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Cleaning the Buildings of High Tech Companies in Silicon Valley: The Case of Mexican Janitors in Sonix

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Introduction

Silicon Valley is internationally known as the heart of the high-technology industry and a paradigmatic example of the new economy that many other regions in the U.S. and abroad want to emulate. The region also is well-know for the high concentration of foreign-born computer engineers, programmers, scientists and other highly educated technical workers whose labor critically contributes to the vitality and success of the high-tech industry (Alarcon, 1999). Less known is the important concentration of low-skilled Mexican immigrant workers who live in the region and are employed in a large diversity of service occupations directly connected to the maintenance of the high-technology industry complex. An example is the case of Mexican workers employed in the building cleaning industry in the region. Usually working in night shifts, they form an army of "invisible workers" in charge of cleaning the offices, "clean rooms", and administrative buildings of the numerous high-tech companies that are concentrated in this region. Employed by independent firms and contractors, Mexican and Central American workers become the backbone of the building-cleaning industry in the 1980s, providing a reliable source of hard-working, cheap and flexible labor for the high-tech client corporations that subcontract their services. Little is known however about the labor, working and living conditions of these workers, as if the glamour of Silicon Valley with all its concentration of wealth and economic success would hide the existence of this segment of the region's working class.

In this paper I seek to examine the case of Mexican immigrants who clean the office buildings of large high-tech corporations employed by independent contractors in the Silicon Valley. The paper is divided in two parts. First, I analyze the structural factors that lead the building-cleaning industry in Silicon Valley to depend on Mexican immigrant workers in the 1980s, and the consequences of this process on the labor and working conditions in this sector. In the second part I illustrate this process with a case-study of Sonix[1], a major high-tech corporation in Silicon Valley that, since the mid-1980s, employs Mexican immigrants to clean the numerous building it owns in the region through subcontracted companies. In the paper, I also discuss the unionization of thousands of immigrants who are employed in this industry in the region and the impact of such campaign on the labor and working conditions of these workers.

[1] This and other companies' names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of my informants.

The paper is based on ethnographic work I conducted with Mexican immigrants employed as janitorial workers in Sonix in Silicon Valley. Most of the information about the experience of these workers was gathered by formal and informal interviews conducted in their homes, as well as observation and interaction with them in public places where they gather to socialize. This information was complemented with interviews with several managers of both Sonix and one of its largest janitorial contractors. Quantitative data about the building-cleaning industry in Silicon Valley comes from census data, surveys from the Employment Development Department in California (EDD), and other secondary sources.

Background: The Restructuring of the Building Cleaning Industry in Silicon Valley

Internationally known as the heart of the high-technology industry, the region where the Silicon Valley is located was an important agricultural and cannery center until the 1950s, when the region started a rapid transformation with the development of the microelectronics industry (Saxenian, 1985). The success of the new industry in the region fueled a period of intense economic and demographic growth. Only between 1977 and 1985, for example, the number of high-tech firms in the Santa Clara Valley jumped from 905 to 2,660 (Flores, 1987: 94) as hundreds of electronics, aerospace, telecommunications, bio-technology, and other high-tech domestic and foreign companies established their headquarters in the region.[2] Also, between 1975 and 1990 about 150,000 jobs were created by high-technology firms in the region (Saxenian, 1994). This explosive economic development fostered a not less impressive demographic growth: between 1960 and 1980, the population of Santa Clara County (the core of Silicon Valley) almost doubled —from 658,700 to 1.265,200 people—, while by 1990, there were 1,497,577 people living in the region (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991).

The expansion of the high tech industry was a critical force behind the demand of low-skilled immigrant workers in the region. The robust growth of the electronics industry created thousands of unskilled, low-wage manufacturing assembly occupations in the 1950s and 1960s, most of them filled by immigrant women from Mexico, China, Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, and other Third World countries (Hossfeld, 1988; Green, 1983). Also, the fast urbanization of the Santa Clara Valley as well as parts of the Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties with the massive construction of corporate buildings, high-tech labs, banks, hotels, restaurants and other commercial infrastructure, produced a vast supply of unskilled and low-skilled occupations in the service sector. Since the late 1970s, these occupations were filled by Latino/a workers, many of them Mexican and Central-American immigrants who arrived in the region in the 1980s (Blakely and Sullivan, 1989; Martínez-Saldaña, 1993).[3] By the early 1990s as the high-technology industry continued its expansion, Mexican immigrants, many of them undocumented, became the bulk of the workforce in a large diversity of service and maintenance jobs that were created in the region over the past two decades.

