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## **Day laborers present challenges for unions**

### **The rank and file might balk at organizing immigrants**

*Monday, August 14, 2006*

**By PETER PRENGAMAN**  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Unions are increasingly courting immigrant day laborers in hopes of reversing a longtime decline in membership and clout.

But labor experts say organizing a work force that is mobile and largely undocumented presents enormous logistical challenges and risks of alienating rank-and-file members.

"Every day there are day laborers who walk in and say, 'I want a union,' " said Janice Fine, a labor professor at Rutgers University. "But the road to getting one is almost an impossible journey."

The Laborers' International Union announced last week that early next year it will begin recruiting day laborers in the construction industry to become full-fledged union members.

"We see unionizing in construction as a vehicle of growth," said union President Terence O'Sullivan. "We are looking to organize and give immigrant workers power."

The announcement came a day after the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest federation of unions, said it would work with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network to improve wages and working conditions for those who solicit work from street corners.

The agreement did not clear the way for day laborers to become union members, but both sides said it could be a step in that direction. The agreement calls for the network's 40 nationwide centers to affiliate with the federation and receive representation on local labor councils.

The AFL-CIO and the laborers union also intend to work toward reform that includes amnesty for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.

"Ultimately, the goal is unionization," said Richard Greer, a spokesman for the laborers union. "But everybody knows it's not going to happen tomorrow."

The largest organizing challenge stems from the nature of day labor.

The mostly Hispanic and undocumented workers routinely do different jobs each day for different employers.

The first-ever nationwide study of day labor released earlier this year found homeowners were the No. 1 employer -- not an easy group with which to negotiate a union contract.

The laborers union said it will focus its push for higher wages and better working conditions on midsize contractors -- the second-largest employer of day laborers, according to the study.

Threats to report the immigration status of many day laborers could help contractors keep them from unionizing, said Marc Grossman, a former aide to United Farm Workers of America founder Cesar Chavez.

"The tactic is illegal and immoral but very effective," said Grossman, now the UFW's lead spokesman.

Under the laborers union plan, contractors and home owners would be obligated to accept union terms when hiring workers from day labor centers. Eventually, the union could provide workers with benefits such as health insurance and workers compensation.

Those details are still being worked out, said O'Sullivan and Pablo Alvarado, director of the day labor network.

Such an arrangement would be a major change for many contractors who now use day laborers because they accept low wages and don't retaliate when not paid.

However, a deal could benefit contractors by providing a steady labor pool.

Many day labor centers already set minimum pay standards, but some workers stand nearby and accept lower wages.

"Everybody gets angry when you accept \$5 or \$6" when the hourly minimum is \$8, said Alejandro Morales, 25, an illegal immigrant from Mexico who finds work through a large center in downtown Los Angeles.

"But sometimes you're desperate," he said.

That practice causes many veteran union members to see undocumented workers as a drag on wages and an obstacle to mainstream organizing efforts.

Unions were often at odds while Congress debated immigration reform earlier this year. Some groups argued against guest worker programs and amnesty for illegal immigrants.

The bylaws of nearly all unions don't prohibit undocumented immigrants from joining.

However, Jerry Hunter, former general council for the National Labor Relations Board, said unionized construction workers might balk if their unions recruit illegal immigrants.

"Members could start asking themselves, 'Whose interests are you representing?' " Hunter said.

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