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CHAPTER 11

Talking Union in Two Languages *Labor Rights and Immigrant Workers in East Tennessee*

Fran Ansley

Like every part of Appalachia, east Tennessee has been deeply affected in recent decades by global economic transformation. Social justice activists there have been struggling for years to understand and respond to these developments and to the difficult social divides they have created and exposed. This chapter recounts from the perspective of a participant-observer the story of one local response and suggests lessons for future social justice efforts in the region.

A rapid increase in the movement of industrial capital from east Tennessee to countries of the Global South constituted the early leading edge of the corporated, “free trade” brand of globalization that swept so powerfully into local lives in the 1980s and thereafter. A number of projects launched by groups in east Tennessee attempted to use the moment of crisis created by plant closings to open local windows onto the global scene and construct bottom-up internationalist channels of communication and action between working-class Tennesseans and their counterparts in other countries. For example, during the 1990s, the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN) collaborated with unions and other allies to organize worker-to-worker exchange trips to the *maquiladora* region of Mexico, where many U.S.-based multinationals had opened branch factories in burgeoning export-processing zones along the border.

Travelers returned home to lobby energetically against the North American Free Trade Agreement and similar trade measures. They did not block passage of these pro-big business trade deals, nor did they manage to save much of the state’s manufacturing base, which continues hemorrhaging to this day. But they did learn a great deal about the global economy, educate many of their fellow citizens about what they had seen in their travels, and take part in the growing national and international movement to challenge the new global rules designed to protect large international investors. Some veterans of the exchange trips eventually represented TIRN at the 1999 “Battle of Seattle,” where labor unionists, environmentalists, and others hit the streets and changed the future course of the World Trade Organization.¹

It soon became clear that many of the same global and corporate dynamics that had sent jobs and capital streaming from Tennessee to Mexico were also pushing Mexican and other Latin American people out of their home countries and north to the United States. These new international migrants (some of them with papers, but many without) were arriving not only in traditional receiving states like California and Florida but also in new places like Appalachia, deep in the nation's interior. Tennessee woke up at the turn of the century to find itself home to one of the fastest-growing Latino populations in the country.²

Astonishingly rapid demographic change had brought, directly into the state's own backyard, the U.S.-Mexico border that TIRN delegations to the *maquiladoras* had once traveled long days to reach. In the presence of that strange new local-global border, issues of racism and xenophobia, the reasonable and unreasonable fears of U.S. workers about competition for scarce employment, and scores of questionable assumptions about America and its role in the world bubbled quickly to the surface. Such matters had been difficult enough for social justice activists with an internationalist bent to take up effectively when the conversation focused on far-away places, but when the situation involved a sudden bloom of new backdoor neighbors marked as "different" in terms of race, language, and culture, the challenges became even greater. At the same time, the volatile atmosphere created by the surge in immigration presented opportunities for extending and deepening some of the cross-national bridge building initiated earlier. The case described below represents one moment when this opportunity was seized.

In 2005 a labor-community alliance between Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee (JwJET) and the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) put the new issues of immigration and immigrants' rights front and center. The collaboration was formed to support an organizing drive by the union at a chicken processing plant whose workforce had become virtually 100 percent Latino. After months of intensive organizing, the workers at the plant voted overwhelmingly in favor of the union, despite the factory's location about an hour north of Knoxville in Morristown, a small, anti-union town that is hardly exempt from racism or xenophobia, in a portion of the state where precious little labor organizing of any kind had been seen for years.

The first aim of this study is simply to demonstrate that even under such austere conditions, labor-community coalitions with a focus on immigrant workers can win substantial victories. They can advance the rights and well-being of immigrants, strengthen organized labor, educate native-born members of the larger community, and alter power relationships at immigrant-heavy work sites—at least when a strong combination of favorable elements is present or can be brought into play. The story also reveals, however, that after the election, significant ongoing challenges continued to face the union, the workers, and community partners of the campaign, thereby suggesting some of the persistent

obstacles likely to confront those who hope to bridge divisions of race and nation within the increasingly multinational labor markets of global Appalachia.

Jobs with Justice in East Tennessee

Based in Knoxville, Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee (JwJET) is part of a larger national JwJ network. Sharing a conviction that labor unions and collective bargaining are necessary elements for a just and healthy democracy, JwJ coalitions also believe that labor and progressive grassroots groups will both be stronger by joining forces to support each other's goals.