The form in which the development of the high-tech economy generated a strong demand for unskilled immigrant labor is illustrated by the case of the building cleaning service industry. Employment in this industry experienced rapid growth with urbanization and the massive construction of office buildings that resulted from the establishment of hundreds of electronics and other high-tech companies in the region. Only between 1965 and 1990, for example, the demand for janitors in the Santa Clara Valley grew fivefold (Mines and Avina, 1992: 441). By 1995, employment occupation statistics of the EDD

[2] By the mid 1990s, nearly 1,500 of the largest 2,500 electronics companies in the United States were located in the region (Rosaldo and Flores, 1997: 64).

[3] According to a study conducted by Blakely and Sullivan, for example, by the mid-1980s Latinos, many of them Mexican immigrants, held almost 80% of the clerical and operating jobs in the low-wage service sector (1989: 4).

(1998a) estimated that there were 12,110 janitorial workers in this county, almost as many as the 12,690 computer engineers who work in this region, a figure that does not include those janitors employed in other parts of Silicon Valley in Santa Cruz, San Mateo, and Alameda counties, nor those workers employed by the numerous small cleaning companies that operate in the informal sector. While there is not direct information on the proportion of Mexican immigrants employed in this occupation, it is estimated that about ninety percent of workers in this industry come from Mexico and Central American countries, especially El Salvador (Alvarado et al., 1991). In a survey conducted by Mines and Avina in five janitorial firms in this region in the early 1990s, for example, 80 percent of the workers were from Mexico (Mines and Avina, 1992: 442). What does it explain the high dependence of the building-cleaning industry on Mexican immigrant labor? What factors contributed to the formation and consolidation of an immigrant labor niche in this sector? And, what are the labor and working conditions of the thousands of Latino immigrants who clean the office buildings of the high-tech companies in this region?

Subcontracting and the influx of Mexican labor in the 1980s

The dependence of Silicon Valley's building cleaning industry on Mexican immigrant workers is the result of important restructuring changes that took place in this sector in the 1980s. Up until the late 1970s, workers employed as janitors fall into two major categories: in-house custodial workers, those cleaning workers directly employed by the high-tech companies where they performed their services; and contract janitors, those employed by independent janitorial firms. In-house janitors usually earned between $7 and $10 an hour, with the same fringe benefits of other low-skilled and semiskilled employees in high-tech companies (e.g., health insurance, sick leave). In many of these companies janitorial employment was an entry-level job for minority and old-time immigrant workers that could lead to better-paid semiskilled occupations if they gained the necessary experience and training. In turn, labor conditions for contract janitors were not as good as those of their in-house counterparts, but given that the industry was highly unionized, they were still comparable to other unskilled or semiskilled occupations in the region. For example, wages for unionized janitors ranged between $5.00 and $7.50, and they received ample fringe benefits, including health care, sick leave, paid holidays, and pension benefits. At the time, Mexican, Filipino and Portuguese settled immigrants made up the bulk of the workers employed in the industry (Mines and Avina, 1992: 441).

In the early 1980s, the building-cleaning industry started a restructuring process which had important detrimental effects on the wages and labor conditions of janitorial workers in the region. The first changes occurred when non-union, mid-size janitorial firms took over a significant share of the cleaning market that was previously in the hands of large union firms. Two factors contributed to this shift, the ability of non-union firms to tapping into a pool of undocumented Mexican workers, and the lack of natural skill barriers that could prevent the replacement of experienced custodial workers by recent immigrants without previous experience in this occupation (Mines and Avina, 1992: 431-435). Later, starting in the mid-1980s, many high-tech corporations which used to have their own in-house custodial workers started to contract out their cleaning services to independent janitorial firms. In the midst of an economic recession, the building owners and managers of high-tech companies opted for contracting non-union janitorial firms to cut operating and maintenance costs. Former in-house janitors were given early retirement packages, moved to other maintenance positions, or simply laid off. Mid-sized companies were in a good position to expand in the industry. As Mines and Avina explained,

