

**Across Races and Nations:  
Building New Communities in the U.S. South**

**Conflict and Community-Building in the Appalachian South**  
by  
**Susan Williams and Barbara Ellen Smith**



## CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE APPLACHIAN SOUTH

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Hamblen County lies in the Tennessee River Valley of Appalachian east Tennessee, nestled between the Cumberland Mountains to the northwest and the Great Smokies to the south. Morristown, the county seat, is home to 43% of the county's 58,000 people, and serves as a magnet for residents of adjacent Cocke, Grainger and Jefferson Counties who commute to its industrial parks and other businesses to work. The remainder of Hamblen County's residents live in outlying areas, where many garden, grow a small amount of tobacco, or cultivate other cash crops to supplement their earnings from conventional but not always reliable jobs. Although its agricultural history remains visible in farms and expanses of green countryside, Hamblen County's employment base lies above all in manufacturing, which began to develop in the first half of the twentieth century. By 1927 there were eight locally owned woodworking mills, and in 1937 Berkline Corporation opened a furniture factory that remains to this day one of the county's largest places of employment.<sup>1</sup> Like many areas of the rural South, Hamblen County's initial industrialization was dependent on access to railroad transportation and natural resource extraction—in this case, timber from the great forests of the Appalachian Mountains.

However, unlike the company towns of the textile industry or the pattern of single industry dominance found in much of the rural South, Hamblen County's manufacturing sector rapidly diversified. Beginning in 1949, companies making synthetic fibers, apparel, hosiery, paper products, plastics, auto parts and other manufactured goods increasingly built factories in the county. The lack of unions, low wages, and overwhelmingly white population (95% as of the 1990 census) were consistent draws. During the restive 1970s, boosters in the local Chamber of Commerce advertised the county's "very favorable labor situation," as evidenced in the "loyalty, sense of responsibility and dedication to the fundamental principles of justice and fair play [that] set [Hamblen County's work force] apart from the present day concept of a blue collar worker."<sup>2</sup> Manufacturing employment quadrupled from 1950 to the present, though the 1% increase from 1990-2000 was far lower than that of previous decades. Today, the largest private employers are Berkline Furniture, MAHLE, Inc. (which makes aluminum pistons), Lear Corporation (automobile seat frames), Shelby Williams (contract seating), and Koch Foods, a poultry processor.<sup>3</sup>

Diversification has not protected workers in Hamblen County from the dislocations of economic restructuring that swept through the "Old Economy" industries of the U.S. manufacturing sector over the past two decades. Deindustrialization and capital flight to yet lower wage areas hit Morristown's apparel and furniture workers in particular; automation and ownership changes decreased job opportunities in the rayon

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1 Chris Baker, "From Frontier Democracy to Development District: Popular Resistance and Discourse in Hamblen County, Tennessee," pp. 11, 13. Paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Association conference, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Morristown Chamber of Commerce, "Morristown: You'll Like it Here," brochure, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, "Tennessee Community Data: Morristown," Nashville, TN 2001.

plants; and contingent employment practices meant that workers who lost their jobs had to apply for new positions (in some cases even the same positions) through temporary agencies rather than a personnel office. From January 2000 through August 2002, total employment in the county dropped by almost five percent, and manufacturing jobs declined even more steeply—by 14 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The capital mobility of globalization has come to Hamblen County not only through the movement of factory jobs to Mexico, China, Singapore and elsewhere, but also in the form of new investors, often in more capital-intensive production processes, from Europe and Asia. The former mayor of Morristown sought to frame these recent changes in positive terms, as evidence of economic vitality:

... We have seen major changes as portions of the furniture industry leave us.... Now you end up with a lot of plants that hire in the 50 to 250 range, with a few over 1,000 but not many. What used to be the chief output—say fiber at American Enka or furniture—are...replaced by other things, a lot of which are automotive in nature. We have eight of the Fortune 500 manufacturing companies operating in this area, and those are all American owned, but they provide less of the jobs than our international plants. We have about 13 international owned plants that fly about eight different flags.... Recently one of our larger companies was purchased by the Chinese who promptly closed it down and took the manufacturing back to their home in China. There is a constant interplay.<sup>5</sup>

