

Unions embracing immigrants;

Faced with declining membership, labor leaders are courting a group long blamed for undercutting wages. Language isn't the only obstacle.

Spanish Phrases

for Union Organizers

Unions embracing immigrants

The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Body

A Mexican woman earning \$125 a week cleaning suburban office parks wanted to help lead a bus rally today at a Malvern corporate complex calling for better wages and hours.

But she was afraid she would lose her job.

"Is it bad to be part of a union?" asked the 50-year-old Norristown worker, who did not want to be identified.

"No," replied Sonia Burguillo, a Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizer, who failed to convince the woman to greet a national Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride bus arriving in the area today.

Union organizers encounter this fear every day as they try to turn the labor movement's new target audience - immigrants - into card-carrying members.

With membership steadily declining, unions are soliciting a burgeoning group long blamed for undercutting wages.

They are doing so largely on labor's new frontier: suburban office complexes, hotels, and industrial parks that have drawn jobs over the last decade - and mass migrations of immigrant workers to fill them.

But in doing so, unions face tremendous odds - language barriers, scattered job sites, workers with often illegal residency status, and a management culture that will fight hard to keep unions out.

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The **Immigrant** Workers Freedom Ride, a bus caravan that swings through Malvern and Philadelphia today en route to Capitol Hill on Thursday, is what **organizers** say is **labor's** first loud declaration that it is **embracing immigrant** workers and the controversial immigration agenda as part of its political future.

It is led by the AFL-CIO and a politically powerful coalition that includes civil rights **groups**, religious organizations, and immigration advocates.

"They see **union membership** plummeting," said Cornell University's Vernon M. Briggs Jr., a scholar on immigration and **labor**. "And they think that by appealing to **immigrants** as **immigrants** rather than as workers, they can make the **immigrants** see **unions** as a beneficial force.

"Their gamble is that they can do this and if they get the people in the **unions** they can make them better off," he said. "I say they cannot and they will hurt U.S. workers in the process."

It is a gamble seen as inevitable. Organized **labor's** ranks and political influence have been in a downward spiral.

At their peak in 1953, **unions** represented nearly 27 percent of the nation's **labor** force. By 2002, that had fallen to 14.6 percent.

Hit especially hard have been onetime manufacturing powerhouses. Pennsylvania's **union** representation dropped from 23.4 percent in 1989 to 16.6 percent in 2002. New Jersey numbers dropped from 25 percent to 20.6 percent in that same time.

The **decline** came as the nation's economy shed its goods-producing core - the largely urban manufacturing jobs that **long** formed the base of **unions**.

It is no coincidence, either, that this weakening of the **labor** movement came during suburbanization. The development of land ringing the nation's oldest cities drew not **only** homeowners but new hotels, office parks and restaurants.

"The greatest growth is coming in the service sector, where unionism has always been weak," Briggs said.

A 2002 study by Northeastern University showed that new **immigrants** accounted for 40 percent of Pennsylvania's **labor**-force growth between 1990 and 2001. The figure was 50 percent nationwide.

There were 19 million **immigrants** in 1990 and 32.5 million in 2000, Briggs said. About one in eight workers are foreign-born.

In this new arena, organizing efforts are harder than ever.

In cities, **unions** built empires by organizing workers concentrated in one area, such as janitors in a skyscraper. In the suburbs, workers are scattered.

SEIU Local 34, which represents 5,000 janitors and health-care workers mostly in Philadelphia, confronts this logistical reality in its suburban "Justice for Janitors" campaign.

Instead of posting one **union** official by a skyscraper's back door, they must dispatch a battalion of **organizers** - one to each two-story suburban building - hoping to snag a worker en route to the trash bin.

In the suburbs it is also harder for **unions** to exert the kind of political pressure that helps win contracts.

When "you're spread out . . . you have an awful lot of borough and town and county [officials]," said Patrick Eiding, president of the Philadelphia Council of the AFL-CIO.

Language differences complicate efforts.

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About a year ago, Teamsters Local 830 failed to organize 50 workers at Gala Industries because of language problems.

Workers at the Pennsauken acrylics manufacturer were primarily Cambodian and Vietnamese, but "we tried to communicate in English," said Joseph Brock, president of 3,700-member Teamsters Local 830.

Organizers used a Cambodian employee who appeared to be a union ally. She turned out to be working against the union, Brock said. "She wasn't translating what we were saying."

But Brock relied on technology to reach Hispanic workers who just ratified their first contract at a Bensalem metal-fabrication plant.

"I would write the leaflets," he said. "Then I would go to a Web site and translate it."

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 bought translation software and hired a Spanish-speaking staffer, said its vice president, Wendell Young 4th.

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees issued its first contract for 1,200 workers at the T.J. Maxx warehouse in Northeast Philadelphia in English, Spanish, Chinese and Albanian.

The transient nature of immigrant labor also works against organizing. Union elections can be so time-consuming that workers move on before the drive is over.

"Until they become union jobs, the turnover is high," said SEIU's Burguillo, expressing frustration. "That's what we're trying to change."

Another problem for unionizing efforts: illegal immigration.

The country's illegal immigrant population boomed during the 1990s, rising to an estimated 8 million.

When such workers are courted in union drives, some employers threaten deportation and firing. In the past, such workers were entitled to back wages. But in March 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated that safeguard for illegal immigrants.

"If you leave those workers with absolutely no protections, you have a devastating impact on everyone else," said Arthur Read, general counsel for Friends of Farmworkers, a group helping Chester County's Mexican mushroom workers.

During the 1990s, Hispanics became the largest minority in the country - and gained tremendous political clout.

The immigrant freedom ride, evoking a powerful symbol of the civil rights movement, began last week as lawmakers in Washington announced bipartisan support for a congressional proposal to legalize up to 500,000 illegal immigrant farmworkers.

Expanding the rights of illegal immigrants is a tenet of the freedom ride - one important to Hispanic voters as well.

The SEIU, one of the most vocal backers of the ride, calls immigration reform an element of its mission, including helping workers gain legal status.

"Do I think that they ought to do something about the border and do a better way of controlling things? Yes," Eiding said. "But once people are here . . . they should have a decent place to live, food on the table, clothes on their back, and a decent wage."

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The Comey Institute of Industrial Relations at St. Joseph's University teaches "Spanish Language for Union Organizers." Here are some key phrases from that course.

1. Is your job dangerous?

Es peligroso el trabajo?

2. How are your living conditions?

Cmo es la vivienda?

3. How long do you work without a break?

Cuntas horas trabaja sin descanso?

4. Have you suffered abuses on the job?

Ha encontrado abusos en el trabajo?

5. Did anyone threaten you with firing if you tried to join a labor union?

Le a amezado que le despidieran a usted si trata a formar un sindicato?

Graphic

PHOTO;

Sonia Burguillo is a union organizer. She helped rally support for local stops of the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride bus.

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