> "These mid-sized companies, often run by the ex-managerial staff of large unionized firms, have combined professional experience in delivering quality service with a willingness to use Hispanic middlemen to tap into networks of recent immigrants. This combination has meant inexpensive, high-quality service, which has presented formidable competition for large unionized firms" (1992: 434).

The penetration of mid-sized non-union firms in the industry had a critical effect on wages and labor conditions of janitors. By 1985, for example, non-union contractors were paying between minimum wage and $5 an hour, while wages mandated by the union contract ranged between $5.12 and $7.96 with ample benefits (Mines and Avina, 1992: 442). Also in 1981, to prevent the further inroad of non-union firms, Local 77 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) that represented union workers in the Santa Clara Valley was forced to admit a new labor contract with an "advancement program", according to which new employees were subject to a four-year apprenticeship period before they could earn full journeymen wages, an agreement that fueled a high turnover strategy by janitorial employers to prevent workers reaching such wages (Ibid.). By the late 1980s, the building-cleaning industry in Silicon Valley had been transformed into a labor niche for recent Mexican and Central American immigrants. The group of settled immigrant workers who were the backbone of union janitorial firms experienced wage depression and labor displacement by recent immigrants employed by mid-sized non union firms. Some of these janitors eventually become self-employed independent contractors, often under the request of the client companies where they were formerly employed, others were hired as supervisors by non-union forms because of their experience, and others were left unemployed and/or retired in advance. As a result, janitorial work devolved from a stable, well-paid, entry-level occupation for minority and established immigrants, to an unstable, low-wage, dead-end job for recent, mostly undocumented immigrants who arrived to the region in the 1980s.

The penetration of mid-sized non-union firms in Silicon Valley's janitorial industry prompted Local 77 to develop a strategy to avoid these firms winning more cleaning contracts with large high-tech corporations. This was done by organizing janitorial workers, targeting high-tech companies sensitive to negative image in the mass-media, and harassing nonunion firms to prevent them from further expanding in the market (Mines and Avina, 1992: 443). Later, starting in the early 1990s, Local 1877 (as the union was renamed in 1989 after merging with its sister Local 18 in San Mateo County) launched the "Justice for Janitors" campaign in the Silicon Valley. [4] With the financial and professional support of SEIU, Local 1877 sought to organize the new immigrants who had become the backbone of the labor force in the industry, using a diversity of innovative tactics such as grass-roots organizing, coalition building, consumer boycotts, hunger strikes, public relations, rallies and demonstrations in front of high-tech companies that used nonunion janitorial contractors. The first victory of the new campaign took place in 1991-92 with Apple Computers, forcing this company after a long battle to replace its nonunion cleaning contractors with a union janitorial firm. This was a decisive victory that had a domino effect upon many other high-tech companies that were using nonunion contractors at the time. From then on and during the rest of the 1990s, Local 1877's strategy consisted in targeting high-tech corporations such as Hewlett-Packard, Unisyx, Applied Materials and others, one at a time, to press them hiring union cleaning firms. By doing so, the union regained control over a significant segment of the building industry that had been lost to nonunion contractors since the early 1980's, now with a renewed membership base mostly made of Mexican and Central American immigrants.

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[4] The "Justice for Janitors" is a nation-wide campaign originally launched by the Service Employees International Union in the late 1980s in large cities such as Denver, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., San Diego, Detroit, San Jose, and others that seeks to press big buildings' owners to employ union janitorial contractors rather than nonunion cleaning firms. The goals of this campaign is to regain control of the cleaning market lost to nonunion contractors in the 1980s, improve the wages and general working conditions of the janitors who clean large buildings and commercial facilities in these cities, and to incorporate immigrant workers as union members.

