

Speech by Francisco Altamirano

Painters District Council 82

Immigrant Workers in Construction Conference

Center to Protect Workers Rights

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Good morning, welcome to this conference. We hope that you enjoy your participation and we hope that today will bring ideas, viewpoints and insights about how we can organize and educate the new immigrant workforce that is coming into our union.

My name is Francisco Altamirano. I am a glazier from Local 1324. I was hired by District Council 82 last year as an organizer. District Council 82 represents painters, drywall finishers, glaziers, glassworkers, sign industry, display industry, screen process and convention set up workers.

I know most of us have very compelling stories to tell and we all know that everyone of us has a unique story. I have come from central Mexico in the late 70's doing a little of everything. In the early eighties I was working in tomato fields picking pears, grapes, cherries, doing those corridas in California.

By 1986, with the new amnesty law, I could get my green card. By 1989 I had my first daughter, I was a mushroom picker and my wife was packing the mushrooms. After having our first daughter we decided to leave the agricultural jobs and move on to the Midwest, Chicago, where we had a lot of relatives that moved there in the early 1960's and moved there from Oxnard trying to find jobs at the factories. I worked in Chicago in different jobs and I was trimming trees when they laid me off and offered me a job at a glazing company. Working for this company opened my eyes about the Union, many shops in Chicago are not union but the field workers are union. When I tried to become Union the company stopped me, they needed me at their non union shop. A company showed up in Chicago to do a small job and I was sent there to help them. During that time they offered me work in Minnesota. A month later I was working for a union company making union wages and paid benefits. Five years later I became a citizen and two years later I brought two daughters legally to Minnesota that were left behind in Mexico. All of this with the help of a steady job, good wages and benefits.

July, 2006 I was hired by the District Council. I am the first Latino organizer. When I crossed the border in the mid 1970's, it was just a bare wire fence lying on the ground dividing Tijuana and San Isidro. Now from the Pacific ocean to the Otay border crossing you see nothing but a 10-foot tall wall and 130 feet North there is a 14-foot tall secondary wall.

My experience about how we organize now in the northern Midwest is very new for unions and for members as well as new construction workers. We are at the stage of educating our members because there is a sector that thinks they are losing jobs because of the new labor force. On the other hand unions are benefiting with this new work force, making stronger unions, gaining members, training younger people that want to do jobs that can't be filled by younger Americans.

Unions in Minnesota are just now hiring Latino organizers. They have never before been more concerned about our new immigrant force, especially workers getting into different union trades like drywall, paint, roofing and the laborers union.

Our state is very open about immigrants, but like any other community they expect the new immigrants to adapt, learn English, and be trained. Because of their experience of being exploited, immigrant workers do not trust anyone. There is always a "subcontractor" working for a company supplying this labor force and underpaying the workers. This included not contributing to the benefit funds and unfortunately there are contractors that follow these practices.

The problem about organizing Latino immigrants is about educating all of the members about what a union can do for its members and for the new members.

It is about gaining trust and having a friendly place where they can gather and express their viewpoints.

It is about educating our leadership about this strong labor force that its taking jobs, that we have to train and educate so our union can get stronger.

We have to start trying to eradicate the apathy against Latinos, we are part of this growing economy.