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Editorial Observer

Day Laborers, Silent and Despised, Find Their Voice

By LAWRENCE DOWNES

Illegal immigrants are a diverse bunch. There are about 12 million in this country, working in all industries and living in a range from middle class to working poor to something well below that. They are mostly Latino, but are Asian, African and Eastern European, too. The illegal Irish get a lot of press, but are just one tiny subset, a green sprig of parsley in the melting pot.

Of all these ethnic and economic subgroups, the one I find most compelling is the quiet one at the bottom: the Latino day laborers, the street-corner guys.

They are not the largest group, but they are the most visible, most vulnerable and most hated. They are also the least likely to get anything good out of the immigration bills now festering in Congress.

It takes nothing from the punishing toil of farm workers, hotel maids, wilderness firefighters and chicken processors to say that day laborers occupy a position of particular risk and hardship in these times of immigration panic.

They are silent and anonymous, but painfully exposed. They are jeered by suburbanites, harassed by Minuteman vigilantes and hounded by communities with police crackdowns, anti-loitering statutes and mass evictions. Contractors cheat them. People beat them up and firebomb their homes.

The possibility of being victimized without sympathy or a safety net is, of course, the risk one takes when entering this country illegally.

Day laborers are acutely aware of this and have set out to improve things on their own. In a development that may surprise those who see day laborers as immigration at its chaotic worst, this ad hoc phenomenon is shaping itself up.

Through a growing national network of job centers and hiring halls, day laborers are organizing, finding allies and pressing for better treatment.

They are energized by a sense that hard work and suffering are antidotes to shame, and that even the shunned and excluded can push back.

A coalition of worker groups around the country founded the National Day Laborer Organizing Network in 2000 to press for its members' rights. At a national conference last year at Hofstra University on Long Island, delegates from 12 states met to share strategies.

In many areas, laborers have formed de facto unions, refusing to work for less than \$10 an hour. In places that have tried to force them out, like Redondo Beach, Calif., and Mamaroneck, N.Y., workers and their allies have filed federal lawsuits on First Amendment grounds.

The National Day Laborer Organizing Network is forging alliances with organized labor, like the Laborers' International Union of North America, which represents 700,000 construction workers, to fight for hiring sites and safer working conditions.

The immigration bills languishing in Congress offer very little promise for day laborers. Even the most generous legislation denies a path to legal status for the newest immigrants and those who can't prove steady employment, which leaves many day laborers out of luck.

The day laborers' group held a forum in a Manhattan church basement recently to discuss the bills, and the general mood was pessimistic. Members spoke of a disconnect between grass-roots organizations like theirs and the large immigrant-advocacy groups in Washington. They had little good to say about the Senate bill, which has been held up by many immigrant advocates as the best deal obtainable.

Such resentment may sound out of place for people who broke the law to get here. But while day laborers may be the most loathed illegal immigrants, you could also call them the least illegal. They don't misrepresent their identities as they contract independently for jobs off the books. They don't steal Social Security numbers or submit false work papers. They just work.

Members of the day laborers' network talk about ways their organization and other grass-roots groups would make their case to a public that isn't buying it. They have begun a hearts-and-minds campaign, seeking to win friends by cleaning up parks and highways while building up political clout with lobbying and protests.

But even if they can pull it off, the odds are against the strategy working. It's been hard enough getting the country behind even limited immigration reform.

If and when Congress ever gets around to fixing immigration, the illegal immigrants who benefit — if any — will be the ones seen as the worthiest, most promising and least threatening.

There will be no room for those at the margins, and that, practically by definition, is where the day laborers are — waiting, and working.