The Case of Sonix: From In-House Employees to Subcontracted Janitors

The changes in Silicon Valley's building-cleaning industry, and the influx of immigrant labor is illustrated by the case of Sonix. One of the major high-tech corporations in the Silicon Valley, the company owns numerous buildings in the region with several million of square feet. In 1989, Sonix started replacing its in-house custodial employees for janitors employed by independent contractors. In an interview with one of the managers of this company, he explained the change was part of a larger decentralizing plan of the company aimed at reducing labor and operating costs of service operations not considered central to its businesses. Former in-house janitors were given the option to be trained and moved to other semi-skilled positions (e.g., shipping and receiving, and maintenance), receive a compensation package with an early-retirement plan, or simply laid-off. The economic incentives for going subcontracting were clear: while former in-house custodial workers were paid an average of $10 an hour plus insurance and a generous "full package" of benefits, subcontracted janitors were paid by their employer an average of $5.50 an hour and received no health insurance or any other benefit, which saved considerable expenses to Sonix as client company. In addition to labor costs, the Sonix's manager estimated that outsourcing cleaning operations had also contributed Sonix to reduce administrative costs as well as expenses related to the management of its former cleaning warehouse. According to him, while the maintenance cost of their former in-house cleaning workers was $1,15 per square foot, independent contractors offered to do the job for as low as 6 cents per square foot.

In addition to reducing labor and operating costs, the use of subcontracted workers was seen as contributing to make janitorial work within the company more efficient and flexible. As this company's manager explained, Sonix wanted to avoid a rigid, vertical organizational structure typical of large firms, and enhance instead a decentralized and flexible scheme of janitorial work within the company. Small, non-union cleaning firms without a complex bureaucratic structure were considered the ideal vehicles to accomplish this goal. According to this manager, subcontracting also offered two additional advantages. First, it gave each of Sonix buildings' managers the option to select its own janitorial contractor. As a result, in the early 1990s, Sonix had contracts with more than a dozen independent cleaning firms in the region, none of them union and most middle and small-size companies that relied on Mexican workers. The second advantage was that the owners of these companies had a direct control over its workers without the thicker managerial structure of large janitorial firms, which made easier for Sonix building and maintenance managers to work in direct and close contact with them and have their orders followed. As the Sonix's manager put it,

> "We prefer working with small janitorial companies because they allow for more flexibility and better service, as for example when we request a non-scheduled service and have janitors respond promptly... They are managed by their own boss who normally is on the site, which makes communication between us and these companies very easy, and which leads to a very good service...The better the relationship between Sonix and these companies' owners, the better the quality of the service and the lower the cost... [With these companies] we had instant service."

Mexican immigrants were considered an ideal work force for this organizational structure, not only because they were cheaper than their in-house counterparts, but also because they worked hard, were highly motivated and offered little resistance to the flexible organization of janitorial work that Sonix managers wanted to implement. For example, in a joint interview with several maintenance managers at Sonix, they emphasized the several advantages of having Mexican workers as janitors. These included their willingness and little resistance to change their work-routines when asked to do so, their easy disposition to work overtime with short-term notice, and their ability to send relatives or friends to substitute them at work whenever they were sick or quit their jobs. To overcome the language barriers and given that few of the Mexican janitors were fluent in English nor did Sonix maintenance managers

speak Spanish, Sonix promoted some of its former in-house janitors to supervisory positions so they could act as intermediaries with the contracted workers. One of them, a Mexican immigrant in his early 30s who had lived in the United States since he was a child and was fluent in both English and Spanish, was considered by Sonix's managers a valuable asset for the company because of his knowledge and familiarity with Mexican workers' culture and habits, as well as about the regions where they come from, why they migrate, and how they find jobs and obtain fake "green cards" to work. He served, in short, as a "cultural broker" for the company sorting, in Sonix's manager words, "language and cultural barriers," and helping the company to develop training and organizational methods for janitors in the workplace.

In sum, subcontracting facilitated Sonix access to an abundant source of cheap, hard-working and reliable Mexican immigrant labor force without the costs of legal risks of directly employing immigrant workers. This was especially important after the passage of IRCA in 1986, which threatened to penalize the employers of undocumented workers if certain conditions were met. Using independent firms allowed Sonix and other high-tech companies to delegate the responsibility over the legal status and labor conditions of janitorial workers to their contractors.

