

# Power Through Problem Solving: Latino Immigrants and the Inconsistencies of Economic Restructuring

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## ABSTRACT

Employment restructuring is a transformative process that brings about significant changes in how work is organised and experienced. Scholars who study restructuring in industries that employ large numbers of immigrant workers, including construction, food processing, or janitorial services, often point to the undermining effects of this transformation on industry wage standards, working conditions, and training supports. But often missing from these accounts is a recognition that restructuring is uneven and incomplete at best and often produces shortcomings and limitations that continue to frustrate and perplex immigrant and native-born workers alike. Drawing on a multi-year study of construction workers in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, we find Latino immigrants are far from passive inheritors of the problems of restructuring that they and others encounter during their daily work. Rather, they respond to these challenges with innovative and lasting solutions, developing new work structures and routines that support industry skill development, knowledge sharing, and quality standards. Equally important, their native-born supervisors and co-workers have learned to value these solutions and ultimately have stepped in as influential allies, helping immigrant workers leverage these contributions to secure improved working conditions and higher compensation levels. These exchanges have tethered immigrant and non-immigrant workers together and in ways

that challenge standard narratives of native dominance and immigrant exploitation. The result is intensified interdependency and ultimately the creation of an enduring relational resource for promoting worker rights and also for guiding further immigrant advocacy. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## RESTRUCTURING REVISITED

Employment restructuring is a form of economic transformation that brings about significant changes in how work is organised and experienced. Restructuring affects workers of all types and across diverse industry and labour market boundaries. Immigrant workers, particularly recent immigrants, however, tend to be especially vulnerable to its negative effects. As new labour market entrants, immigrants are not often in a position to pick and choose among jobs opportunities. In economic parlance, they are job 'takers', rarely able to challenge the jobs made available to them in their adopted labour markets. Immigrants who are undocumented may experience additional vulnerabilities because their legal status may limit their access to support institutions, which are often essential for circumnavigating or legally challenging poor working conditions.

As a result, scholars who study industries that rely on immigrant labour emphasise how employment restructuring guts industry wage standards, working conditions, and training supports (Zlotniski, 1993; Theodore, 2003; Doussard, 2008; Bernhardt *et al.*, 2013). Once

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restructured, jobs in these industries provide limited scope for advancement for immigrants and more often than not involve work environments that are demeaning, unsafe, and physically demanding (Theodore *et al.*, 2008). Studies of this stripe help document the ways in which employment restructuring augments worker vulnerability and powerlessness and puts immigrant workers in an especially vulnerable position vis-a-vis their employers and also non-immigrant co-workers and supervisors (Weil, 2014).

Missing from these accounts, however, is recognition that restructuring is uneven and inconsistent at best. For starters, restructuring does not automatically result in complete replacement by immigrants of a previously employed native-born workforce. Equally likely are blended forms of labour market integration that result in immigrants working side by side with native-born workers, with the latter acting as supervisors or as higher ranked and more influential co-workers (Bailey & Waldinger, 1991; Griffith, 2005; Doussard, 2008). Nor is restructuring universally valued by those in positions of power or authority. Certainly, there are cases where native-born co-workers and supervisors use restructuring as a means to exert control over the immigrant workforce in ways that worsen inequities and working conditions (Griffith, 2005). But restructuring can also create new and unexpected industry challenges and frictions that instead bring the interests and needs of native-born incumbents and immigrants into closer alignment (Bosch & Philips, 2003; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004).

Presented in this light, employment restructuring is less a wholesale replacement of one set of practices (and people) with another. Rather, it unfolds unevenly as a work in progress – one that is shaped and even contested by the various industry actors, immigrant and non-immigrant alike, that encounter and enact restructuring in their daily work life. In this regard, restructuring, as with most labour market dynamics (Herod, 2001), is not only participatory and ‘lived’, but also subject to collective action and interaction.

Our reframing of restructuring as a fluid, participatory, and inconsistent process is based on a multi-year study of construction workers in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina – a region that

has experienced tremendous influx of Latino immigrants since the late 1990s, a large share of which are undocumented. With this demographic change, employment practices have also evolved to include greater labour subcontracting and task specialisation among firms along the contracting chain. In some cases, second and third tier subcontractors, specialise in labour procurement, are acting as labour brokers that recruit, place, and at times, obscure the legal status of undocumented immigrants.

As labour subcontracting has taken hold as established practice, it has enabled undocumented immigrants to gain access to jobs – in some cases through long term subcontracting arrangements – at prominent commercial and institutional construction sites. In this regard, our case provides an opportunity to study semi-formal work arrangements that involve mainstream, visible, and prominent organisations and institutions, but with fluid employment structures in place that also support high levels of incorporation of undocumented immigrants.

