

“Immigrant Spring’ Five Years On: What the 2006 Marches of Millions Can Tell Us About Today’s ‘Madison Moment’”

By Larry Kleinman
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Do mega-marches and huge mobilizations change the state of politics...even the course of history? Consider the follow examples:

- In January and February of this year, hundreds of thousands occupied Cairo’s central square for weeks. An entrenched dictator fell.
- In February and March, a hundred thousand amassed at the state capitol in Wisconsin and denounced as “un-American” the unprecedented rescission of collective bargaining rights for public employees. The governor signed the bill, ignoring threats of a recall campaign.
- Five years ago, immigrants poured into the streets in dozens of U.S. cities—some four million marchers in all—bonding with a vision of “Let my people *stay!*” The blossoms of humane immigration laws withered in the winds of xenophobia and the chill of economic crisis.

The ultimate outcomes in the Middle East and the Mid-West are, of course, unknowable today. It does *seem* clear, though, that 2011 is already a strong candidate for “turning point” status, right up there with 1989 (collapse of communist states in Europe) and 1968 (social protests and tide-turning anti-war marches across the globe).

By this time five years ago, 2006 was shaping up to be that kind of watershed year for immigrants and for the cause of immigrants’ rights in the U.S. Few, if any, could have imagined then that in 2011, only two states—New Mexico and Washington—would still be issuing drivers’ licenses to undocumented immigrants. Or that state legislatures nationwide would be entertaining all manner of draconian measures—even blatantly *unconstitutional* ones—such as denying citizenship to children, born on U.S. soil, whose parents are undocumented.

So what are the key political “physics” that propel and paralyze the phenomenal forces we witnessed in 2006 and we see again today?

The ingredients of a political wildfire

In November, 2007, I wrote a short description ¹ of wildfire-like qualities that I saw in the “Immigrant Spring.” It’s an analysis which still resonates today. Here’s what I wrote then:

Like any wild fire, this fire required the right sequence and proportion of fuel, spark, oxygen and accelerant. A “political fire marshal” report on these blazes’ causes could have read as follows:

- The *fuel*: increasingly shrill anti-immigrant rhetoric and slander generated an intensifying heat wave of immigrant and Latino community anger, parching the community’s patience and evaporated its fear;
- The *spark*: The “Sensenbrenner” Bill (HR 4437) passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in mid-December 2005, proposing to criminalize virtually anyone who associated with an undocumented worker;
- The *oxygen*: the Catholic Church’s forceful calls in immigrant-dominated parishes across the country to take public action against HR 4437 as an affront to the community and to church doctrine;
- The *accelerant*: Spanish-language radio DJs in key cities like Chicago and Los Angeles incessantly exhorting and commenting on mass action, augmented by national TV coverage—especially on Spanish-language stations—of the first mega-marches in Chicago (on March 11th) and Los Angeles (March 25th).

The “fire” zone included Oregon, and the role of radio in the Willamette Valley mirrored the national pattern. For a six-week period from late March to early May, 2006, mainstream commercial stations broadcasting in Spanish morphed their usual content (mostly shallow banter, pop music and commercials) into nonstop talk radio on immigration. Though this change was initially spontaneous, station owners surely *decided* to ride the popular wave, self-interest ever central to their calculations. In late March, PCUN President Ramón Ramírez, easily Oregon’s most visible Latino leader on immigration issues, became an almost daily fixture on the commercial AM station, KWIP, especially its morning drive time or mid-morning show, hosted by *Don Angel*, the formerly irreverent cynic turned political crusader.

Immigrant communities responded as never before: 400,000 marching in Chicago (including sizeable contingents of Polish and Irish immigrants), 500,000 in Dallas and a million in Los Angeles (there, including thousands of Koreans). In Oregon, we “led”—more like guided—the two largest gatherings at the state Capitol in Salem by *any group for any purpose* in Oregon’s history: 18,000 on April 9th and 12,000 on May 1st.

¹ Part of a full-length narrative, “You Can Hear Us Now! The Story of PCUN’s *Radio Movimiento*” chronicling the improbable journey of Oregon’s farmworker union to put its low-power FM radio station on the air in 2006.

In sum, our Movement, the Latino community and the nation experienced an “immigrant spring”, a sudden thaw unleashing awe-inspiring energy. For that all-too-brief season, the community experienced mass media actually serving *community* interests, a crucial element in the atmosphere of exhilaration.

On May 1st, thousands of immigrants in Oregon answered the national call, which PCUN supported, to boycott work that day. Plant nurseries, restaurants, and construction jobsites remained idle. Some influential mainstream organizations, such as the Catholic Church, publicly opposed the boycott, characterizing it as too confrontational. Workers would not be deterred. They found irresistible the opportunity to approximate the effects of a “day without immigrants.” The boycott’s success startled commercial radio stations. Abruptly overcome with self-consciousness about being seen as an instrument of radicals, commercial stations returned more or less to “normal” programming. Predictably, this “cold front” of backlash had damped down the flames.