Workers Join the Union: The Justice for Janitors Campaign in Sonix

The nature and effects of the subcontracting system used by Sonix was illustrated by the case of Bay-Clean, the largest of its janitorial contractors in the early 1990s. Owned by a Korean entrepreneur, the company employed 266 workers and was divided between a thin layer of managers, most of them Koreans, and a large base of workers, most of them Mexican and Central Americans, and a small group of Koreans. In each of Sonix's buildings, and depending on their size, Bay-Clean maintained one manager and one or two floor-shop supervisors who worked in close contact with Sonix's maintenance managers and served as intermediaries between them and the janitors. This allowed Sonix's managers to maintain a great deal of control over the organization of janitorial work and the daily activities of the subcontracted workers. Average wages for most Bay-Clean janitors (excluding those in charge of waxing floors and window cleaners) was $5.50 an hour, and workers did not have any fringe benefit except health insurance mandated by law, a considerable difference with wages and labor conditions enjoyed by the former in-house Sonix's custodial workers.

Janitors in Bay-Clean complained about low and stagnant wages, as many had been in the company for several years without receiving any increase. They also resented not having any working benefit, especially health insurance, which made feel unprotected and vulnerable, the poor material conditions in which they have to carry out their daily jobs, and the lack of a clear policy about job promotions and the distribution of work loads. A common and central complaint by many workers was to be object of ethnic discrimination because of their race and undocumented status. Bay-Clean workers deeply resented what they considered "blatant racial discrimination" by their Korean employers. Thus they bitterly complained about unfair treatment, arbitrary decisions, and the general contempt with which supervisors treated them in the workplace. Many workers accused Bay-Clean of using a double standard assigning Mexican workers the hardest cleaning jobs, while given the few Korean workers employed in the company the lightest and easiest tasks to then be promoted to supervisory positions. The resentment caused by this situation was well summarized by the comments of a Mexican janitor in Bay-Clean,

> After all, they [Koreans] are also immigrants like us, but they want to step on us... One thing is that you are exploited by the country's own people, and other to be exploited by other immigrants...that is too much.

The Unionization of Bay-Clean Workers

Tired, frustrated and with little hope that their situation would improve, a group of Bay-Clean workers decided to contact Local 1877 for assistance. At first, the goal of these workers was not to join the union, but to denounce their problems to Local 1877 and ask for help as intermediaries between them and their employer. Bay-Clean workers' petition could not come at a better time for Local 1877, which after an organizing campaign with an important high-tech company was ready to focus on a next target in the ongoing Justice for Janitors campaign in Silicon Valley. Union representatives told Bay-Clean workers that the best strategy to solve their problems was to organize and join the union. A group of about twelve workers started then to promote the union's cause among their peers. The response of Bay-Clean janitors was timid and cautious at first. Many were recent undocumented immigrants who had never heard about the union and were afraid of getting involved into any kind of political activity that could jeopardize their jobs. Others were skeptical and suspicious about the union's motives, and still others believed this was a good opportunity to have the grievances with Bay-Clean heard outside the company. With the strategic advice of the local union, the janitors who cleaned Sonix's facilities started to organize in each of the company's sites and gathering the support of an increasing number of co-workers.

A group of Bay-Clean's workers organized a rally in front of the company's offices to present their major demands. These included, among others, better wages and a plan for wage increases based on job seniority, the establishment of a clear and fair policy about the distribution of work loads, the promotion of Mexican janitors to supervisory positions, medical insurance for the company's employees, adequate supplies to do their jobs, and to stop the retaliation campaign launched by the company against workers sympathetic to the union. A few weeks later, Bay-Clean's janitors coordinated by the local union held another rally in front of one of Sonix's main administrative offices to denounce their poor working conditions and press the company to use union contractors. This tactic produced immediate results. Shortly afterwards, afraid of negative publicity that had affected Apple Computers in the past, Sonix managers announced that the company had decided to "consolidate" its janitorial services and reduce its numerous contractors to only one. After the bid process, Sonix selected CLS as its solely building cleaning contractor, a large union firm with good reputation in the industry. These were good news for Bay-Clean janitors who, under an agreement reached between the union and CLS, were hired by this company to keep cleaning Sonix's buildings now as union workers.

