Scapegoating Immigrants

Immigrant-bashing is on the rise

By Elizabeth Martinez

Time to face some troublesome facts. In Los Angeles during the 1992 uprising many long-time Mexican-American residents said “We're not the ones rioting, it's those immigrants”—meaning Mexicans and Central Americans. At a San Francisco rally marking the 30th anniversary of the March on Washington last August, Dolores Huerta was speaking. A middle-aged African American woman stood and screamed angrily at Huerta, “Go back to Mexico! We need our jobs!”

Incidents like these—and there are many more—leave us with certain questions: will African Americans be made the shock troops of an ugly campaign by racist whites to scapegoat immigrants for the social ills devastating Black and other poor communities? Will established Latino residents forget where they came from and fail to see the racist, classist divisiveness in today’s immigrant-bashing? Shall we all remain blind to the need for solidarity among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks, Arab Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinos—not to mention progressive whites—in combating today’s international attack on immigrants?

Imperatively the times call for understanding what the hell is going on and why. Three questions confront us, as formulated by a homeboy friend the other night: “Who is the gun pointed at? Why is the gun being pointed? What is the gun?”

Who Is The Gun Pointed At?

From the U.S. to Germany to Australia, anti-immigrant actions and policies have escalated in often deadly fashion during recent years. In the United States, President Bill Clinton wasted little time breaking his campaign promise to end Bush’s inhuman policy toward Haitian refugees. Under Bush and Clinton some 40,000 Haitians have been summarily returned to a military-police dictatorship of unbridled brutality where they would be lucky to escape immediate death. Surely this year’s award for racist immigration policy should go to the U.S., whose officials were sending armored Haitian refugees back to Haiti last October even as other officials pulled armed U.S. forces out, saying Haiti was just too dangerous.

Clinton’s action also gave the green light to the right wing’s anti-immigrant agenda. His own proposals (see “An Activist’s Guide”) are aimed at tighter Border Patrol control and a speedup in reviewing asylum requests that could send people to their deaths faster.

In California, government officials have generated a tidal wave of anti-immigrant laws or programs. Gov. Pete Wilson led the way with a stream of outrageous proposals, among them denying citizenship to children born in the U.S. of undocumented parents. He got four passed in October which include a ban on giving driver’s licenses to the undocumented, requiring state and local agencies providing job training or placement to verify a person being a legal resident, and increasing penalties against getting Medi-Cal benefits “raudently” or helping others to do so.

Not to be outshone by a Republican, California’s two new Democratic women Senators offered their own measures. Even the erstwhile liberal Sen. Barbara Boxer urged sending the National Guard to defend the U.S.-Mexico border against my relatives. Some “reformist” politicians like Rep. Romano Mazzoli advocate stricter enforcement of employer sanctions. At the heart of the 1996 Immigration Reform and Control Act, these sanctions provided for penalties against those who knowingly hire the undocumented; the sanctions haven’t worked but they have encouraged
discrimination against anyone who looks or sounds "foreign." As for the Hispanic Congressional Caucus, it has taken a mix of positions.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also sparks anti-
foreign, anti-immigrant sentiment. NAFTA negotiations never address the civil and labor rights of immigrants—only Mexico’s responsibilities to stop northbound traffic. An anti-immigrant attitude prevails in the debate over NAFTA, the main issue being whether NAFTA will increase or diminish im-
migration from Mexico.

California, where 40 percent of those who immigrate to the U.S. settle, has repeatedly seen bombings and other violent attacks on Asian and Latino immigrants or their advocates by ultra-rightists. One image speaks to all these actions. Irma Muñoz, a 20-year-old woman who immigrated from Mexico recently, became a successful engineering student at the University of California, Davis, and began working publicly as an intern for a state legislator advocating less reactionary immigration policies. Last April two white male students at UC Davis punched her, cut her hair, and scrawled on her arm and back with a black magic marker. "Wetback" and "Go home you illegal." If she told anyone about the attack, they warned, she would be killed along with "your wetback friends" like the legislator.

In Texas, where the second largest immigration oc-
curs, the spectacular "Operation Blockade" went up last September. A Border Patrol inspiration, it put 650 armed agents in a 20-mile long line facing the Juarez-
El Paso border for 24 hours a day, supposedly to pre-
vent "illegals" entering from Mexico—but of course they harassed those with papers too. Overtime costs quickly ran up to $300,000 and anybody could walk around either end of the 20-mile line, but no matter; at this writing the operation continues and will also be replicated in the San Diego area. Somebody fretted that the word "blockade" implies an act of war so the San Diego operation is called "Enhanced Enforcement Strategy." That does sound nicer.