For workers with a history in Hamblen County's factories, these changes in product mix and corporate ownership mean spells of unemployment, diminished job security, and in some instances lower wages and the loss of fringe benefits. Older workers are particularly hard hit. Although certain of the new, relatively capital-intensive manufacturers offer wage and benefit packages that are excellent by local standards, their jobs tend to go to young people entering the labor market rather than to 45- or 50-year-old laid-off furniture workers. One young African American woman commented:

Morristown has always been a factory town, and a lot of the factories have closed or are closing, especially furniture factories. ...[W]e were always known for Berkline and Lea Industries. And Berkline has been sold and Lea Industries has been shut down, Shelby Williams the last I heard was going to shut down or move... As far as a problem in the work force, what I've seen has come as a result of NAFTA, because everybody ...thinks all the jobs have been sent to Mexico, and a lot of them have.

This economic context of tumult and insecurity is fundamental to understanding local reactions to the large influx of Latino immigrants, which began in the 1990s.

### Immigrant Community Growth

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<sup>4</sup> Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, East Tennessee Development District.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from interviews conducted for the "Across Races and Nations" project.

By the time of the 2000 census, the Latino population of Hamblen County had ballooned by 1,785%, outnumbering the small but longstanding black population and becoming almost 6% of the county's residents in the space of ten years. The new arrivals were predominantly foreign-born (77%), and most originated from Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Economic crises in that country, resulting in part from passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 and the devaluation of the peso in 1994, forced many rural and urban Mexicans to emigrate to the U.S. These economic factors, combined with the social networks of migration through which information about opportunities in Hamblen County circulated far and wide, help to explain the influx of Latino immigrants.

However, it is important to note that Latinos have been present in Hamblen County well before 1990 and the recent population explosion. Migrant farm workers have been traveling through east Tennessee for decades, working on tobacco, tomatoes and other vegetable crops. The Migrant Head Start program in Cocke County, adjacent to Hamblen County, has been providing pre-school education for children of migrant workers since the early 1980's. Indeed, there is evidence that some of the first permanent Latino residents of Hamblen County settled out from the migrant stream to work in local poultry processing. In more recent years, word of these and other jobs spread through the networks of Latino migration, so that Mexicans working in Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Texas and California reported hearing about employment opportunities in Morristown and came there to work. Others from the Mexican state of Michoacan, approximately 800 miles south of the border, learned of the job prospects in Morristown and migrated north.<sup>7</sup>

Today, there are many cultural indicators of the sizeable Latino presence in Hamblen County and east Tennessee more generally. Morristown now has three Mexican grocery stores within several blocks of each other, as well as new Mexican restaurants catering to Latinos. Spanish-speaking residents can now listen to a Spanish radio station that covers the east Tennessee area from Knoxville to Johnson City (which includes Hamblen County), and read a Spanish newspaper *Mundo Hispano*. "For Rent" signs on apartment buildings now appear in Spanish, and ads for car dealers, video rental stores, check cashing services and other businesses increasingly note a capacity to speak Spanish as part of their marketing pitch. The number of Hispanic children in the Hamblen County School System has climbed from 117 students in 1995-1996 to 659 in 2002-2003, indicating more and more immigrant families settling in Morristown.<sup>8</sup>

### Reactions to New Latino Neighbors

In this relatively small town, where any newcomers tend to be identifiable to the local population, the high visibility of the Latino population contributes to some negative reactions, particularly from whites. One of the most widespread complaints involves language, and the perception that speaking Spanish in public is exclusionary and

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*, 1990, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Moore, "Sheriff: Employers Should Educate Hispanics on Drunk-Driving Laws." *Morristown Citizen-Tribune*, October 22, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Moore, "Hamblen County Classrooms Seeing Changes with Rise in Latino Students, *Morristown Citizen-Tribune*, October 2, 2001, p. 1.