But within this restructured labour market, immigrant workers also find opportunities to make valuable contributions that improve ‘mainstream’ industry performance. These opportunities come at a time when traditional practices and institutions for replenishing workforce skill and promoting quality construction have been undermined – unanticipated changes that ultimately reveal inconsistencies within the labour subcontracting system. Faced with the practical challenges this has created, immigrant construction workers have developed strategies that support skill development, knowledge sharing, and quality standards. These strategies are informal in that they depart from the institutionally prescribed and sanctioned pathways for learning and for making skill visible. As important, their native-born workers supervisors and co-workers are learning to value these solutions and, with some acting as influential allies, helping immigrant workers leverage these contributions to improve working conditions, secure higher compensation levels, and at times, even secure formal employment.

Before turning to the empirics of the case, including describing the rise of labour subcontracting in North Carolina’s construction industry, we first provide an overview of

contemporary perspectives on employment restructuring and its disproportionate effect on immigrant workers in particular. We then outline the challenges that labour subcontracting has created in North Carolina's construction workforce and the solutions offered up by the Latino immigrant workforce. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the recognition immigrant workers receive from native-born supervisors and how this translates into tangible worker benefits. We argue this represents an underutilised interdependency that immigrant and labour advocates could make greater use of for elevating the status of immigrant workers in North Carolina and beyond.

#### THE INCONSISTENCIES AND INTERDEPENDENCIES OF RESTRUCTURING

Economic restructuring can take a variety of forms, although many contemporary accounts stress connections between the restructuring process and increased worker vulnerability. Examples of employment restructuring are well documented for immigrant heavy service and resource-based industries that mostly employ less educated immigrants, including agriculture, janitorial services, and construction. (Zlolniski, 1993; Peck & Theodore, 1998; Doussard, 2008; Weil, 2014). In these industries, restructuring often involves the rise in contingent forms of employment, most notably labour subcontracting (Wells, 1996; Peck & Theodore, 2001). Furthermore, the adoption of labour subcontracting in these industries is often associated with greater incorporation of marginalised, and often undocumented, immigrant workers and a subsequent shift away from a native-born or more established immigrant workforce (Zlolniski, 2003; Doussard, 2008). Under this arrangement, immigrants rarely secure direct employment from the end-user businesses or clients. More typically, they are hired through elaborate, often informal networks of labour subcontractors or temporary staffing agencies (Zlolniski, 1993; Weil, 2014).

The use of labour subcontracting in industries largely employing immigrants is closely associated with the degradation of the conditions of employment: industry wage standards are eroded, and the formal training systems used by workers to acquire trade skills and leverage

better remuneration are dismantled. Wage theft has also been noted in numerous reports on the effects of subcontracting on immigrants (Milkman, 2010; Fussell, 2011). Moreover, the restructuring process can result in diminished industry safety standards, as nested labour subcontracting arrangements obfuscate which businesses are assigned legal liability (Valenzuela, 2003; Theodore *et al.*, 2008). Related to this, employee misclassification is commonplace, whereby immigrants are wrongly categorised as independent (sub)contractors rather than wage employees and, in the process, lose essential rights as workers (Wells, 1996). In this regard, misclassification is not simply a coping mechanism through which employers conceal their dependence on a mostly undocumented immigrant workforce – rather, it can be part of a more pernicious strategy that reinforces immigrant vulnerability to employer abuse.

Still, despite their precarious position, immigrants are not just complacent actors within restructured labour markets. A number of scholars have demonstrated their ability to successfully challenge and resist harmful forms of restructuring, including those stemming from abuses under legally questionable forms of labour subcontracting. While research on this topic tends to emphasise improvements to job quality and wage security that result from immigrant affiliation with formal labour market intermediaries, especially worker centres or labour unions (Fine, 2006; Milkman, 2006; Martin *et al.*, 2007), a growing body of research extends this further by featuring less explicit and deliberate acts of resistance and collective action by immigrant workers themselves.

As one illustration, Christian Zlolniski has documented instances whereby predominantly undocumented Latino immigrant janitors employed through nested subcontracting arrangements in Northern California resisted attempts by employers to speed up the work routine in ways that would have undermined their work performance (Zlolniski, 2003, 2006). As one example, undocumented immigrant janitors worked together to expedite completion of more routine tasks, thereby giving them extra breathing room to accommodate more challenging tasks (Zlolniski, 2003). At the same time, they coordinated strategies to create room

for unauthorised, yet much deserved breaks, including taking turns as 'look out' for approaching supervisors or clients. As this case demonstrates, immigrant workers can develop collective strategies to resist attempts by employers and supervisors to undermine poor working conditions (See also Wells, 1996).