New York, the third main destination of immigrants, saw a tidal wave of anti-immigrant (particularly anti-
Arab and anti-Muslim) hatred after the World Trade Center bombing. A September 1993 poll of 1,203 New Yorkers reported "startlingly negative on re-
cent immigration in a city renowned for its interna-
tional character." More than 63 percent said the num-
ber of recent immigrants was too high and more than two-thirds said immigrants had made New York a worse place to live. For "illegal" immigrants, 55 percent saw them as a serious terrorist threat and 82 percent of the U.S.-born said they believed tighter con-
trols over immigration could have prevented the World Trade Center bombing.

Add to such hysteria the racist depiction of U.S.
shores being assaulted by boatloads of Chinese refu-
gees. Incidents also occur in scattered locales like Fall River, Massachusetts, where 12 white men murdered a Cambodian American and severely beat his friend last August 14 while racially taunting both. Or the Univer-
sity of Nevada in Las Vegas, where an India-American student died after being set on fire by two men—one white, one African-American—who said they didn’t want any more foreign students on campus.

Elsewhere in the world: In Germany police reported 2,285 acts of rightist violence in 1992, mostly against foreigners and including seven murders. On May 29, 1993 came the Neo-Nazi firebomb killing of five Turks—three young girls and two women—along with other violent attacks on Turkish refugee hostels, homes, and restaurants. A German clerk in a Berlin store falsely accused a Turkish resident of stealing; when the woman’s daughter protested, the clerk said "We got rid of 6 million Jews, we’ll get rid of you too." Chancellor Helmut Kohl refused to attend a mem-
orial service for the firebombing victims and threat-
ened Turks who might defend themselves. (Of Ger-
many’s 1.8 million Turks, many came here 30 years ago invited as guest workers; many were born in Ger-
many.) The German parliament passed a law, which required changing the German constitution, that blocks most applicants for political asylum.

* In France attacks on North Africans have been common, with citizens complaining that Third World immigration "is changing the French way of life." Last June France’s National Assembly overwhelmingly approved a new law authorizing police to carry out random identity checks to clamp down on undocumented immigrants.
In Italy a group of North African immigrant workers were beaten and stabbed by 20 Nazi-skinheads in February, 1992.

Last spring Spain was reported to be increasingly xenophobic toward immigrants from Africa, who numbered 264,000 in Barcelona alone, as well as from South America. An African immigrant in Madrid was murdered last spring in an officially recognized hate crime. An appalling traffic bringing workers from North Africa to Spain by boat has led to 1000 deaths by drowning in the last five years, 300 in 1992 alone. Apparently nobody cares, again we find the zero value put on the life of a poor black person.

In Hungary, with 50,000 refugees from the war in the Balkans, Gypsies have been a favorite target. One gypsy was beaten to death last Nov. 6 by skinheads.

Britain sees constant attacks on “blacks” (which includes Indians and Pakistanis). One in three Britons does not want Arabs or Pakistanis as neighbors and two of three said in an October 1993 poll that they don’t want to live near Gypsies.

In Holland middle-class white flight from the schools increases as the immigrant population rises.

Switzerland’s 1991 elections showed rising animosity to immigration when the leader of a rightist party scored big election gains.

Australia began enacting tough policies in 1992 to deal with an immigration “problem” that critics say does not really exist. And, in an ultimate irony for white folks, we find that immigrants from the Caucasus—yes, Caucasians—who have moved to Moscow since the Soviet Union disintegrated are resented, harassed and attacked as “blacks.”

Three chilling commonalities surface in this geographic mix. First, in almost every country the anti-immigrant attack coincides with and nurtures a rapid growth of neo-Nazi and far-right groups. But the New Right is not a fringe creature; it includes “respectable” reactionary politicians, with a number of them winning office on an anti-immigrant platform.

Second, many liberals join reactionary forces in scapegoating immigrants. Some major environmental organizations have formed an anti-immigration alliance and are loudly demanding curbs on immigration for its supposed ecological damage and excess population (“immigrant women have high fertility rates”). It seems that 2-4 percent of the U.S. population causes every evil from pollution to traffic jams.

Third, the attack on immigrants is usually racist (and often anti-Muslim). Paris’s conservative mayor Jacques Chirac minced no words: they even have “smells” of their own, he said about immigrants. In the U.S. the very word “immigrant” means people of color in most people’s minds; forget the many Europeans.

Why Is The Gun Being Pointed?