In turn, the mass enthusiasm waned when proposals for comprehensive immigration reform—including a legalization program for millions—stalled in Congress. The marches and the boycott had yielded a stunning victory: halting the Sensenbrenner Bill. Still, a “nothing accomplished” mindset took hold. That it had all happened too quickly added an undertone of unreality.

“You...and what army?”

It’s the retort I remember hearing in elementary school, a sarcastic variation on “make me!” That bit of juvenile hyperbole captures a dynamic key to understanding the successes and limitations of mass mobilizations.

“Army,” of course, connotes a wide variety of conglomerations. On May 1st, 2006, marchers comprised a people’s “army for a day,” a mass of humanity nearly twice the size of all branches of the U.S. armed forces, active and reserves, put together. Aerial video captured the arresting images of a sea of white—thanks to the t-shirts, a sort of impromptu uniform.

On that one day, thanks to their numbers and their unison of action, workers had the upper hand on employers; students faced down administrators.

Why did this spectacular show of force dissipate and prove insufficient to move Congress to enact reform? Was the commercial radio pull-back in fact the decisive factor?

There are, I think, three factors and they all figure centrally as well in today’s movement of masses: the capacity to sustain mass struggle, the frame that defined the struggle, and the power credited to the struggle.

“What do you do for an encore?”

What could the base “afford” and what did the key organizations have the capacity to sustain?

In Spring 2006, the plain answer was “not much.” Community organizations, unions, and some churches cobbled together meager funding on the fly to defray logistics costs. In most cities, a handful of full-time staff handled all the arrangements, aided by the rank-and-file leaders they could enlist. To attract donations at the State Capitol march in Salem, fifteen volunteers holding boxes stationed themselves, three-across, along the four-lane avenue and at 20-foot intervals. Marchers, who filled the street curb to curb, pulled out change and bills to deposit as they streamed by. The \$9,000 collected accounted for 75% of the march’s bare-bones budget.

In some of the biggest cities, large labor unions brought in much more substantial resources which proved crucial to isolating anti-immigrant provocateurs, procuring massive sound systems, and such. Most marches, though, were badly under-resourced. Countless student walk-outs on April 10th—set off on that date by a blizzard of text messages (origin unknown)—brought thousands onto neighborhood streets and into downtown plazas with little or no organization, structure or plan.

The mass actions this winter in Madison, Wisconsin exploded when the Republicans, led by the Governor Scott Walker and his legislative crew, directly threatened the very existence of public sector unions. He thereby roused teachers, police, firefighters, municipal and state workers, plus their countless friends, families and allies. Solidarity marchers converged from nearby and faraway states, further swelling the crowds. Material aid appeared spontaneously (most famously, the hundreds of pizzas purchased by supporters far and wide and delivered to the Capitol building). Moreover, unions pulled in hundreds of staff and spent dollars in the hundreds of thousands. Those resources proved critical to keeping the pressure on through the *weeks-long* stand-off.

In Madison, organized labor got “Walk-er-ed” on. They lost that legislative battle but promptly re-directed their fight-back energy and capacity to the electoral plane and to similar fights in other states. In 2006, immigrants and allies stopped HR 4437—a victory, without question. “Triumph,” though, would have been to win a path to legal status and citizenship. We’ll never know if continuing the marches would have extracted and converted on that history-making opportunity. Instead, millions returned to work or class and they shifted their gaze to Congress. Six weeks later, when it became clear that Congress would not act, school was already out for the year; neither workers nor movement organizations could muster the capacity or ardor for renewing mass action. We sensed—correctly, I think—that it would be protracted and it seemed impossibly costly.

“We was ‘framed’”

Were the millions in the streets five years ago “*hard-working, honest contributors to our economy, doing jobs that “Americans” avoid or refuse*” or were they “*criminals, leeching off U.S. social services, too lazy or dismissive to go through the channels to attain legal status*”?

When polsters asked (and continue to ask) “what should be done with ‘the illegals’?”, they commonly posed one of two formulations. The first goes something like this: “should hard-working immigrants who entered illegally but have a clean record be given legal status and a path to citizenship if they continue to work , pay a fine, learn English, and pay taxes? In 2006—and still today—75% of respondents answer “yes”. If you throw in “should they *have to* apply?”, the “yes” camp exceed 80%.

The other version is less wordy and more blunt: “What should be done with the illegal immigrants?” Consistently, about half of respondents say “deport them.”

The rise of the mass media has left few in doubt about the extraordinary power of “framing.” The very term no longer primarily conjures schemes to falsely convict. The work of crafting the terms of debate, complete with images and buzzwords, is big, influential, and even respectable business.

The 2006 marches surprised everyone, including the immigrants themselves, but didn’t sufficiently capture the underlying “story.” The dominant images—of millions in the streets—blazed with a wattage that outshone the compelling stories of individuals and families, depictions that win enduring sympathy. The DREAM Act has come closer to enactment than any other immigration reform proposal because it spotlights the “best and brightest” (and the least “culpable”) that undocumented America has to offer.

