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AFL-CIO Aligns With Day-Laborer Advocates

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The AFL-CIO voted yesterday to join forces with a national network of day-laborer organizers in a push for worker rights and legalization for unauthorized workers, a move that could provide day laborers with a potent ally in efforts to establish hiring halls and combat shifty employers.

Six years after organized labor made an about-face to support illegal workers, the agreement further cemented the struggling labor movement's embrace of illegal immigrants as key parts of the U.S. workforce and potential union members. Research indicates that about three-fourths of day laborers are in the country illegally.

For day laborers and their organizers, who have faced high-profile opposition in Herndon and elsewhere, the agreement offers access to expert lobbyists and lawyers and a chance to devise strategies with local councils of the 10 million-member AFL-CIO, which backed sanctions against illegal immigrants until a policy shift in 2000. The partnership does not require day laborers to join unions.

"Day laborers in the United States often face the harshest forms of workplace problems, and this exploitation hurts us all, because when standards are dragged down for some workers, they are dragged down for all workers," John J. Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, said at a news conference in Chicago, where he signed an agreement to form a partnership with the Los Angeles-based National Day Labor Organizing Network.

The group, known as NDLON, is made up of about 30 day-laborer centers and organizers, including CASA of Maryland and Tenants and Workers United in Alexandria.

Officials said the groups will begin working together at a national level, crafting policies on workplace issues and campaigning for immigration legislation that includes a path to citizenship but not a guest-worker program, which both groups oppose.

The agreement gives local AFL-CIO councils the option to link up with day-laborer centers. Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA of Maryland, said he expects to work with local AFL-CIO organizers to boost the state's minimum wage and fight local ordinances that might penalize day laborers.

The alliance comes one year after four major unions split from the AFL-CIO, taking a third of its membership, and as the labor movement struggles with decline. Union

membership waned from about 35 percent of the 1950s workforce to about 13 percent last year.

About 117,600 day laborers solicit jobs each day, according to a national study by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, New School University and UCLA. They frequently fall victim to the employer abuses and workplace hazards that unions battle: Nearly half have been stiffed or denied breaks, and 20 percent have been injured on the job, the study found.

"We want to build a stronger network of support for our day-worker centers," Pablo Alvarado, executive director of NDLON, said in an interview.

Since 2000, organized labor has been a chief advocate for immigrants. And worker centers and street-corner activists have been organizing day laborers. But unions and worker centers have rarely collaborated.

Recently they have begun wooing one another. Alvarado recently escorted AFL-CIO leaders to a day-laborer corner in Agoura Hills, Calif., where workers have a pact not to work for less than \$15 an hour. Labor leaders see such self-organizing as the "seeds of the labor movement," said Ana Avendaño, general associate counsel for the AFL-CIO.

Ruth Milkman, a sociology professor at UCLA, said, "The labor movement wants to ride that wave."

Not everyone thinks it is a good idea. In Allentown, Pa., unions are backing a law prohibiting the hiring of illegal immigrants. Vernon M. Briggs Jr., a Cornell University labor economics professor, said labor's support for illegal immigrants could encourage immigration and depress wages for low-skilled Americans.

"Fighting for people who are not supposed to be working in the first place? What kind of union is that?" Briggs said.

In Fairfax County's Culmore neighborhood, men waited for work yesterday outside a 7-Eleven, where organizers with Tenants and Workers United have helped day laborers set a \$10 minimum wage and record employers' license plate numbers.

Most were vaguely aware of the agreement. But they described their need for advocates. Jose Santos Lazo, 37, said he dropped a large sheet of wood on his face during a job last year. Surgery cost \$17,000, he said, and his boss promised to pay. But the employer has vanished, said Lazo, a Salvadoran who said he has legal residency.

"I do not have money for a lawyer," Lazo said.

Alvarado said that is a resource the AFL-CIO can offer.