But also revealed through Zlolniski's detailed ethnographic account are inconsistencies within restructured industries that immigrant workers have been able to leverage to reassert control over the labour process. As Zlolniski stresses, resistance by these industry newcomers was not simply an attempt to shirk established work routines and responsibilities. Rather, immigrant janitors resisted contradictory pressures imposed on them by their own employers – namely the contradictory pulls they experienced between client expectations for quality standards and the pressure placed on them to reduce costs by limiting how much time they allocated to individual tasks. In response, 'workers were not protesting their employer's attempt to transform them into professional "custodial employees", but rather that the company failed to do so despite its official discourse' in support of quality service (Zlolniski, 2003). This 'mismatch' pushed immigrant workers to come up with innovative solutions in an attempt to remove obstacles to good performance and quality workmanship.

Ultimately, in this particular case, neither employer nor client valued the innovative solutions put forward by immigrant janitors. As a result, the pressure to speed up the work routine prevailed, forcing immigrant janitors to forego attempts at achieving quality performance. But what might have happened if employers (or for that matter non-immigrant co-workers) took greater notice of these immigrant-authored practices and, in turn, recognised and defended their contribution to quality service? How might employment conditions have changed if employers had incorporated the informal strategies that migrants had developed to resolve organisational contradiction in the formal management structures of the janitorial service? What effect might this have had on their status and bargaining power as workers?

Additional ethnographic research provides some insight into this alternative outcome (Willis, 2005; Du Bry, 2007; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010).

Willis, in her study of immigrant labour market incorporation in North Carolina hosiery industry, extends the analysis furthest to examine immigrant advancement opportunities that emerge at the jobsite itself (Willis, 2005). In her particular case, highly-skilled Anglo workers with decades of hosiery industry experience stepped in to support immigrant newcomers to the industry – but only once they had recognised the contribution of immigrant workers to stabilising domestic hosiery employment. In essence, Latino immigrants filled a growing industry void created as younger native-born residents turned away from traditional manufacturing industries. In response, native-born incumbents provided Latino immigrants with on-the-job training and, in the process, helped move them up the career ladder. As Willis notes, 'reaching out to the Spanish-speaking (immigrant workers) on the shop floor to ... engage them in more technological training was critical in ensuring that the mill will remain competitive' (Willis, 2005, parentheses added). In essence, high-ranking, native-born workers perceived training of immigrants as a necessary coping strategy to save their own jobs.

In this respect, the North Carolina hosiery case foreshadows related dynamics we observe in the state's construction industry. However, in contrast to their counterparts in hosiery, immigrant construction workers have not simply relied on native-born North Carolinians to impart established knowledge and, thus, determine their industry worth and value. Rather, immigrant construction workers have been active participants in their own value creation, using collective knowledge and shared expertise to devise innovative approaches to work-based training and quality control. Additionally, their native-born supervisors have themselves learned to value and defend that contribution – recognising immigrant-authored solutions to persistent industry challenges. In this regard, native-born construction workers do not simply view their immigrant co-workers as a temporary resource for buffering against immediate or individual job loss. Rather, they have embraced immigrants as essential partners in an on-going effort to reclaim control over the labour process and, in turn, reintroduce deeply held values and norms around quality work and craftsmanship. As we argue further on in this paper, the

exchanges Latino entrants and native supervisors have tethered immigrant and non-immigrant workers together and in ways that challenge standard narratives of native dominance and immigrant exploitation. The result is intensified interdependency and the creation of an enduring relational resource for promoting worker rights and guiding further immigrant advocacy.

## DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To examine employment restructuring and worker responses to it, we relied on open-ended interviews with approximately 125 Latino immigrant construction workers at or near project sites in Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina. The vast majority of immigrants interviewed were from Mexico, although many arrived via other US destinations. We asked open-ended questions about their migration journey, with responses suggesting the majority of our sample was also undocumented.

Interviews with immigrant workers were mostly conducted off-site to encourage workers to speak more candidly about their employment experience. We coupled immigrant worker interviews with open-ended interviews with their employers, as well as industry experts and training providers through 2013. In addition, we conducted a dozen interviews with native-born industry 'old timers' with over 20 years of industry experience and, thus, with first-hand knowledge of employment restructuring and its impacts. Most of these individuals were senior field superintendents for prominent general contractors or licensed subcontractors in the region. Each had advanced through the industry, initially starting their construction careers as entry-level labourers or helpers. They provided us with a historical perspective on the industry and its employment transformation in recent decades. They were also asked to reflect on their daily interactions with Latino immigrant workers they supervised or interacted with at the job site.