disrespectful. As in Siler City, North Carolina and other small southern towns with large Latino population growth, some local residents react with a feeling of being “invaded” by those who are ethnically different. The director of a local Hispanic ministry commented: “Minorities at first are so rare that they are interesting. They become a threat later on when the numbers increase and they start taking over neighborhoods.”<sup>9</sup>

Already bitter about the movement of local jobs to other countries, including Mexico, many white working-class residents viewed the entry of Latinos into local labor markets as an aggressive threat that added insult to injury. Anonymous postings to the website of the *Morristown paper* decried the Latino presence in venomous tones. One Latina commented, speaking of her white co-workers: “They view me badly, they don’t want me, they hate me.” In another interview, a white woman recounted:

I just experienced this on the weekend: someone decided to come up and start telling me—and she didn’t even know me, that was the first time I had met her—that she had just lost her job because of the immigrants. I said, “How do you know that?” She couldn’t give me an answer, but I think what it went back to is that the job she had before this, . . . that plant had shut down to relocate to Mexico. Then the place where she lost her job just last week had a few immigrants employed there, and when she lost her job she just naturally assumed that was why.

Within the locally defined hierarchy of manufacturing industries in Hamblen County, the jobs that many of these new arrivals secure in poultry processing and farm work are among the least desirable—but for local workers, both black and white, still sometimes necessary—in the county. Koch Foods, the poultry processor, “where they actually kill the chicken, clean the chicken, cut the chicken up, package it, freeze it, and ship it out” is at the bottom of the hierarchy, along with farm work. One white woman described local attitudes toward jobs in poultry processing:

We’ve always called it the “chicken house,” and it was like—if you hit rock bottom, it was even a joke, if you lost your job or got laid off or whatever it was, like I would do *anything* before I have to go work in the chicken house. That’s something that was always said, and there were horror stories about the working conditions and what you were exposed to and the way the employers treated their employees....

In one sense, then, these immigrant workers “took jobs that no one else wanted,” but our Latino interviewees had also found work in more desirable manufacturing sectors, including furniture, fan assembly, plastic fence production and even auto parts. Moreover, within the repertoire of survival strategies among white and black workers in Hamblen County, even stigmatized jobs in poultry processing represented fall-back positions in hard times. These and other dynamics in the local labor market are essential to any understanding of the hostile reactions of some residents to Latino immigrants. The presence of this new racial/ethnic group also unsettled the dualistic hierarchy of black

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<sup>9</sup> “1492 in East Tennessee.” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 11, 1995.

and white in Hamblen County, generating complicated cross-currents of both solidarity and tension across racial/ethnic lines.

Racial and Ethnic Dynamics in Hamblen County

Contrary to stereotypes of rural Appalachia as exclusively white, racial/ethnic diversity has characterized Hamblen County since its founding in 1870. Although European settlers displaced the original Cherokee inhabitants, African Americans lived in east Tennessee, primarily as slaves, since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1868, soon after the Civil War, a school for freedmen, the Morristown Normal and Industrial College, was founded in Hamblen County. Investment by the Methodist Conference allowed the college to grow and become an important resource for educating black teachers and ministers. The influence of Morristown College, as it became known, accounts for the relative prosperity and higher educational levels of Hamblen County’s black community as compared with many other areas of the rural South.<sup>10</sup>

This is by no means to suggest that African Americans were treated as equals by the dominant white population. Jim Crow segregation, racist attacks on Morristown College and other features of white supremacy are part of the county’s history. A book published in 1996 by the county’s black Progressive Business Association stated:

We decided to take personal responsibility for giving the larger community a history of people who have survived four hundred years of slavery, one hundred years of Jim Crow, additional years of unfunded expectations and economic disparity in the workplace but who still find a people striving, achieving and contributing to society.<sup>11</sup>

Today, Hamblen County’s black population, though not as well off on average as whites, fares better than Latinos according to such measures as the poverty rate and median income. (See below.) Indeed, unlike Memphis, Tennessee, Latinos are on the bottom of the economic and racial hierarchy in this rural Appalachian context.

