

# **‘Workers, go home!’ The anti-immigrant movement: The anti-immigrant movement**

by [David L. Ostendorf](#)

December 18, 2001

A Riverhead, New York, jury has sentenced 29-year-old Christopher Slavin to 25 years in prison for attempted murder and assault. Last fall Slavin and Ryan Wagner (who will soon be tried on the same charges) posed as labor contractors in Farmingville, Long Island, “hired” Mexican day laborers Israel Perez and Magdaleno Estrada Escamilla, then took them to an abandoned warehouse and attacked them with a shovel, a post-hole digger and a knife.

The actions of Slavin, who is bedecked from neck to ankle with racist tattoos, have raised the specter of organized racist activity on Long Island, and made Farmingville the epicenter of a growing anti-immigrant movement.

Each day, hundreds of predominantly Hispanic workers gather in these communities to wait for labor contractors who drive up and hire them. Residents complained about the crowds and traffic at these sites, and their complaints fanned anti-immigrant rhetoric and focused anger on the “illegals” who allegedly comprise the workforce. Stirred by unfounded rumors of increased criminal activity, some residents determined to preserve their “quality of life.” After becoming involved with national groups such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), they organized a local group, Sachem Quality of Life (SQL).

When bigotry and racial tensions simmer, intimidation and violence escalate. Anti-Catholic rhetoric is flourishing in Farmingville, with everyone from the pope to Catholic Charities blamed for the growing immigrant workforce. Two staff members of area Catholic parishes, women who have helped seek resolution of the community conflict, were threatened in person and on the phone. In a 12-month period between June 1999 and June 2000, at least six incidents of assault on immigrants were reported. Meanwhile white supremacist groups took advantage of the conflict by

distributing flyers in the area.

One of the SQL leaders describes immigrant workers as an “invasion” force occupying his community and calls for the military “removal” of immigrants. When immigrant and civil rights organizations met in Long Island, he responded by saying that “the gunfight at the OK Corral is going to take place.” With its ties to FAIR, the leading voice of the anti-immigrant movement in the U.S., and to American Patrol, the California-based white nationalist vigilante group, SQL has attracted considerable national attention. Nationally known speakers and leaders from all of these groups gathered on Long Island recently to rally support at a “Day of Truth.”

Meanwhile another local group, Brookhaven Citizens for Peaceful Solutions, has renewed its efforts to build an even stronger coalition of religious, civic, business and labor organizations. Bolstered by a rally that drew 2,000 people in support of immigrants, the group has become increasingly vocal and effective.

Brookhaven Citizens organized to press the Suffolk County legislature to provide \$80,000 in public funding for a hiring site where workers could gather off the streets. The solution was deemed treason by some opponents, and the legislation was vetoed by the county executive. Brookhaven Citizens could not muster additional votes, and by the time the veto override came to a vote in April, Sachem Quality of Life had convinced several supporters of the legislation to switch their votes. But local coalition, community and day worker leaders, along with immigrant and civil rights groups, rallied at a midsummer gathering and galvanized the Brookhaven group’s resolve. The day laborers themselves are organizing, with the support of the Long Island-based Workplace Project and the emerging National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

Area churches have not escaped the controversy. Several Catholic parishes are polarized, with parishioners on both sides of the issue and SQL leaders in their pews. Parish staff, however, have been staunch in their efforts to support immigrant workers—even in the face of threats—and are teaching Catholic social doctrine and leading the parishes and the larger community to new commitments on the issues. Catholic Charities has also played a pivotal role. While Jewish and Islamic leaders have been visible and vocal in support of the workers, other churches have been silent, even when religious bigotry was voiced in attacks on Catholics by anti-immigrant forces.

Hundreds of day laborers of any nationality in a single community present challenges, just as the expansive hiring of immigrant workers by U.S. industries challenges communities and workers alike. The only solution is to work in coalition, and assure that justice is secured by and for all the stakeholders in the community.

In Farmingville, however, legitimate community concerns have been overridden by a shrill, well-funded and increasingly effective movement that has deep roots in white nationalism. Behind a facade of mainstream respectability and legitimacy, Sachem Quality of Life has developed the “Farmingville model,” and is ready to export it to the rest of the nation. According to SQL leaders, communities across the country are asking for help in organizing to “get the immigrants out.” In nearby Farmingdale, SQL leaders and local residents managed to shut down a worker hiring site that had been in operation for a year.

Emboldened by the Farmingville experience, the FAIR organizer who helped develop SQL has been working in Iowa, one of the next targets of the anti-immigrant movement because of a meatpacking industry that employs thousands of immigrants, and because of a new initiative to increase the declining population through immigration. By late summer FAIR and ProjectUSA (the New York-based group known for its inflammatory billboards) had scheduled meetings in three Iowa communities, worked with Reform Party leaders to shape its immigrant policy and met with several African-America congregations to drive the political and racial edge between them and Hispanics. Project- USA recently issued an appeal for Iowa farmers—who oppose urban sprawl and hog factories—to be a public voice in opposition to immigrants.

Like many other anti-immigrant groups, FAIR presents itself as pro-labor and pro-environment. In late spring, a FAIR umbrella group called “Coalition for the Future of the American Worker” ran television and radio ads that blamed layoffs on immigrants. In a recent Mason City, Iowa, meeting, ProjectUSA representatives pandered to town meeting participants by criticizing low wages in the area and warning that immigrants will keep wages depressed. They claimed that their opposition was not “about” immigrants or race, but about the vastly expanding number of people in the U.S. population, most of whom are the “offspring of immigrants.”

The anti-immigrant movement seeks to maintain a white political majority even though census data point to an impending change in that status. Vile, racist ideology

permeates the writings and speeches of its leaders. The leader of the California-based Voices of Citizens Together/ American Patrol, for example, has called Mexico a “two-bit gangster-run country” and describes immigrants as “the alien tide” waging “demographic aggression” against the “blood descendants of European people.” The St. Louis-based Council of Conservative Citizens provides an ideological framework for the movement, and suit-and-tie cover for sympathetic politicians. State-level “immigration reform” groups cover a third of the nation. The Pioneer Fund (the “race science” and eugenics group from the ‘30s) backs the movement financially and has given generously to FAIR and to American Immigration Control Foundation (AICF).

Biblical and theological positions against immigration are also spreading. AICF relies on biblical texts and interpretation to advance its agenda. The Social Contract Press of Petoskey, Michigan, publishes a journal that seeks to aid evangelicals and liberal Protestants in claiming a theological opposition to immigrants and refugees, and in refuting the “destructive” language and thinking of any who challenge those views as xenophobic, nativist or racist.

Since September 11, public support for a reduction in immigration has surged, with polls showing that 60 to 70 percent of Americans favor stricter control of the nation’s borders. The anti-immigration movement has used the tragedy to press its agenda. White supremacists called for immediate border closings. Council of Conservative Citizens leader Sam Francis opposes “an alternative social structure” created by non-Western immigrants: “The characteristic belief system of the West is Christianity and a view of man and the universe derived from or closely related to it, and only those whose minds and habits incorporate that worldview are part of the West.”

What has happened on Long Island will spread to communities across the nation unless they organize to counter anti-immigration influences and build strong ties with immigrant workers. Churches must help create strategic coalitions that will address low wages, substandard housing, inadequate health care, education and school system impacts, cultural clashes, racism and other issues. In congregations and parishes, many varieties of people of faith can struggle together for a common ground of justice and righteousness. It is time to build those communities.

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*Devin Burghart, director of the Center for New Community's Building Democracy Initiative, provided research for this article.*