Interviews with industry old-timers were conducted at the project site and, most often, were paired with a supervised tour of that site. This enabled us to observe immigrant construction workers on those sites and gave industry experts an opportunity to feature their contributions by pointing to specific types of immigrant work practices and interactions.

Information on employment restructuring and labour market dynamics was also captured through an in-depth review of industry archives and trade publications from 1980 to 2005, including monthly publications of an influential industry association, the Carolina's branch of the Associated General Contractors.

## RESTRUCTURING IN NORTH CAROLINA

Since the early 1980s, North Carolina's urban construction industry has gone through a protracted period of restructuring that has shifted the dominant work structure. Admittedly, this transformation has opened up job opportunities for Latino immigrants; most of them are recent arrivals, and many are undocumented. But it has also generated challenges in training, project management, and quality control for the industry, which Latino immigrants not only encounter at work, but also have helped to resolve.

A key component of this restructuring involves the diffusion of labour subcontracting throughout North Carolina's commercial and large-scale residential construction industry. Labour subcontracting involves the use of indirect employment by specialised subcontractors or third-party staffing agencies. Subcontracting of this type is not unique to North Carolina. Starting in the late 1970s, construction industry associations representing general contractors and prominent industry suppliers outside of North Carolina promoted labour outsourcing as an intentional strategy to undermine labour union power (Erich & Grabelsky, 2005; Weil, 2005). In some cities, this coordinated response greatly curtailed labour union representation in the building trades. Still, in other places, including a number of East Coast cities like New York and Philadelphia, labour unions managed to mount a successful challenge and, for the most part, have retained tight control over hiring and wage setting practices for non-residential construction work (Fine *et al.*, 2008; Iskander *et al.*, 2010).

In North Carolina, however, labour unions were never a strong institutional influence, and this helped to diffuse adoption of subcontracting practices. An additional push came from southern general contractors who initially experimented with labour subcontracting as a

means to expand their southern territorial reach in response to growth opportunities in 'Sunbelt' cities in the 1970s. But equally, declining Federal support for large-scale infrastructure projects forced many prominent Carolina contractors to bid for smaller projects across multiple urban geographies. Through subcontracting, general contractors were able to reduce direct labour costs, yet still amass a suitable (albeit temporary) workforce by relying on independent brokers in local labour markets to deal with worker recruitment and wage setting.

Subcontracting within licensed building trades, namely electrical, air conditioning, pipefitting, and plumbing, had long existed in North Carolina (Wood, 1990) and elsewhere (Erllich & Grabelsky, 2005). But throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the practice of subcontracting extended to other, non-licensed trades and task areas in North Carolina, including labourers, painters, carpenters, and roofers. Today, the practice of labour subcontracting is nearly universal in North Carolina, and for many construction trades and specialties, it has been used as a strategy to further subdivide task responsibilities. In drywall installation, for example, separate subcontracting companies exist for different sub-task areas – that is to say, separate crews, managed by different employers, are each responsible for hanging, taping, or finishing pre-fabricated wallboards. Similar divisions exist within carpentry and brick masonry.

Ultimately, the widespread use and acceptance of this practice has helped reduce barriers to entry encouraging a new generation of smaller-sized contractors to set up shop. In the past decade, the practice has also enabled prominent general contractors in North Carolina to shed all direct employees and focus their resources entirely on supplier logistics and project management, leaving the task of hiring and managing work crews to companies further down the contracting chain.

But while subcontracting aided industry growth and expansion, it also created a nagging industry challenge – namely a protracted skills shortage, which reflects inconsistencies in training standards and practices across North Carolina's diverse construction landscape. Some of this shortage resulted from the dismantling of

established training programmes that catered to larger general contractors and their workforce (Northrup & Northrup, 1984). Subcontractors, however, were less interested in supporting these institutions. Much of this was due to their smaller size and related resource constraints. But equally, a mismatch existed between earlier training programmes that emphasised comprehensive, craft-style training versus the narrower task orientation of most subcontractors. As subcontracting rose, worker access to formal training programmes declined.

Changing perceptions among younger labour market entrants in North Carolina further compounded North Carolina's labour and skill shortage. A series of reports by Carolina's Associated General Contractors captured this shift, pointing especially to the problem of construction's 'low-image status' and the 'need to improve construction's image with young people'. While some of this image problem reflected a rise in college attainment among North Carolina's younger population and related desire to explore employment options well beyond traditional 'blue-collar' occupations, it was exacerbated by declines in industry wages that went hand in hand with the narrowed task orientation (Wood, 1990).