**Earnings, Income and Poverty, 1999  
Hamblen County, Tennessee**

	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>
Median Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers	\$12,280	\$23,682	\$26,512
Median Family Income	\$23,850	\$32,763	\$40,253
Poverty Rate	34.2%	16.2%	13.0%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Jovita Wells, ed. *A School for Freedom: Morristown College and Five Generations of Education for Blacks*. (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Willie and Clare Osborne and Luie Hargraves, eds. *Contributions of Blacks to Hamblen County, 1796-1996*. (Morristown, TN: Progressive Business Association and MCF Discover, 1996), p. i..

Most of our interviewees—white, black and Latino—agreed on the intense hostility that some whites in particular expressed toward new immigrants, and both black and white residents observed that Latinos had replaced African Americans as the chief target of white racism. This served to engender sympathy, rather than competition, between African Americans and Latinos. Two comments by different African American women in Hamblen County illustrate this dynamic:

I think that the Hispanic community and the African American community get along a lot better than the Caucasian community in certain areas because of us both being minorities.... I noticed how the Caucasian community tends to lean more toward the Hispanic community now as far as the hassling and giving them a hard time and the racial comments and that sort of thing.

I think [the racial tension] is more between the Latinos and the Caucasians than it is the blacks.... [Latinos] are different and new, and then too they are moving in and probably taking over what [whites] consider their territory.... For years the white man has gotten used to the blacks and now another group comes in and it's just changed.

Although it would be premature to celebrate racial/ethnic solidarity between blacks and Latinos in Hamblen County, these comments seem to suggest that potential. Working against that possibility are the actions of certain federal agencies, which have served to foment division along racial and ethnic lines.

#### Federal Targeting of Immigrants

Since September 11, 2001, changes in federal immigration policy have clearly targeted certain groups of immigrants, evoking in response both popular endorsement as necessary domestic security precautions and condemnation as violations of civil liberties. In view of these ominous national trends, it is important to note that the two episodes documented below occurred prior to September 11. They nonetheless served to marginalize and, particularly in the case of the highly publicized Immigration and Naturalization Service's action, foment antagonism toward Latinos.

In 1995 and 2000, two federal agencies, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Social Security Administration, targeted immigrants in east Tennessee for highly publicized "raids" and for document verification that was in some instances unwarranted. Although their focus was on the immigration status of newcomers, the local association between Latino ethnicity and foreign birth, lack of English proficiency, lower class position and undocumented immigration status rendered the meaning and impact of the agencies' actions profoundly stigmatizing. They served to separate Latinos even further from other residents, and to construct them as a distinct "race."

In 1995, just as immigration to Hamblen County and east Tennessee more generally escalated sharply, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service announced Operation South P.A.W. (for "Protecting American Workers"), a brief and largely

symbolic series of raids to enforce immigration laws in the interior South. The Knoxville newspaper, in an article titled “Residents Laud Aliens’ Roundup,” reported that “legal residents of the region, angry over losing jobs to illegal aliens, stood in the streets and cheered the [INS] agents on.” Ron Kidd, an INS supervisor from the regional office in Memphis, was quoted: “Seldom have we been welcomed with such open arms by the public. To have people stopping us on the street, shaking our hands and applauding is an eye-opener to the most seasoned INS veteran.”<sup>12</sup> This action clearly reinforced existing perceptions of Latino immigrants as economic threats, while doing nothing effective to “protect American workers” and their jobs.