Our JwJ coalition in east Tennessee dates back to the mid-1990s. Buoyed by a wave of optimism about labor-community cooperation that followed the 1995 election of reform candidates John Sweeney and Appalachia's own Rich Trumka to the top leadership of the AFL-CIO, JwJET's founding partners set out to get a local chapter underway. We recruited member groups, developed plans and structures, and announced that we were in business, waiting in eager anticipation for the new era to begin and for the invitations we thought we would receive from east Tennessee labor unions, asking us to support their initiatives.

We did find that some unions in east Tennessee were interested in this kind of approach. What we did not find, however, was any real degree of substantial, sustained, proactive organizing by unions in our area. We were ready to be in solidarity, but there was depressingly little to be in solidarity with!

No doubt some of the problem was our own failure to find effective ways to get out the word to individual unions and their members about JwJ's goals and capacities, a task that remains an ongoing challenge. Some of the problem was also rooted in the inertia of old habits on the labor side. Few unions in our area have had much experience with labor-community coalitions, and some are not yet convinced that community allies can be trusted to understand labor issues or that collaboration will prove worth the time and risk of messy conflict that such work requires.

For the most part, however, the lack of union response to our presence was a question of power and resources. Manufacturing jobs were in steep decline, union organizing in the burgeoning service sector was slow, and union membership and morale were slipping fast. This lack of energy, growth, and vision was precisely the downward spiral we had hoped to help interrupt with our JwJ activities, but it was hard to see how to achieve that goal when opportunities for active solidarity seemed so few.

We were not idle. Occasionally a local union asked for support in a dispute. We helped with consumer boycotts called by distant farmworkers in North Carolina and Florida. We joined the fight for a city and campus living wage, and then supported efforts by progressive students and public employees to build a union presence at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. We convened Worker Rights

Board hearings where panels of local leaders received testimony on workplace problems. All of this was fine work, and we were happy to do it. But with the exception of the organizing at the university, it did not really reflect the kind of revived and expanding labor movement that JwJET had envisioned.

Meanwhile, like others in the state in this period, we were witnesses to the upsurge in Latino migration.³ The arrival and reception of Latino newcomers were noteworthy to all kinds of people for all kinds of reasons, of course. But for worker rights activists, the trend was especially salient. After all, the main magnet pulling this mass migration into Tennessee was the chance for employment, and the flow of new immigrants was mostly heading straight into low-wage jobs where the potential for old and new forms of exploitation and abuse was all too clear.

Although some of the new arrivals were citizens or lawful residents, a large number were undocumented. Their precarious legal status, often coupled with other problems such as low English proficiency, or lack of literacy in any language, rendered many Latinas and Latinos in Tennessee extremely vulnerable to mistreatment on the job and discouraged them from coming forward with complaints. This handed employers a heavy threat to hold over the head of any worker who might get out of line. All these dynamics intimidated unions, many of them already beleaguered on other fronts and with little experience operating in the shadowy world of undocumented employment. Thus a social actor that should have been, at least by JwJ's logic, a leading ally in any fight by or for immigrant workers' rights, sat sidelined and silent in a disappointing number of cases.

Further, as anti-immigrant fervor was whipped up across the nation by the likes of television commentator Lou Dobbs and worse, and as the post-September 11 Department of Homeland Security ramped up its immigrant enforcement activity at the border and elsewhere, native-born union members were bombarded with negative images of immigrants and with the idea that "illegal aliens" were taking the jobs and pulling down the labor standards of U.S. workers. Of course, not all workers fell for these divisive claims or for the assumed master narrative of labor market competition. But many did, and the overall climate of hostility toward immigrants affected the thinking of many native-born workers, both in and out of unions.⁴

As a result of these complex factors, when it came to labor initiatives aimed at immigrant workers or their concerns, we did not find much action underway. We did undertake small steps of our own as we could identify them. For instance, JwJ looked for ways to do educational presentations about immigration and globalization, and we were welcomed by some unions to do so.⁵ But new organizing to reach new immigrant populations was seldom on the agenda in the venues where we spoke.

I describe this gloomy state of affairs in some detail because case studies too often focus on high points in the development of both individual campaigns and

larger social movements. Useful knowledge of how change actually occurs can only be produced through research that also includes the long daunting periods of listening, groping, and experimentation in which most of us are destined to live the major portion of our time on this earth. This explains why it was so exciting for the organization when at last we were contacted about a possible break in the weather: the opportunity to support a union-organizing drive at a poultry plant in Morristown—a city with the highest percentage of Latinas and Latinos anywhere in east Tennessee.