Labour shortages and related skill gaps were not the only problems created by labour subcontracting and sub-task specialisation. Concerns over declining quality control were also raised in light of reduced investments in industry skill development and worker training. According to industry experts interviewed for this project, sub-task specialisation reduces the likelihood that crews performing a given task within a prescribed sequence will overlap at a large-scale project site and this has implications for managing quality. As one superintendent explained, 'it is important for each crew to do its best job. Otherwise the next step doesn't turn out right. For example, if one crew countersunk the screws too far it causes problems in laying the paper in the next step. Sometimes the quality is not up to par.' Quality control problems can remain hidden until subsequent tasks in a sequence have been completed and with crews responsible for the offending action long gone. One superintendent described an incident where cracks emerged in the finished ceilings of a multi-storey, mixed-use high-rise building: each

time the door opened the ceiling appeared to 'breathe'. After moving up and down, several hundred times the ceiling eventually cracked, exposing electrical wires and other structural elements. The only solution – one that was costly and could have been avoided through better coordination – was to tear down and rebuild the entire ceiling structure. Reinforcing this, yet another project supervisor noted, 'other groups do not do such good work, forcing others to clean up their mistakes'. This coordination challenge has created a need for workplace solutions that promote greater task integration and with it more consistent quality standards.

### THE IMMIGRANT SOLUTION

Starting in the 1990s, Latino immigrants offered a viable solution to North Carolina's construction labour shortage (Johnson-Webb, 2002; Kasarda & Johnson, 2006). By the mid-2000s, Latino immigrants accounted for one-third of the state's construction workforce, with estimates reaching as high as 70% for urban labour markets (Martin, 2004; Hummel, 2006). Still, in the last decade, Latino immigrants have proven themselves to be more than just a low-cost, replenishable labour supply.

Similar to the native-born incumbent workforce, they have encountered substantial problems with restructuring that impede their daily work. But in response, they have also helped to resolve these shortcomings and, in the process, enhance project management to the benefit of those supervising and employing them. Their responses have largely been informal, in that they have not initially been indicated or sanctioned by the formal organisational structures in the industry, and often, have diverged substantially from institutionalised practices for production and training. However, as these solutions become more visible, they are motivating supervisors and native-born co-workers to intervene in an effort to protect and reward the immigrant workforce. In this respect, immigrant-authored strategies are contributing to further advances in employment practices and labour standards and create an opening for further advocacy.

The first of these immigrant-authored solutions involves the introduction of new forms of on-the-job mentoring that facilitate skill

development through active models of training. This mentoring is often initiated by Latino immigrants themselves, not by their employers, and is typically informal in nature. It often extends from informal social networks that immigrants use to recruit other workers. When referring a friend, family member, or former co-worker for a job, an established immigrant worker often trains that new recruit – a reciprocated practice long documented by immigration scholars (Bailey & Waldinger, 1991). This training might take place at the main jobsite or at side projects undertaken during weekends or evenings.

Still, informal mentoring among co-ethnics is more than a mechanism for diffusing knowledge across the Latino immigrant workforce. Fundamentally, it represents an important challenge to passive styles of training often promoted by non-immigrant employers and project supervisors. Immigrants acknowledge they are often told by native-born employers and supervisors to simply observe others at work, receiving simple instructions like 'just copy what he does' or 'observe his technique'. While observation is certainly part of the learning process, immigrant mentors are also mindful of other learning modalities, including expert demonstration, supervised experimentation, and co-worker feedback and guidance. These multiple modalities are noted elsewhere as being crucial to tacit skill formation in manual trades like construction (Iskander & Lowe, 2010) and undergird most industry apprenticeship programmes (Palladino, 2005).

In the North Carolina context, active, on-the-job mentoring by Latino immigrant workers has filled an existing institutional void with respect to upskilling. Immigrant mentors, through their promotion of active learning practices, have demonstrated to other immigrants the best way to perform a given task or set of sequenced tasks. They have also provided a much needed source of feedback and guidance, at the same time that they have helped fellow immigrants that arrived with construction experience in Mexico translate pre-existing construction knowledge to the North Carolina context (Iskander & Lowe, 2016). In this respect, they have helped immigrant co-workers develop a deeper appreciation for and more sophisticated understanding of tasks to which they are assigned and thus have contributed

greatly to industry skill development. Equally important, with this mentoring, they also help to reinforce and uphold quality standards.

