywall, and he doesn't risk profit or loss. He wears a red hard hat bearing the "E & K" insignia of an Omaha contractor, Eliason & Knuth Drywall Co. He cashes a paycheck cut by a second company, an Atlanta-based labor broker called Eagle Managed Subcontractors. By all appearances, Miguel is somebody's employee. Yet before he could work on the new Omaha convention center, Miguel, as we're calling him, had to sign a contract declaring himself an independent subcontractor.

Steve Jordon, Cindy Gonzalez, “When a worker is not an employee When illegal immigrants are classified as subcontractors, taxes tend to disappear. Who's the boss?” Omaha World Herald (Nebraska), April 27, 2003 NEWS; p. 1A.
To Exclude or to Organize?

- What does history tell us?
- Yesterday’s immigrant becomes today’s union leader
  - English, German, Irish, Scottish, Greek, Russian and Italian names are common among union leaders today
  - Will Asian and Hispanic names be next?
To Exclude or to Organize?

• What is possible in today’s world?
• Cannot role back free trade
  – And with trade will come immigrants
  – What will happen to unions if immigrants are not organized?
Conclusion

- The closed period of the American economy (1920s to 1960s) is an historical exception
- Rolling back free trade and globalization is unlikely
- If trade continues, immigrants will come
- What will happen to construction if these immigrants are not organized?