The Campaign

A number of factors contributed to Morristown's attraction for the mostly Mexican immigrants who had been streaming into the small factory town for years, but the presence of a large chicken-processing plant was high on the list. JwJET had long been aware of this Morristown enterprise, once a local business but eventually acquired by one of the nation's largest poultry producers and processors. We knew that, like similar operations in other parts of the state, it had expanded in recent years and had begun aggressively hiring Latino immigrants. Our organization was also aware that conditions in the industry nationwide were brutal and barriers to union success substantial. In Morristown and surrounding Hamblen County, anti-immigrant activity and xenophobic rhetoric were evident, both in the seats of power and at the grassroots. Organizing by a union there would require a degree of optimism and a readiness to commit major resources that, frankly, we did not expect to see in east Tennessee.

In early 2005, however, we learned that the UFCW had decided to launch an organizing drive at the Morristown plant and that they were eager to identify community allies. They put two organizers on the ground in Morristown, and JwJET sent a small delegation to attend the union's first open community meeting with workers from the plant. Even our partisan crew was genuinely surprised at the degree of excitement we saw and felt at that first meeting.

When we arrived, the large room the union had rented in a local community center was packed. Mothers and fathers with children in tow, young women talking in animated clusters, groups of single men leaning against the back wall of the room—all these people filled the space with energy and anticipation. The organizers—a black man from Alabama and a Latino from Arizona—stood at the front explaining their mission. But as the conversation proceeded, the organizers faded back and the people in the room took center stage.

One worker after another rose to tell about an injustice or to describe another objectionable fact of life in the plant. The room bubbled up with laughter as one woman jumped to her feet to demonstrate the behavior of her supervisor. Narrowing her eyes and throwing back her head, she channeled his hateful, denigrating words and tone: "Shut up! Do you hear me? Shut your mouth! You have no

rights here. This is not your home. I am the one who speaks here!” Her portrait quickly provoked additional performances, revealing a world in which worker humiliation had become a supervisory norm. People talked also about wages, punishing line speeds, and threats to worker safety and health. But it was the disrespect and personal degradation that inspired the best theater and generated people’s greatest anger and indignation. Our JwJET delegation was moved and impressed by what we saw and eagerly jumped into the campaign.

JwJET’s activities in the effort were wide ranging. For instance, we showed up at meetings of the workers’ organizing committee in Morristown to demonstrate that they had supporters among the native-born community and in faraway places like Knoxville, Mississippi, and Chicago. Given that the lead union organizer and many of us supporters spoke no Spanish, we located resource people to help the union with interpretation for meetings and with translation of documents. We shared our small but growing knowledge of immigration issues and immigrants’ concerns with the organizers assigned to the campaign on occasions when it seemed that some of these things were new to them.

We also reached out to the broader community. For example, we organized a Worker Rights Board hearing in Knoxville on the right to organize as a fundamental U.S. labor standard and an international human right. We worked with multiple community and religious groups to provide opportunities for workers to speak from podiums and pulpits, through interpreters if necessary, about their lives in the plant and why they were seeking to organize a union. Building from those contacts, we recruited Knoxvilleans to Morristown for a support rally as the election drew near. The group found one Morristown church willing to host a low-profile discussion about the campaign. We cultivated contacts with local media, and found some interest. JwJ collaborated with regional and national allies, who contributed various kinds of advice, worker education, and general support. During the campaign, which went on for months, we also worked hard to maintain regular and active contact with the unions’ organizers and with district and international union staff.

One of the union’s most urgent goals was an agreement with the company that it would refrain from mounting an active campaign against union recognition, and instead allow the workers to decide for themselves what they wanted to do. JwJET fully understood why winning such an agreement was crucial and was likely to be difficult. U.S. employers and their attorneys have honed to a fine edge their ability to resist union recognition campaigns. Dancing deftly around and often over the edges of legal rules that are already weighted heavily against workers and their organizations, anti-union consultants succeed in defeating labor initiatives in a huge number of cases, even when the workers are native-born and do not have the specter of immigration enforcement hanging over their heads. When undocumented workers are added to the mix, the ability of the employees at a work site to win a union through the traditional mechanism of a National

Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election is even more severely compromised. So we understood the union's desire to get a neutrality agreement, and we did what we could to advance that goal.