A second, related industry contribution involves the co-optation of workplace safety standards and resources by higher-ranking immigrant workers in an attempt to forge new channels for technical skill development and deepening. In non-residential construction in North Carolina, industry safety standards have been promoted by general contractors, in part because they are held accountable for jobsite accidents. Safety training at these sites has focused primarily on proper use of construction equipment and fall prevention. At most building sites, safety training is also designed to reach all construction workers, especially immigrants, regardless of their spoken language, education level, or even legal status. To address potential language barriers, safety training for Latino immigrants is often conducted in Spanish, and the curriculum displays a high sensitivity to cultural differences in translation and interpretation. Educational barriers are overcome through the use of safety videos and visual demonstrations of safe building practices, rather than reliance on written manuals and tests.

This emphasis on safety training has ultimately helped to lower injury rates among North Carolina's Latino immigrant population. But safety training has also played a critical role in deepening the technical skill level of the state's immigrant workforce. Well-tested visual aids, safety videos, and on-site demonstrations have been used by immigrant workers as resources for learning about new machinery or specialised equipment and new methods to complete specific building tasks. Worksite safety coordinators – most of whom are Latino immigrants with 10 or so years of construction experience – have reinforced this dual purpose training, setting aside time reserved for safety reviews to also discuss proper use of new tools and equipment and preferred construction techniques.

This pedagogical use has gone beyond the transmission of information necessary to maintain conventional construction techniques. At 'green building' sites, immigrant safety coordinators have also used safety training sessions to explain the logic underpinning environmental building practices and to

demonstrate green building techniques, thus further expanding the repertoire of industry skills of the immigrant workforce. As such, safety training represents a circuitous pathway for skills-based advancement, one accessible to undocumented immigrants excluded from the state's few remaining formal technical training programmes. Much like on-the-job mentoring, this co-optation of safety standards by immigrant workers has helped fill a gap in the wake of dismantled training institutions and contributed to the soundness and quality of buildings and homes in North Carolina.

The final institutional influence that we have observed involves the formation of stable work teams that not only challenge established job hierarchies within the state's construction industry (Iskander & Lowe, 2010), but also provide a vital source of industry problem-solving and quality control that general contractors and specialised subcontractors especially covet. These immigrant work teams tend to be long-lasting, reproducing themselves over several years and across multiple construction projects. Most involved five or six immigrant members, often with prior social or familial ties. Most include at least one immigrant spokesperson fluent in English, acting as the point of contact for non-Latino co-workers and supervisors.

While these teams often have members with considerable construction experience, they have chosen to engage in strategies that help to diffuse knowledge and responsibility to all members of the team.<sup>1</sup> Immigrant teams often encourage frequent job rotation, whereby each member cycles through different tasks as they move from one project to the next. Cross-training is also used to encourage on-going learning, in turn allowing individual members to share and disseminate new knowledge. For one team we studied, this enabled them to 'keep learning new codes together', thus allowing them to gain access to more sophisticated construction projects. In this regard, the strategies they devise also enable them to resist rigid job hierarchies and fixed job descriptions that have long been used to structure work processes in North Carolina (Iskander & Lowe, 2016).

Work team dynamics have also encouraged on-going group problem-solving, which in turn enables team members to collectively identify site



specific problems and develop innovative and effective solutions. Similarly, the closeness of team members and familiarity with each other's work styles and non-verbal cues means that tasks performed by an immigrant work team are not only well sequenced and seamless, but performed both expediently and to high standards.

#### BUILDING RECOGNITION

Still, in many cases, the strategies developed by immigrant work teams to advance industry skill and quality standards remain unobserved by native born co-workers and supervisors. Our interviews with immigrants also suggest that supervisors often fail to recognise the social dynamics within these teams and how they contribute to overall gains in industry productivity and performance. In several cases, supervisors simply assigned value to one immigrant worker – typically those with English fluency – at the expense of other skilled members of their team. Interestingly, however, we also found examples of push back, where offers for individual promotion were turned down in an effort to maintain team cohesion and secure collective gains for the entire group.

Especially intriguing were examples involving supervisors that not only acknowledged and rewarded collective contributions of immigrant work crews, but also did so in ways that reinforced a shared resource for collective action and group bargaining power that could stretch across a larger swath of the immigrant workforce. Many Anglo superintendents interviewed for this project admitted benefiting directly from having access to a skilled immigrant workforce. These same 'old timers' also recognised the contribution of immigrant work teams in resolving quality control challenges that stem from North Carolina's task-oriented division of labour.

One superintendent at a specialised plumbing firm described a defining moment, which helped him recognise and even quantify this contribution. At one construction site, he decided to break up an immigrant team and assign individual members to different floors of the 'high-rise' residential building. But after separating the crew, he noticed 'it slowed down progress a lot. Something they would do in four or five days easily, took more than a week and a

half.' In explaining this delay, he went on to say 'this was not about attitude – about them being angry with me for splitting them up. I think this just messed with their routine.' When asked what about their routine was crucial, he said 'it had to do with (non-verbal) communication. They have worked together for so long, they can just pick it up immediately and go.' From that moment forward, he took every measure possible to maintain team cohesion, eventually asking members of the group to determine how best to allocate tasks and responsibilities.