“No human being is illegal” has long been a favorite rallying cry, one heard often in 2006. However, it’s righteous attempt to situate human rights as a higher moral imperative than immigration status did not then—and still hasn’t today—upstaged or co-opted the term “illegal.” The opening line of my essay “Coming to (New) Terms With the ‘I’ Word,” written in early 2008, remains stubbornly valid: “The term ‘illegal’ is killing us.”

The sharp rise in job insecurity has predictably boosted resentment about perceived unearned privilege or benefit, breathing new life into the much-refuted canard that undocumented immigrants receive government benefits and/or are a drain on the economy. By contrast, big-time bankers and financial speculators—the gold-medal class of the unearned privilege Olympics—receive shockingly little scorn.

This contradiction points up a key overlap in the framing that defines the immigration debate and the labor debate: “rights” versus “riches.” Regarding “rights,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in the last speech of his life, delivered in Memphis on April 4, 1968, summed it up well: “Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest *for* rights.” What’s more, it’s quintessentially American to protest to *retain* them because it taps into a deep sense of entitlement. In Wisconsin, public sentiments turned pro-union when the debate shifted from benefit and job security “envy” to revocation of longstanding rights.

In the predominant mindset, “illegal” immigrants have *no* rights and no claim to share—even modestly—in the wealth that their labor creates. No matter how many millions take to the streets, immigrants’ appeal to “rights” fails to resonate widely. Immigrants—*some*, not all, the thinking goes—merit *opportunities*.

Western media accounts of protests in the Middle East characterized them as pro-liberty and anti-tyranny, hence politically laudable. Though this seems deserving, it also brings to mind countless examples where the press abetted repression by belittling labor, civil rights and peace activists as trouble-makers and condemning “unrest.”

In sum, “frame” usually trumps facts. One person’s “terrorist” is another person’s “freedom fighter.”

“Got power?” or “Today we [all] march...tomorrow we [some of us] vote!”

Bouyed by our numbers, immigrants’ rights marchers confidently chanted “*hoy marchamos y mañana votamos.*” Many immigrants *did* vote in 2006 and even more in 2008—an estimated ten million. In a few states, immigrants who had become citizens cast the decisive ballots. In many states, however, politicians concluded that immigrants communities’ protest “bark” would not result in electoral “bite.”

This points up the third essential ingredient of successful mass action: **a power—actual or potential—that those in government respect and even fear.**

In 2006, the immigrants’ rights movement made an impressive enough showing to stop the Sensenbrenner Bill but also unleashed a counter wave...of phone calls, faxes and emails—reportedly ten to one—against immigration reform legislation. Swing-state senators credited the anti-immigrant vote. On the economic front, the boycott of Kimberly-Clark, owned principally by the Sensenbrenner family, never got traction. At the workplace, “A Day Without Mexicans” (a term borrowed from the title of a popular 2004 film) proved to be just that—*a day*.

In Wisconsin, labor is leading recall efforts against key Republican legislators and labor-backed candidates made surprisingly good showings in local elections on April 5th.

Governor Walker's hand-picked candidate to succeed him as Milwaukee County Executive lost 60-40 to a candidate heavily backed by labor. The race was widely interpreted as a referendum on Walker's agenda.

In Egypt, the army refused to back up Hosni Mubarak and disperse the throngs occupying Tahrir Square in central Cairo, sealing his fate.

Be it voting, withholding labor, causing economic losses, or applying (even withholding) military force, the credible demonstration or threat of power is an ingredient essential to the triumph of mass action.

"Time is on *our* side"

In 2006, the outpouring of millions seemed like a tipping point. The immigrants' rights movement had neither the staying power, the favorable frame, nor the clout to break through. Sadly—and at great human cost—immigrant-bashing continued to dominate in 2009, 2010 and 2011, most visibly and outrageously in Arizona. It gets traction because it's perceived as a political winner. Within the Republican Party, and among wavering Democrats, the politics of "now" rule.

The 2010 Census results provide a glimpse of the politics of "later." In Arizona, there are about 700,000 Latinos under 18, 43% of the state's youth. There are roughly the same number of white people who are 65 or older, they make up more than 80% of that age group. Republicans garnered political gains in 2010 with their high profile enactment of the country's most punitive immigration measures. When Senate President Russel Pearce brought even more draconian bills to a vote in 2011, half of his Republican Caucus deserted him, presumably sensing the approach of the eventual Latino electoral backlash. The bills failed, possibly signaling the anti-immigrant forces have finally peaked.

Labor—and immigrants—have always been under attack in the U.S. It's simply been a matter of how much, where, and which sector. The enemies of labor and immigrants have always managed to galvanize them by finding a way to overreach. In 2011, Arizona and Wisconsin have led the way.

Though one can't predict the precise physics, the intensity of labor's do-or-die fight-back and the demographic sticker-shock of fifty million Latinos (and growing) are ingredients bound to figure in the next marches of millions and their impacts on the course of history.