For instance, in pursuit of this aim we connected the union with Anne Lewis, who was happy to include the organizing drive as part of a documentary film she was shooting about local impacts of globalization. She brought a crew to town, and footage they captured of workers' concerns was later used by the union to prove to company management in Chicago that workers' complaints were not a figment of some deranged organizer's imagination. In addition, the instant the company took the tried-and-true union-busting step of firing two of the worker leaders, we protested that move, and we cheered with the union when we learned that the company had made the surprising move of agreeing to hire the workers back—perhaps a sign that the wind was beginning to shift. Throughout this period, we also coordinated a letter-writing campaign to the management of the factory, urging the company to agree to a neutral stance.⁶

Eventually the company acceded to this demand and promised to remain hands-off during the organizing drive. This represented a momentous development and one that undoubtedly affected the outcome of the campaign.⁷ There were some subsequent troubling reports from workers about continued back-handed comments and innuendos from supervisors, but the company did honor its agreement to the extent of refraining from overt intimidation or reprisals against union sympathizers.

Despite the neutrality agreement, however, none of us rested easy for a minute during the remainder of the campaign. Members were painfully aware of many reasons immigrant workers might still vote to continue living with the status quo: for example, they might well be fearful of later reprisals from the company, doubtful about the union's own promises of benefit, or worried about attracting attention from the immigration authorities. We were not living in a time when optimism came easy, and we also knew that the cold probabilities were not in the workers' favor.

So when the date set for the election finally rolled around, we were definitely on edge. Our organization had recruited as many people as we could muster to stand outside the gates in support of the union for each of the different shift changes. When some of us arrived for the night shift (which was to cast the opening ballot), we could see that as workers pulled their passenger-laden cars into the company parking lot, they were being greeted by teams of leaflet-wielding, Spanish-speaking men and women enthusiastically urging them to vote "Si!" for the union. We learned that these people were UFCW organizers and members from other plants around the country who had been flown to Tennessee to help in the final blitz of home visits prior to the election. As we watched the cars rolling up to these teams, it seemed we were mostly seeing windows opened gladly, faces spread with friendly grins, leaflets taken with welcoming interest. But then

again, we hated to trust our eyes. We knocked on wood and were trying hard to keep our expectations low.

In the bright sunshine of the next day, a motley group of JwJET members and other supporters stood outside the main plant when the last shift still to vote had all gone inside. Election monitors from the NLRB were inside the plant, counting ballots under the watchful eyes of company and union observers, while those of us outside were craning our necks and straining our eyes for any sign of the result of the months-long campaign.

Standing along the highway that morning, together with our JwJET delegation from Knoxville, there were black, white, and Latino organizers and union members from the UFCW, and a couple of guys from the Nashville local union to which the Morristown chicken plant workers would be attached if the election went for the union. There was a faithful young intern from the Highlander Research and Education Center whose highly skilled interpreting and translating services had been integral to the organizers' efforts and workers' comprehension, involvement, and morale. There was a union painter from Morristown who had learned about the election at a recent Labor Day event in Knoxville and who showed up at the factory gates to lend his support. There was an Appalshop film crew diligently working the crowd for interviews and impressions. There was the president of a dying union local at a soon-to-close chemical plant in Morristown who, throughout the organizing drive, had opened the doors of his aging union hall to the workers from the chicken plant, welcoming its use for meetings, rallies, child care, buffet suppers, and workshops, and who had now come to stand with them on this fateful day.

The wait seemed interminable, but at last we made out the sound of cheering. Spilling down the hill toward our waiting crew came an elated group of union-designated election watchers. "Ganamos! We won! Ganamos!" We gathered around this jubilant group and pressed for details. Blinking and smiling with dazed pride, they announced the startling news. The workers had scored not a mere victory, but a landslide. In an era when most unions would be relieved and delighted to eke out a bare majority, the workers that day voted for union recognition by a startling margin of 465 to 18. Amazing.⁸

Elements of Success

Labor unions all over the country do win victories sometimes, and immigrant workers do come together in effective ways to organize, whether in unions, community organizations, or the varied "worker centers" that have emerged as a vehicle for worker rights in situations where union organizing is impracticable, inappropriate, or undesired.⁹ Nevertheless, the victory we tasted that bright day in Morristown was far from the norm. It therefore seems appropriate to reflect on what contributed to its success.