A second episode also involved intimidation of immigrants, but without the intentional, visible appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment among other residents. In 2000, Highlander staff learned that the Morristown-Hamblen Hospital was not filing for EAB (Enumeration at Birth) if at least one parent of a baby born at the hospital couldn’t provide a social security number. EAB is the process for newborns in the United States, who are automatically citizens regardless of their parents’ status, to receive social security numbers. Parents of children born in the Morristown hospital were asked to provide their own social security numbers to hospital staff and, if neither parent could produce one, were told to go to the Social Security Administration office. This policy apparently originated from the Social Security Administration, and was shared through a memo from Paula Taylor, State Registrar, dated January 10, 2000. As noted in a memo from Chris Griffin of the Tennessee Justice Center: “All of this had a horrible impact on mixed status households. If both parents were undocumented, they were told that their child could not get a social security number, even when the child was born in the U.S. and was, therefore, a citizen.”

Fortunately, this situation was favorably resolved, but only after considerable effort by the staff of several non-profit organizations. Phone calls and other interventions by the Tennessee Justice Center and the National Immigration Law Center eventually persuaded the Social Security Administration and Tennessee state registrar to distribute clarifying memos, which instructed hospital staff to encourage parents to participate in the EAB program, regardless of the parents’ possession of social security numbers.

It is probably not accidental that this episode involved immigrant babies’ status as U.S. citizens, for that birthright represents the potential establishment of a permanent, unequivocally legitimate immigrant presence in the local community. That prospect was precisely what the actions of both the INS and the Social Security Administration seemed designed to prevent. The implicit message of these and other actions by official government agencies was that immigrants are an undesirable presence in east Tennessee, undeserving of the rights that they as parents and their children in fact possess. Coupled with the larger economic context, this attitude fed into the episodes of anti-immigrant mobilization by individuals and organizations that occurred in east Tennessee during this same period.

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<sup>12</sup> “Residents Laud Aliens’ Roundup.” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 24, 1995.

### The Controversy over Migrant Head Start

In 1999, the staff of the Migrant Head Start program in Cocke County, a predominantly agricultural area adjacent to Hamblen County, sought to lease land in the small town of Bybee, where they planned to build a new center. Migrant Head Start had been operating for twenty years in Cocke County, providing pre-school enrichment activities for three months during the summer for children from Hamblen, Cocke and Greene Counties whose parents qualified as seasonal migrant workers. The program's longstanding existence indicates the well-established migrant stream through this area. Although transitory and largely segregated in migrant housing on larger farms, Latino workers and their children had been a familiar and essential part of the local agricultural economy for many years.

Nevertheless, the proposal to lease land in Bybee unleashed hostile reactions from residents. A petition against the new facility began circulating, and more than 100 people turned out for a protest against its opening. Those in attendance disparaged migrant workers, calling them "illegal aliens," and asserting that they were prone to criminal behavior and violence. Signs around Bybee soon declared "No way, Jose" and "Help keep our community safe and clean." A barn owned by the farmer who planned to lease his land for the Head Start program was burned to the ground, and the FBI began investigating the arson as a hate crime.

Seeking to dispel the hostility, the Telamon Corporation, which operated the Head Start program under contract with the federal government, scheduled a public meeting in July 1999 in Newport, the county seat of Cocke County. Both supporters, who included Latino workers, Head Start staff members and progressive activists, and opponents, primarily white working-class residents of the county, turned out to voice their perspectives. One of the most common arguments against the new location involved the "NIMBY" (Not In My Backyard) phenomenon; critics asserted that there were few migrant farm workers in the Bybee area and that busing their children from elsewhere would be expensive and dangerous, due to the increased traffic. Infusing this perspective may have been class resentment against wealthier farmers in the area, who were more prone to hire migrant labor. An opponent argued, referring to one of the largest farmers in the county, "Harloff's farm is where they [Latino migrants] pick their tomatoes. Why not let them build it over there?"<sup>13</sup> Others who opposed the new location questioned the legality (i.e., immigration status) of migrant farmworkers, their contribution to the tax base, and the wisdom of spending government money on such a program in the first place.

The discussion thus turned quickly toward larger questions of immigration policy, the necessity of migrant labor, the value of education and the appropriate priorities of government. Although Telamon staff fielded the majority of specific questions (e.g., regarding the decision to locate in Bybee), other supporters spoke to the attitudinal differences underlying the controversy. One Latina eloquently defended migrant workers:

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<sup>13</sup> These and other quotations from the meeting are from a videotape filmed by the Cocke County Contact Council youth group and transcribed by Highlander staff.

