Understanding Contemporary Workers' Struggles: Remembering David Montgomery

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I was not one of David's students, though I wanted to be. I had applied to Yale for graduate school and had gone up to New Haven to meet him beforehand. But I didn't get in. Apparently, the admissions committee (which he wasn't on that year) considered it too risky to admit someone who had worked in the labor movement, in light of the union organizing going on among Yale's graduate students and employees. I thought this was ironic because, although I was sympathetic to the Yale organizing, I was searching for the life of the mind. If I had wanted to organize workers, I would have continued what I was already doing. In any case, I ended up elsewhere, and I've had no complaints about my graduate education. David and I stayed in touch over the years, and I was honored by a kind review he wrote of my first book in the *Journal of Social History*.

What I admired most about David was his understanding of contemporary workers' struggles. In the early 1990s, when the "Janitors for Justice" movement was just starting, David understood the significance of Latino immigrant workers' militancy. And he understood that the future of the labor movement would come from places like Los Angeles, with its post-Fordist economy and vibrant immigrant communities. He was prescient in this regard, ahead of most of the "new labor historians" and certainly ahead of the leadership of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). "Immigrants have once again become key to labor's rejuvenation," he wrote in 1999 ("Dignity and Democracy," *New Labor Forum* 5).

David's appreciation of immigrant workers was a longstanding mark of his scholarship. Immigrant workers figured prominently in *Fall of the House of Labor*, of course; but immigrants were also central to David's arguments about working people and political democracy. In David's presidential address to the Organization of American Historians (OAH) in 2001, he stated, "The struggles of migrants of every clime and complexion have transformed American life in every generation." Popular struggles for political reform, he said, "usually [left] the goals for which working people acted at best only partially realized, but never [left] society and politics unchanged." The democratic impulse was, of course, connected to that of African Americans' long struggles for freedom. Migrants entering America confronted a racial landscape constructed from the legacies of slavery and racial subordination; but their presence and struggles also reshaped the contours of race, ethnicity, and democratic politics. And, as with African Americans, the diasporic

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 82, Fall 2012, pp. 48–49
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doi:10.1017/S0147547912000221

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000221 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experience also endowed immigrants with democratic sensibilities about what it meant to be a worker and a citizen, sensibilities that far exceeded the boundaries of official nationalism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000221 Published online by Cambridge University Press