First and most foundational were assets brought by the workers themselves. During the campaign, powerful leaders emerged from within the plant, people willing and able to step forward, speak out, and take responsibility. It was evident to JwJET and union organizers that these leaders and their skill sets, connections with other workers, and personal character were a key motor for the campaign. Many brought experiences from Mexico that translated into the organizing drive. For instance, some had been active in local community mobilizations, others had learned from watching parents who were educators and social activists. During the union drive, we saw all kinds of resources mobilized that we would not have thought to imagine. Pickup trucks magically arrived with mammoth sound systems when amplification was needed. Extensive informal grapevines far outstripping the power of any e-mail lists were activated in the service of turnout. Delicious homemade dishes became the norm at large events, supplanting the lame hotdogs that the organizers had provided at the start. Stacks of signed union cards were delivered by member volunteers to paid organizers, who sat in a local motel room amazed at what they were witnessing.

The contributions of the union were also crucial. When the drive first began, some of us were skeptical that the union would invest the kinds of resources that were likely to be needed for a victory in Morristown. In fact, the union came through with a substantial commitment. It sent in a pair of organizers for many months, assigned others who rotated in to relieve them periodically, and bolstered the basic team with additional troops from other locations for occasional bursts of more intensive work. Although the lead organizer assigned to the project was an African American who spoke no Spanish, he knew a great deal about the poultry industry and about racism, and he knew the importance of recruiting immigrant workers into the UFCW and the labor movement in general. The second organizer assigned full-time to the campaign was a Spanish-speaking Mexican American, and virtually all the other staff and union members who rotated through the campaign were Latinas or Latinos.

Beyond simply investing resources, the union was generally smart in how it used them. Once on the ground, the initial organizing team recruited active participation from workers and helped them build an in-plant committee. The organizers and the committee made multiple calls on workers in their homes to initiate conversations about workers' concerns at the plant. They logged this outreach activity on computers, kept track of workers' responses and feelings about the union, and conducted regular formal assessments of their progress rather than relying on memories and informal impressions to gauge the strength of their support. Organizers listened to workers and discussed ways a union presence could improve conditions that bothered workers most. With help from two poultry justice educators, they hosted a training session where workers could learn about occupational hazards and ways that union pressure could reduce them. They fought like tigers to defend pro-union workers from retaliation. These

union staffers struggled to understand community allies and make good use of the resources we offered, even though such close collaboration with outsiders was new for them and there were times when their frustration at our different ways was evident. Finally, the organizers and those above them in the union structure, together with the workers' committee inside the plant, succeeded in the tricky task of managing the pace and trajectory of the campaign so that it came to a crescendo just in time for the election.¹⁰

Although the workers themselves and the union provided the most important pieces of the campaign's success, the community support stimulated and coordinated by JwJET also made an important difference. For the most part our role in the campaign was directed outward to the larger community to win more supporters and allies; we also initiated communications to management to urge their neutrality. But to do either of these things well, we had to build relationships of trust with both the union and the workers. As to the former, the organizers and other union staff could see that we genuinely respected their work and appreciated many of its difficulties. That respect built trust with the union people and helped both sides toil more patiently through rough spots in communication.

Similarly, the workers could see that we were excited to be engaged with poultry workers in general and with Mexican immigrants in particular. We showed our eagerness to learn from them about their lives and experiences. Often, we voiced our convictions about the importance of solidarity between immigrant and native-born workers and about the strategic importance of the poultry industry and other low-wage, high-exploitation sectors. In addition, several members of JwJET were involved with non-workplace issues of importance to immigrants, such as lack of access to a driver's license, racial profiling by local law enforcement, and the need for federal immigration reform. We discussed these issues with workers from the plant and provided information about groups in the state that were trying to do something about them. Although a better model would be one in which the union itself was already involved in issues of civil rights and community concern and could use that involvement to show prospective members the union's relevance for a broader range of social concerns, JwJET's demonstrated interest was a second-best way of integrating these community justice issues into the life of the campaign.