I'm a migrant, OK? I come from Florida, ...a beautiful state. We come here to harvest your crops, we come here to cut your tobacco, we come here to pick your tomatoes.... We work here so you don't have to pay \$5.00 a pound for tomatoes, we come here so you don't have to pay \$20.00 for a pack of cigarettes. *We* do the labor, and I'm not afraid to say it. I am very proud of what I am: ...a migrant is a person who moves from one state to another to harvest everyone else's crops but our own.

A young, white working-class man in the audience also spoke in support of the center by using his own experience to repudiate arguments about the purported relationship between Latinos and crime:

You worry about the crime rate going up because a school is being built. That's stupid, the crime rate is going to go up if you *don't* have a school. I've lived the hard life, I've lived in the projects all my life, in Knoxville, all over here... I didn't have schooling, I didn't have very good schooling, and that's what introduced me to crime.

Although this meeting was an important opportunity for public dialogue about the controversy, the barn-burning ironically seemed to do more to quell overt opposition. Critics of the new center sought to distance themselves from this act of property destruction, especially when FBI agents began questioning local residents about the arson. The Telamon Corporation eventually proceeded with plans to build the new Migrant Head Start center in Bybee, and it is now operating without incident. However, opposition to the Latino immigrant presence in east Tennessee has persisted and, in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, re-emerged in the odious form of overt white supremacy.

### **The Klan Resurfaces**

In January 2002, the Tennessee White Knights of Yahweh, the Morristown-based chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, announced plans for a January 19 rally at the courthouse in neighboring Cocke County to celebrate the birthday of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and to protest the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. An additional purpose of the rally was to condemn "the growing non-white flood of illegals into our communities." A pamphlet promoting the event called for closing the nation's borders "before the hordes of American hating foreigners pollute and destroy your community. We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."<sup>14</sup> According to newspaper reports this would be the most public demonstration by the Klan in the east Tennessee area since 1978.

It was not clear why Cocke County and its county seat of Newport were chosen, although the mayor of Newport, Roland Dykes, is African American, elected by a largely white community. In the week before the event, a cross-burning in the front yard of Mayor Dykes' home led to an FBI investigation and to protestations by the Klan that this was not the work of their group. In response, a number of local groups in Cocke County,

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<sup>14</sup>Ray Snyder, "FBI Probes Cross Burning," *Morristown Citizen-Tribune*. January 17, 2003, p. A6.

supported by the mayor and district attorney, planned a diversity event at the high school to counter the Klan's message of hate and fear. Others felt it was important to protest directly and visibly at the Klan rally, and to mobilize a large crowd to come to the courthouse. These included Earth First, the NAACP, American Indian organizations, and Jewish anti-defamation groups.

On the day of the rally, the clouds poured buckets of rain, to the great delight of anti-Klan forces. Despite the deluge, a large crowd gathered in front of the courthouse: about 50 Klansmen, outnumbered by over 150 state troopers and police, faced off against a far larger group of some 800-1,000 anti-Klan protestors. The latter group drummed and chanted, making it impossible for the Klan's message to be heard, although their speeches went on for two hours. Above the crowd, a banner with Dr. King's likeness was hung on a brick building. It read: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Onlookers were divided in their sympathies. A local woman who worked in a shirt factory said that she found the Klan's message decrying Latino immigration appealing. "These people come in here and are taking our jobs," she told a reporter, refusing to give her name.<sup>15</sup> A skinhead waving a Nazi flag also drew press attention. Meanwhile, others attended the diversity celebration at the high school, where there were displays, performances, music, food and speeches.