Another superintendent described his core immigrant work team as his 'A-team', explaining that their work together is 'like a professional sports team. Every one of them knows what the other one is doing....We just tell them to go prep a slab and it's done.' A second superintendent at the same company stated emphatically, '(the A-team) can do anything!'

Superintendents at some general contracting firms have assigned immigrant teams the responsibility of managing quality control problems throughout the entire construction sequence. This is often carried out by bringing select immigrant teams on site at various points in the process with the goal of identifying and resolving lapses in quality standards as they emerge. Once a problem is identified, these teams are encouraged to engage specialised crews and help them learn from mistakes or oversight. As one superintendent explained, 'the concrete sub-contractor wasn't getting it done fast enough so I got our guys in, they were able to absorb his Hispanic employees into their group and (train) them, and knock the thing out.' As this suggests, these work teams not only help to enhance the productivity of fellow team members, but also enhance the performance of other immigrant crews.

Immigrant workers in North Carolina have found ways to leverage the growing recognition they receive for their industry contribution. In some cases, immigrants have secured these gains individually by moving from one employer to another and, in the process, negotiating slightly higher wages – strategies, which we have documented in detail elsewhere (Lowe *et al.*, 2010; Hagan *et al.*, 2011). But more substantial advances in earnings and working conditions have been garnered when teams or crews of immigrant workers collectively secure the help

of sympathetic supervisors, who have brought migrant-authored informal training practices closer to formality by incorporating them into their management strategies.

The A-team, introduced earlier, provides an illustrative example. While one member of the team initially received a promotion offer, he turned it down in favour of negotiating for increased wages and job security for the entire team. Interestingly, the promotion he received was due in large measure to having a valid driver's licence. The earnings needs of the team were made known to several superintendents, who in turn helped carry the case up the chain of command. Eventually, the same superintendents helped to guarantee greater job security, initially by coordinating work schedules across multiple projects and months in advance in order to ensure the A-team consistently worked 40 or more hours per week. This offer of consistent hours was particularly valuable as it occurred during the 2011–2013 construction industry slowdown in North Carolina – a time when many immigrant workers in the state struggled financially in the face of unpredictable work schedules. As one of the superintendents explained it: 'the biggest thing about that group (the A-Team) is knowing that the more they produce consistently at a highest quality level they can... this company is going to keep them busy. And that is the most important thing that anyone in the industry now has going for them.'

In a second example, a highly valued immigrant team was able to convince their supervisor to defend their need for higher wages, as well as provide free transportation to and from project sites, which included a dedicated truck and driver. This benefit greatly lowered monthly transportation costs and with it increased disposable income for each member of the team. But equally, it protected them against the risk of driving without a licence and insurance – a common challenging facing undocumented immigrant in North Carolina. Related to this, another employer hired an immigration lawyer in an effort to secure work permits for his immigrant workforce and help them gain legal status.

What makes these collective strategies especially effective is the implicit threat of movement by the entire team, not just individual members. In other words, superintendents have

become keenly aware that they risk losing the entire team to another employer or even another state if they fail to step in and advocate on their teams' behalf. At stake for native-born superintendents is their ability to deliver consistent, quality work and, ultimately, their overall contribution to industry productivity. But interestingly, these superintendents have taken steps to reinforce, rather than diminish, this interdependency overtime.

Many superintendents we interviewed acknowledged investing heavily in immigrant team upskilling, including using the construction slowdown in 2011–2013 to cross-train these teams on new, yet related tasks and trades. One supervisor helped his crew master all steps in drywall installation for example, thus opening up opportunities to bid for longer contract terms involving previously disconnected tasks. Other supervisors have even secured funding from their employers to enrol team members in community college certificate courses. These courses cannot substitute for the formal, craft-oriented training once available through industry apprenticeship programmes like the Carolina's Construction Training Council (CCTC). Still, they do enable participating immigrants to formally demonstrate competence in blue-print reading, safety assurance, and welding, among others. Furthermore, this subsidised training offer is typically made available to immigrants with legal standing and with the expectation that newly acquired skills and standards will be shared across their entire team.