Beyond our visible commitment to both labor justice and immigrants' rights, we allies contributed in other ways. Thanks in large part to help from the nearby Highlander Research and Education Center,¹¹ we were able to bring some knowledge about language issues to bear in the campaign. Highlander provided a staff interpreter and lent interpreting equipment for a large union-community rally prior to the election. A Highlander intern volunteered to translate documents on demand, both for JwJET and the union, allowing JwJET to keep workers more fully informed about some of our activities. Even more important, this intern did one-on-one simultaneous interpretation for the lead organizer during all

union meetings. As a consequence, the organizer was able to observe and digest what was going on at meetings without having to choose between being left out entirely or interrupting the flow of discussion for repeated translation breaks. These interventions and contributions were all part of an important learning curve about language practices in bilingual environments that were instructive both for JwJET and the union.

Several other elements provided by JwJET were helpful to the campaign. Working in concert with Interfaith Worker Justice of East Tennessee, we had the ability to identify people who were willing to speak out on workplace justice as a religious value. Of all the resources we mustered during the campaign, this was most often mentioned by the union as our key contribution. Religious voices carry weight in east Tennessee, and we took this part of our mission seriously.

As we started to reach out both to religious groups and secular progressives in Knoxville, we came to see that many people had been wanting a way to connect with the new immigrant community. There was a hunger among many people to learn more about immigration and what immigrants themselves were really like. In JwJET's assessment, our decision to bring activist workers from the plant to speak with groups of native-born non-Spanish speakers led to some of our best work. Giving congregations and other groups a chance to hear directly from some of the impressive leaders who had emerged during the campaign created real energy and interest.

Finally, some elements contributing to the success of the organizing drive cannot be credited to any of the main players above. One was provided by two young women who took the first steps of resistance to everyday norms. The first, Antonia Lopez Paz, a young Latina working in the plant, took action when the company denied her permission for bathroom breaks.¹² The company's refusal violated law and common decency in any context, but it was particularly outrageous given that she was pregnant, had been diagnosed with a bladder infection, and had even provided the company with a letter from her doctor requesting the company's cooperation.

The second pioneering individual who helped open the door to what followed was Jennifer Rosenbaum, a young lawyer whom the pregnant poultry worker contacted for help. Together these two framed a complaint to state health and safety authorities, triggered an inspection of the factory, and then initiated another complaint against the state agency itself after the inspection was botched. Most important was their decision to reach out to others in the plant. In the weeks that followed their initial contact, what could have been treated as an individual matter affecting one pregnant worker became a plantwide agitation about a whole range of health and safety problems. When workers met to talk and explore their legal options, they soon understood that many of the problems they were uncovering had no workable legal remedy but required organization and the exercise of collective power inside the plant. This is the point at which the UFCW was invited

by the workers to visit Morristown and talk with them about what a union might have to offer.

So the micro level was important to this case: at its opening juncture and beyond, individual agency mattered. But the macro level was also at work, and the larger context mattered as well. One piece of that larger context was the climate around immigration policy at the time these events took place. All of the major work on the organizing campaign at the chicken plant in Morristown occurred in 2005, culminating with the election in early September of that year. The postelection campaign for a contract involved negotiations that stretched into the spring of 2006. Those months are precisely the period during which an unexpected and unprecedented mass movement in defense of immigrants' rights was simmering beneath the surface, then bubbling, and eventually spilling over into the great outpouring of protests and street processions seen in places large and small all over the United States.

Without our knowing it, the campaign at the chicken plant was riding a current of human feeling and social movement that would only break the surface in March through May 2006. Throughout the period, there was both escalating frustration and rising hope, a feeling in the immigrant community that the pressure had become intolerable and that something had to give, the conviction that it was time to move. This was also a time when the fear of immigration raids, though always present, was less intense than it was later to become in the waning days of the Bush administration, after the failure of comprehensive immigration reform, and after the Department of Homeland Security began to stage repeated raids that were large-scale pieces of political theater aimed most often at high-visibility targets like poultry processing.¹³

During the organizing drive, the union chose to focus almost exclusively on workplace issues, and it talked very little with workers, at least as far as I am aware, about the large policy debates then raging among immigrants and nonimmigrants alike. Nevertheless, in my judgment workers were more ready to take risks to gain a union because they were breathing the air of that preparatory time. For its part, the company too may have been affected by these still-submerged currents. It may have been less ready to provoke a public conflict with its employees because it had the sense that some kind of immigrant revolt might be in the air. Conversely, the company may have feared becoming the target of anti-immigrant community backlash if visible disputes arose, given that anti-immigrant sentiment was also simmering.