Immigrant-bashing and persecution embody a ruling class tactic going back centuries that blames “outsiders” for a society’s woes. Today’s message is: “Don’t blame corporate interests, don’t blame the Savings & Loan banks, don’t blame the government or elected officials, do blame immigrants!”

“Operation Scapegoat” calls for the U.S.-born to see immigrants as individuals who have freely chosen to leave their homes and cultures, and not to see that most people migrate under the pressure of political, economic or social forces. Similarly the receiving country is seen as a passive victim of invading hordes, when in fact its policies may well “pull” migrants in various ways. The U.S. sent $6 billion in aid to El Salvador’s government during the 1980s to crush the popular insurgency. Almost 500,000 destitute, frightened Salvadorans moved to Los Angeles, mostly during the 1980s. Could there be a connection?

Foreign policy including warfare is one answer to why people move across borders. Other politico-military reasons would be ethnic conflict, civil strife, and persecution. These have had devastating impact in recent years: the massive dislocation of people in Iraq and Kuwait caused by the Gulf War, the aftermath of the Berlin Wall’s collapse, and effects of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

The economic reasons for migration are no simple matter but we surely need to look at immigration in relation to global economic trends today. For centuries pressure from the failure of domestic structures to provide basic employment and subsistence has created economic refugees. We can see the effects of contemporary economic restructuring, intended by capitalists to restore their profit rates and to hell with millions of skilled steel workers, auto workers, and others. Arturo Santamaria Gomez, the Mexican professor and author, writes of how globalization has caused a deepening U.S. dependence on the Mexican immigrant work force, for example. “Globalization puts a competitive premium on pools of low-paid, ‘flexible,’ vulnerable workers,” he said in a Nation article (Oct. 25). Mexican and other migrant labor—especially when undocumented—is key to restructuring the U.S. economy.

Historically that labor carries great advantages for the capitalist. It is vulnerable, especially if undocumented, and totally disenfranchised. Here is the most basic function of the border: as a mechanism for defining and maintaining control over labor by the possession or lack of “legal” status. History is packed with experiences of deportation just when an undocumented
worker was due to be paid or when workers began to organize for their rights; of low wages and terrible working conditions accepted because the alternative was deportation. Such crippling controls make the undocumented worker a very special kind of wage slave, more enslaved than waged.

But the growth of global economic integration involves more than cheap labor, as immigrant rights activist Maria Jimenez tells us. Why does The Wall Street Journal call for a totally open border, even as other voices from center to right demand tighter control? It seems possible the Journal understands that today countries belong to an inter-dependent collectivity shaped by global trends. That it questions the role of borders in an era of galloping, global economic integration. Why try to regulate immigration with border control at a time of energetic efforts to open up national economies and create trading blocs like NAFTA?

Saskia Sassen, of Columbia University, a longtime expert on immigration issues, has written about such contradictions. She points out, for example, the way overseas operations of firms have a migration impact. We can conclude, people are moved when investment moves. The real migrant is capital.

What Is The Gun?

Instead of considering such realities, we are barraged with a repertory of hostile myths about immigrants. We hear regularly two key myths. (1) "Immigrants are taking away jobs."

In fact, in the U.S. the Rand Corporation, the Urban Institute and the Heritage Foundation—hardly dens of leftism—all concluded in various studies that immigrants do not take jobs from native workers and depress wages. Newsweek recently reported (and I would agree, from random observation of janitorial and other service work in a few cities) that during times of high unemployment there may be temporary displacement in some job sectors. But even if that happens, new jobs are soon created by the presence of immigrants with their needs for basic goods and services. This temporary displacement is numerically very small. Immigrants mostly work in jobs in highly exploitative sectors like the garment industry, as nannies, or in the fields, with the legalized working 2-5 hours more per day than the general population.

(2) "Immigrants use services but don't pay for them, and thus they drain local and state resources."

But again numerous studies show the opposite: immigrants, including the undocumented, pay more in taxes than the cost of the services they use. Business Week (of July 13 1992) reported that immigrants pay $90 billion in taxes each year, while receiving $3 billion in services. (This truth is masked by the fact that much of the tax money goes to the federal government, not the state providing the services.) Also, immigrants use fewer services than the native-born; for the undocumented, always fearful of capture and deportation, the percentage is tiny. The director of the National Immigration Forum says less than 1 percent of newly legalized immigrants received general assistance in 1987-88 and less than half a percent obtained food stamps and AFDC. As for social security taxes, since most immigrants are young they will pay a disproportionate amount of tax for an increasingly aging population.