Anglo supervisors have also reintroduced elements of mentoring that they themselves experienced in their youth as young apprentices and new labour market entrants. Interestingly, this mentoring opportunity was extended in response to language constraints, which required English-speaking supervisors to conduct most training through physical and tactile demonstration and not just through verbal description. As one supervisor put it, 'what helps is that a lot of communication in construction can be done with the hands.' To overcome this language barrier, 'old timers' have stepped into the trenches with Latino immigrants, in turn, opening an additional space in which to observe immigrant workers in action and reinforce their contributions by sharing knowledge of past industry practices and routines.

As this suggests, native-born supervisors are contributing to a virtuous cycle whereby greater breadth of skill and expertise creates additional opportunity for immigrant workers to collectively negotiate for enhanced benefits. But equally, by drawing on and augmenting strategies that new labour market entrants use to overcome the challenges they encounter from restructuring, native-born supervisors are also transforming immigration into a shared resource for reestablishing worker participation in processes of industry and employment restructuring.

#### REFLECTIONS FOR ADVOCACY

Recent scholarship on immigration has turned an eye towards internal sources of worker bargaining power through which immigrant workers resist exploitative and demeaning working conditions (Zolniski, 1993; Gordon, 1995; Milkman, 2011; Iskander & Lowe, 2013). This represents a return to earlier studies of labour processes internal to the workplace that have helped advance job quality and working conditions for low-wage workers, including Latino immigrants (Burawoy, 2008; Osterman, 2011). This paper further extends this inward looking approach by featuring interdependencies between immigrant and non-immigrant workers that emerge within immigrant-heavy industries in the wake of employment restructuring.

In considering such interdependencies in Raleigh-Durham's non-residential construction industry, we move beyond a narrow framework that simply casts employment restructuring as a tool for employers or supervisors to exert greater 'control and discipline' over their immigrant workforce. Instead, we draw attention to inconsistent and contradictory pulls that can accompany employment restructuring and pulls that create persistent challenges for workers and managers alike. In our case, these interdependencies emerge as a result of competing logics between industry-wide strategies designed to cheapen the labour process and the simultaneous need by industry supervisors to maintain quality construction standards and replenish workforce skill.

As our case highlights, the contradictions of restructuring can act as a powerful tether between immigrant and non-immigrant workers,

producing a relational resource through which immigrants can better demonstrate and even defend the informal strategies they use to develop skills and improve construction techniques. In this regard, our case complicates standard immigrant narratives of supervisory dominance and worker exploitation. But we would be remiss if we simply presented our case as an oppositional alternative – after all, many immigrants we interviewed for this project described in harrowing detail a myriad of abuses they encountered over their construction careers in North Carolina and neighbouring states. These ranged from cases of wage theft to lapses in safety standards that ultimately put their lives at risk.

By focusing less on these stories, our goal is not to minimise or under-report worker vulnerability. To the contrary, the aim is instead to draw attention to emergent, informal practices by immigrants that can be targeted with further assistance and advocacy. What this advocacy might look and who should lead it is a topic for future investigation. One step might involve working with immigrant crews to make their industry contribution more visible, not only among their peers but through engagement with institutional actors that have wider labour market reach and influence. Another step might involve coordinated advocacy efforts to leverage the position of enlightened supervisors and secure their support in carrying forward the message of widespread immigrant influence and impact. A third step could even involve a direct challenge to employment restructuring itself – building a case for more stable and direct employment relationships and with the assumption these might produce better paying jobs.

But here, we wish to end on a cautionary note and in light of the main focus of this special issue – migration and the informal economy. One immigrant founder of a highly adaptive workcrew admitted he lost control over team management when his group was offered formal employment at a reputable plumbing firm. 'The group structure is now different because when we started (formally) with the company, they separated us. When we were an (informal) subcontractor for the firm, it's as if they were asking our permission' – which he acknowledged was essential to the informal practices his team

used to allocate tasks among group members and in ways that optimised internal capacity and opportunities for group learning and cross training. This example and others we documented, suggest there might be limits to advocacy strategies that blindly push formalisation through a one-step conversion from subcontracting to direct employment. That shift, in isolation and without regard to other informal practices in play, could inadvertently undermine team dynamics by changing the structure of power and shifting who has direct and ultimate control over the labour process – formal or otherwise. In the wrong hands, this could undercut the very strategies that immigrants leverage for developing industry alliances and, from them, advancing their standing within the labour market. As advocates look to immigrant-authored strategies as a potential resource for worker bargaining power, they need to understand how and when those strategies might falter and consider when blunt instruments of formalisation widen the pathway to further advancement or instead block the road ahead.

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#### NOTES

- (1) See Iskander *et al.*, 2010, "The rise and fall of a micro-learning region: Mexican immigrants and construction in center-south Philadelphia" *Environment and Planning A* 42 1595-1612 for a discussion of related team formation by immigrant construction workers in Philadelphia.

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