The worker leaders from the plant were thoroughly tuned in to the debates over immigration reform. One of the highlights of my life that spring was standing on a sidewalk in Knoxville outside then-Senator Bill Frist's office, along with thousands of others who had assembled to show their outrage at the regressive anti-immigration legislation that had passed the U.S. House of Representatives in December and to urge Frist to support comprehensive immigration reform

when that issue reached the Senate. As I watched the crowd of festive, joyous, chanting people parading six-deep around the federal building, all decked out with their flags and baby strollers and T-shirts and protest signs, I looked up and saw walking toward me all of the key leaders from the workers' organizing committee at the poultry plant. We greeted each other in delighted surprise, and they jubilantly informed me of two things. First, they had just succeeded in beating the odds by obtaining a first contract, and, second, management had shut down the plant for the day to allow workers to be present at "la gran marcha."

Postelection Challenges

We rejoiced with the poultry workers from Morristown, both on election day at the plant and later during the astonishing week when they won their first contract and thousands of brown-skinned people poured into the streets of Knoxville for the largest protest in that city since the Vietnam War. But, of course neither of those events represented the resolution of all the problems that had led people to mobilize. The victory in Morristown, though exhilarating for many of us, did not change the fact that unions in the food-processing industry had suffered tremendous losses in membership and social power in recent decades, or that wages and conditions in poultry were dismal even with a union contract.

In the days, weeks, and months after the campaign, many remaining challenges became evident. The union structure into which the newly organized group was to fit was a Nashville-headquartered local made up primarily of native-born retail grocery workers. Its officers and staff had to start from scratch learning to competently represent this new group of non-English-speaking immigrant poultry workers who were located several hours away from the main office. Providing interpretation in contract negotiations or union workshops, for instance, was something they had not thought about before. The strong need and desire of many immigrant workers for help from their union with individual and social problems outside the plant was a dynamic with which the local was unfamiliar. The challenges of education and leadership development in an immigrant workplace were likewise new.¹⁴

As community allies, we were faced with our own difficult adjustment. We were not clear what our role might or should be in the aftermath of the election. The organizers we had gotten to know so well had been pulled off to their next assignments, and those responsible for negotiating the crucial first contract clearly felt that the need for working with community allies was over, at least for a time. Our own language resources were slim, so it was not easy for us to maintain regular communication with the workers in the plant across physical and language distances. And, in any case, we were aware that the main relationship that needed to be built and strengthened was between workers and the union, and we did not want to be a hindrance to that process.

The workers too had difficulties with the transition. Those who had been most active in the campaign had many questions about what it meant that they now “had” a union. They did not know what to expect from the company or union staff. Those without papers wondered if their immigration status would interfere with what the union was supposed to do for them, or what they could do for the union (both complex questions that few in the union in Tennessee were well qualified to answer). They had no real idea of U.S. labor law, or how a collective bargaining agreement worked, or what their or the union’s authority was during negotiations. And of course all day every day the company was ready to take advantage of every sign of weakness or uncertainty. Meanwhile, union leaders faced brush fires on many fronts. Doubtless these challenges and more will continue to face unions, workers, and their allies in labor organizing efforts in the future. Easy solutions are few.

Conclusion

This story has no tidy ending. The union at the Morristown chicken plant continues to exist and to face challenges. Here, as across the nation, many questions about the future of the labor movement and the future of efforts to win and implement significant immigration reform remain open.

JwJET entered this campaign with the conviction that labor unions, for all their considerable weaknesses, are crucial to a genuinely democratic society. They constitute one of the rare institutions in our divided social order that can provide space for horizontal dialogue and exchange between native-born and immigrant workers. Granted, there is no guarantee that labor unions will be able and willing to provide or help build this kind of space. History shows that unions have sometimes played exactly the opposite role with regard to immigration, choosing instead to scapegoat immigrants and push an exclusionary agenda. But unions today have not embraced that anti-immigrant path. Although the outcome is not yet certain, they are at least struggling to find another way.¹⁵

Having experienced both the elation of this rare union victory and the ambiguities of its aftermath, JwJET activists appreciate more deeply how much about normal union practice will have to change if labor is to rise to the challenges now facing it. But we are also more convinced than ever that labor rights and immigrants’ rights are mutually dependent and inextricably intertwined. We see local workplace organizing as key for any progressive response to immigration because it has the rare capacity to create a space where workers themselves can explore the intersection of these two sets of rights and interests and can move toward the solidarity that is key to the advance of both.