The unionization of the janitors who cleaned Sonix's offices brought a significant improvement in their wages and labor conditions. Wages for most janitors went up from $5.50 to $6.10, the entry-level wage established by the union master contract at the time, while that of specialized workers such as window cleaners and wax-floor workers were also raised proportionately. While modest, such raise was welcomed by most workers, who sought it as the beginning of a wage-increase system based on job seniority. Janitors also gained important fringe benefits, including health care (after three months working for CLS), sick leave, and one week paid vacations after one year of employment. And as union workers, they were now protected from unfair labor practices by their employer, which many considered important in light of the numerous abuses they had endured in Bay-Clean.

Not all the changes, however, were positive. When CLS replaced Bay-Clean and the rest of nonunion contractors, it reduced the number of janitors employed to clean Sonix's facilities from 285 to 240 workers, a common strategy used by cleaning companies to offer the most competitive bids. To make up for the difference, CLS changed the organization of work assigning most janitors bigger work-loads. This change was not welcomed by CLS janitors, who complained about their additional work responsibilities, sloppiness in the way their supervisors organized their tasks in the workplace, and the contradictions in the company's policies. Summarizing the feeling of many of his co-workers, one janitor complained, "what do they want, quantity or quality?" referring to the orders received from his

supervisor who asked them to work faster and clean less thoroughly on the one hand, and increase the quality of their work on the other.

The INS Comes into the Scene

The major blow to CLS janitors took place, however, in 1995, about two years after they have joined the union when the INS conducted an audit in this company. As a result, about 400 workers who did not have valid work-authorization papers, including most of those employed to clean Sonix buildings, lost their jobs. In a matter of a few weeks, these workers lost not only their jobs, but also all the benefits for which they had struggled so hard. Disheartened by this outcome, workers' reaction was a mixture of disappointment, anger and resignation. Many thought that everything was a plot by CLS to replace them with new workers at entry-level wages. Others believed in the authenticity of the INS investigation, but thought CLS had taken advantage of the situation to that effect. Pressed by economic needs, most looked for work in other union janitorial companies, often with the assistance of the local union.

After this, and throughout the nineties, many other janitors at CLS lost their employment as a result of not having valid work-authorizations whenever the company asked them to verify their social security numbers. According to a union representative, this has become a common strategy used by large janitorial firms in the industry in the late 1990s, including union contractors, which use information provided by the Social Security Administration to maintain a high turnover and thus save wages and working benefits of their employees. This tactic has prevented many undocumented workers to reach the top seniority wages established by the union contract, generating a "revolving-door" effect in the industry in which janitors shift companies on a regular basis whenever they are laid-off by their employers for not having legal authorization to work.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described the restructuring of the building cleaning industry in Silicon Valley by which janitorial work has become a labor niche for Mexican immigrants in the past two decades. The case of the janitorial industry in the region illustrates an important trend that defines the new U.S. economy: the generation, along highly-skilled jobs, of large numbers of unskilled and low-skilled occupations, a factor that plays a critical role in the demand of low-wage immigrant workers to the country, including a region at the forefront of technological development as the Silicon Valley. Thus, even high-tech companies like Sonix reach out for unskilled immigrant labor via subcontracting as a strategy to reduce labor costs and develop flexible forms of work organization.[5] In the near future, Silicon Valley is expected to generate a considerable amount of such unskilled and low-skilled jobs. Current projections of the EDD for Santa Clara County, the hearth of the Silicon Valley, show that by the year 2002 the service sector will account for 50 percent of the net nonagricultural job in the region, with two-thirds of this growth due to business services such as data processing, advertising, building maintenance, security and personnel supply services (1998b). According to this estimation, janitorial

[5] This finding adds support to the position maintained by authors like Saskia Sassen (et al. 1992), Wayne Cornelius (1992, 1998) and others who emphasize that the supply of low-skilled jobs, especially in the service sector, represents a central feature of the postindustrial U.S. economy which is structurally linked with the demand of immigrant workers from Mexico and other Central American countries.

work is the 13th occupation with the greatest absolute job growth between 1995 and 2002 (EDD, 1998a).[6] This and other projections confirm the model of the new economy as a combination of both highly skilled and low-skilled occupations with a much thinner body of traditional manufacturing jobs in between. The employment in Silicon Valley of large numbers of immigrant workers at both ends of the occupational structure neatly illustrates this trend.