The myths are intended to prove that the very real deprivation experienced today by the U.S.-born should be blamed on immigrants—that largely impoverished 2-4 percent of the population. In California, whose economic problems obviously rise from such setbacks as failed new industries and severe cuts in tax revenue under Prop. 13, this scapegoating seems ludicrous. Instead of swallowing it we should all protest the real causes of the crisis and immigrants should be demanding: No taxation without representation.
Politics is the first, obvious place to find the reasons for those myths. Governor Pete Wilson’s approval rating rose seven points soon after his “get tough on immigrants” campaign warmed up. Immigrants have always been a favorite whipping boy and recruitment play for rightist forces. Such politics echo the anti-social services, anti-labor shift that has swamped much of the world over the last two decades.

A key part of this shift is the intensification of racism, and racism plays a key role in immigrant-bashing—so often that it’s sometimes hard to separate one from the other. In France Jean-Marie LePen’s rightist National Front Party has grown steadily for several years on a platform that would cut off immigration specifically of Arabs and Africans.

Fighting Back

In the long run, universally humane treatment of immigrants and refugees requires global changes in today’s economic policies and the supra-national agencies like the World Bank or GATT who determine them. Meanwhile, we must deal urgently with the short run. That calls for two related kinds of action: building a new civil rights movement that includes immigrant and refugee rights, and combating forces that pit people of color or workers against each other by scapegoating immigrants.

On the first front we need to begin by defining immigrant and refugee rights as a civil rights issue around which all must unite. We need a new civil rights movement that recognizes immigrants are usually non-white and are made vulnerable to exploitation and abuse because they lack citizenship and knowledge of English. At the top of our civil rights list is getting the Border Patrol under some control. We need procedures, starting with H.R. 219, the Immigration Enforcement Review Commission, to investigate complaints about this autonomous agency—the largest police department in the U.S., guilty of rape and murder of defenseless immigrant women and men, almost all Mexican or Central American.

Nothing is more difficult than combating the divisiveness that has pit people of color against each other. The mass media, right-wing organizations, politicians, and normally progressive voices have established a climate where 63 percent of 500 Latinos polled in California this year thought enforcing employer sanctions was the best way to curb illegal immigration and 73 percent of African Americans believe immigrants are taking their jobs, according to a Harris poll. The right-wing Federation for American Immigration Reform, FAIR, ran radio spots targeting black communities that blamed the problems there on those foreign hordes coming across the border. In a more subtle but equally venial way, TV gives us an auto-mobile commercial in which an African American salesperson says: “Go see Rising Sun, then you’ll know why you have to buy your car from me.”

School children learn racist anti-immigrant epithets heard from parents or the media. To hear a Chicano kid sneer “Mexican” at a day laborer on the street corner is cause to grieve mightily. To hear African American children holler “wetback” at recently immigrated Latino kids who speak too little English for self-defense is also grievous. To hear Latinos object to protests about the bombing of an Asian rights center because “those people didn’t have it hard like us” is sad indeed.

We need to set aside narrow, reactionary nationalisms that tell us to care only about our own. We need to welcome and encourage voices that try to expose the scapegoating, like that of Joe Williams III, an African American writing in the Los Angeles Sentinel last Sept. 9. Williams compared the current attacks on the undocumented to the harassment of blacks during the 1950s-60s, when many moved north or west as southern agriculture declined. “They were accused of taking the jobs of the white man. They were accused [by whites] of undermining the salaries of union workers.” But it’s even worse today, Williams concludes, because mainstream politicians as well as segments of the black and Latino communities join the attacks. About Latino immigrants “We must realize that California and four other states were...part of Mexico,” he says.

A new civil rights movement should not deny that class differences exist among immigrants, but those don’t justify the current denial of civil/human rights across the board. A word must also be said to organized labor: it’s time to reject that racist, elitist attitude toward immigrant workers, including the undocumented. Unions need to recognize the courageous determination of workers today like the Los Angeles drywallers—almost all Latinos—or the San Antonio garment workers’ organization Fuerza Unida—almost all Latinas. It could do much to revive the U.S. labor movement. Civil rights, human rights, labor rights: all are needed.

We are left with a chilling question of our time: Will we unite to fight the divisive scapegoating of immigrants? At the very least that attack will move U.S. society still farther to the right. At worst, it can usher in neo-fascist tendencies.

The immigrant and refugee rights struggle points to our need for a whole new world view. Does anybody really think the way to deal with an estimated one million migrants wandering the planet today is by locking some doors? There is no way that 19th century nationalism can be useful. It is profoundly backward to go on seeing countries primarily as bordered nation-states which can resolve issues like immigration policy unilaterally. No Hay Fronteras.