The questions that linger for the workers, the union, and their allies show that all of us still have much to learn about building organizations that bring native-born and immigrant workers together on reciprocal terms that increase their mutual

power in relation to employers and the state. Whatever the remaining challenges, those of us who worked on this campaign with JwJET are still convinced that we were onto something big and promising. We do not intend to stop.

Notes

1. Eve S. Weinbaum, *To Move a Mountain: Fighting the Global Economy in Appalachia* (New York: New Press, 2004); Fran Ansley and Susan Williams, "Southern Women and Southern Borders on the Move: Tennessee Workers Explore the New International Division of Labor," in *Neither Separate nor Equal: Women, Race and Class in the South*, ed. Barbara Ellen Smith (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 207–44.

2. Fran Ansley and Jon Shefner, eds., *Global Connections & Local Receptions: New Latino Immigration to the Southeastern United States* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009).

3. During JwJ's early days, those witnesses did not include any immigrants' rights organizations in the state. The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) emerged in 2001 and eventually placed an organizer in east Tennessee, but not until after events described here. For more on TIRRC, see Fran Ansley, "Constructing Citizenship without a License: The Struggle of Undocumented Immigrants in the USA for Livelihoods and Recognition," in *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Naila Kabeer (London: Zed, 2005), 199–215.

4. The literature on what effect the presence and reception of immigrants may have on nonimmigrants is voluminous. Debates abound. Though studies reporting no or slight effects predominate, most note that the likelihood of negative impact is greater for low-wage nonimmigrants. Two excellent resources are: Barbara Ellen Smith, "Market Rivals or Class Allies? Relations between African American and Latino Immigrant Workers in Memphis," in *Global Connections, Local Receptions*, ed. Ansley and Shefner, 299–317; and Jennifer Gordon and R. A. Lenhardt, "Conflict and Solidarity between African-American and Latino Immigrant Workers" (Berkeley, Calif.: Earl Warren Institute on Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity, 2007).

5. Anne Lewis was then at Appalshop, an arts center in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and she had already begun work on *Morristown: In the Air and Sun*, not released until 2007. In the interim, she produced a set of English/Spanish interviews (or "video letters") with U.S. and Mexican workers, and we screened these for some union audiences. *Morristown Video Letters* is available from Highlander Research and Education Center.

6. Stephen Greenhouse, "Union Organizers at Poultry Plants in South Find Newly Sympathetic Ears," *New York Times*, September 6, 2005; and "Victory for Immigrant Workers' Rights at Koch Foods in East Tennessee," *I'll Be There* (national newsletter of Jobs with Justice), March 2006, 2.

7. Such an agreement can make all the difference. An organizing drive at a chicken plant in Morganton, North Carolina, went down to bitter defeat not long after our own victory, despite long years of labor struggle by generations of workers. For more on the earlier history, see Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). The most obvious difference between their recent effort and ours was the winning of a neutrality agreement in Morristown, contrasted with the vicious antiunion campaign waged by the company in Morganton.

8. Rebecca Ferrar, "Working Hard for a Better Life: Koch Food Employees Fight for Fairness," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, November 20, 2005, C-1. Some scenes described above appear in Anne Lewis's 2007 documentary, *Morristown: In the Air and Sun* (Whitesburg, Ky.: Appalshop).

9. Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2006).

10. In a planning aid developed by Cornell researchers Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert S. Hickey, the authors identified ten recurring elements in successful drives they studied. *Blueprint for Change: A National Assessment of Winning Union Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Office of Labor Education Research, New York School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 2003). In our case, the union managed to incorporate all ten.

11. The Highlander Center's Multilingual Capacity Building Program trained interpreters, educated groups about how to be linguistically inclusive, and provided interpretation for grassroots events.

12. Steven Greenhouse mentions Antonia in *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 2–3.

13. See "Postville Raids Symposium," *DePaul Journal for Social Justice* 2 (Fall 2008): 1–100.

14. UFCW has invested more than most unions in organizing immigrants and opposing ICE raids. See, for example, National Commission on ICE Misconduct and Violations of 4th Amendment Rights, *Raids on Workers: Destroying Our Rights* (Washington, D.C.: UFCW, 2009).

15. See Janice Fine and Daniel J. Tichenor, "A Movement Wrestling: American Labor's Enduring Struggle with Immigration, 1866—2007," *Studies in American Political Development* 23 (April 2009): 84–113.