The working and living conditions of janitors in Silicon Valley's building-cleaning industry also illustrate the case of the working poor in the region. The wages, benefits and career prospects of immigrant janitors who today clean the buildings of high-tech companies like Sonix have little in common with those of the former minority and settled immigrant custodial workers they came to replace. New immigrants have become an integral part of the proletarian working class in the region, those workers whose labor contributes to the well-being of the mainstream economy but who have to struggle hard to make ends meet and remain out of poverty. Thus in my research, I found that most of these workers live in extended households with relatives and/or friends pooling wages to cover rent and other living expenses, often in overcrowded housing conditions (Zlolniski and Palerm, 1996).

At the same time, the successful unionization of thousands of Mexican and Central American janitors in Silicon Valley shows that low-income immigrants, included the undocumented, are not passive actors unable or unwilling to organize to improve their labor and working conditions. Thus the Justice for Janitors campaign in the industry has critically contributed to the improvement of wages of labor benefits of janitors employed by large firms to clean the offices of high-tech corporations in the region.[7] Moreover, it has contributed to debunk the myth that immigrants employed in low-wage occupations cannot be organized. Indeed, the success of the Justice for Janitors campaign in San Jose and other cities in California and elsewhere in the country is seen now as a model by the AFL-CIO to organize thousands of low-wage workers in other service industries of the new economy (Milkman and Wong, 1999).[8]

For policy purposes, an effective approach to the problem of the working poor should seek to combine a set of initiatives aiming at raising labor standards and wages in low-wage industries in the service and manufacturing sectors. The first step is to recognize that immigration of low-skilled workers is driven by structural demands of the U.S. economy, hence that the issue of low-skilled workers cannot be thought as the result of an "immigration problem" but rather as a labor issue. This means enforcing wage, labor and health safety standards within industries where the working poor are concentrated, targeting with special programs mid-sized and small labor firms and contractors that operate in those sectors where most of the violations to minimum wages and other legal standards take place. An effective policy approach should also promote the unionization of immigrants who work in these industries, regardless of their immigrant status, and to prevent that employers use immigration legislation as a labor weapon to maintain a high workers' turnover. Finally, a solid policy approach should be complemented by a reform of the current immigration legislation that acknowledges the structural demand for low-skilled workers in the economy, instead of penalizing immigrants who are employed in those jobs. Currently, immigration policies and the way in which they are used by employers tend to re-enforce the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants, as in the case of CLS janitors who lost their jobs in the hands

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[6] This figure does not reflect the total growth of janitorial employment in Silicon Valley in other counties like San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Alameda where new urbanization that results from the expansion of the high-tech industry is taking place.

[7] By the early 2000, the union has about 5,500 members in the Silicon Valley alone, a significant increase with respect the 1,500 members it had in the early 1900s when Justice for Janitors first started. As the union contract signed in 1996 is due to expire by the end of May 2000, Local 1877 is preparing the negotiation of the new contract, now with the added strength of its important victory in April in Los Angeles in a public campaign that attracted national attention.

[8] For the union organization of Mexican and other Latino immigrants, see also Delgado (1993), Waldinger (et al 1996), Cranford (1998), Milkman (2000).

of the INS only to be replaced by a cadre of cheaper undocumented workers, further contributing to the consolidation of a segment of working poor in these industries. Just as the demand for highly-skilled foreign-born workers by the high-tech industry is used to reform current immigration legislation, so the demand of low-skilled immigrant workers by the same structural forces should be used as a realistic premise to reform immigration laws concerning undocumented immigrants who work and live in the country.

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