Two days later on Monday, the actual King holiday, a local group called Citizens for Justice, Equality and Fairness (CJEF) sponsored an event in adjacent Jefferson County with the theme "Together We Rise." As the group marched toward the courthouse, a small number of black-jacketed Klan members, including one woman, began taking turns using a sound system to speak hateful messages about immigrants, Jews, gays, communists and African Americans. One of the protestors made reference to the failure of the Ku Klux Klan rally in Newport, and explained that he and his friends had come to Jefferson County to "return the favor."<sup>16</sup> They carried signs reading "Abolish King Holiday in America now" and "NAACP is the real terrorist organization." The appearance of the Klan enlivened the CJEF crowd, which proceeded to sing more loudly, speak more fervently and raise the importance of the messages that the civil rights movement shared with the country.

### The Meaning of Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in East Tennessee

It is instructive to examine seriously the negative attitudes expressed toward Latino immigrants in Hamblen County, for they extend beyond the specific question of local job competition and reveal larger political and economic themes that social justice organizations are challenged to counter. Although factors specific to the context of Hamblen County evoked white hostility, local expressions of anti-immigrant sentiment drew their ideological strength and framework from decidedly national themes in conservative thought. These include the pairing of whiteness with American identity, a class resentment that defines the "real" Americans as "working people," and a militant

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<sup>15</sup>"No Major Incidents at Klan Rally—Protestors Drown Out Speeches by KKK," *Morristown Citizen-Tribune*, January 19, 2003, p. A8.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Marion, "Marchers Drown Out Protests," [Jefferson County] *Standard Banner*. January 22, 2002, p. 3A.

nationalism that is combined with disdain for the established government.<sup>17</sup> It is important to underscore that these are not neo-Confederate or peculiarly southern sentiments. Although anti-immigrant activism in east Tennessee has featured some symbolic trappings of the region, such as Confederate flags, the ideology that frames the protest is more akin to that of national militias and hate groups.

Within this ultra-nationalist perspective, fueled by the events of September 11, foreigners threaten white supremacy and the already precarious status of working people—both of which are symbolically represented by an endangered America—while elected officials do nothing effective to protect the citizenry. This combination of economic insecurity and perceived political powerlessness—a consequence of politicians’ neglect of working class economic interests and the absence of effective levers of influence in the political process—is exceedingly dangerous. The chilling implication is that it will be necessary for “people” to take matters into their own hands.

A local labor leader expressed this complicated and ominous perspective in a statement that is worth quoting at length:

I don’t think [residents of Hamblen County] are actually against the people because they are Mexicans. I think it is sort of a complex deal where they are mad at the government for opening the doors. They know they are losing their jobs to foreign competition, and [the Mexicans] don’t really care about the jobs that much; ... they are just over here on a free ride. They don’t ... really care about America...

I’ll tell you what I hear through the grapevine: we are going to have a real problem here in America. It will probably wind up being racial. I’m not saying anything against the Latino, but I hear there are groups here in the South and the Midwest that is just ready to roll if things don’t change. I’m not a fanatic, and I’m not reading this out of any kind of lunatic magazine, but I’m thinking people are really getting down on the politicians more and more...[T]here is not going to be any kind of move made...to change anything to benefit the working people. And I think the NAFTA thing and losing the jobs—if this economy drops down, I believe [America] is going to be a violent place.

White antipathy toward Latino immigrants in Hamblen County is neither exclusively racist nor distinctively southern. Rather, it derives from a larger ideology that is all the more powerful because of its acceptable appeal to a nationalism that disguises white supremacy within imagery of an embattled America. It is this complex ensemble of mutually reinforcing beliefs—rather than a more narrow ideology of racial exclusion—that social justice organizations are challenged to address.

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<sup>17</sup> Juan Perea, ed., *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*. (New York: New York University Press, 1997). Abby Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

### **Signs of Community-Building in Hamblen County**

Episodes of suspicion and hate, exemplified by opposition to the migrant Head Start center in Bybee and the mobilization of the Klan, receive major local and even national media attention. Less visible and often unreported in the press is the on-going, steady work of building bridges between longstanding residents and new Latino immigrants.

In Hamblen County, many non-profit organizations, service agencies, churches, businesses and individuals have sought to respond favorably and helpfully to the community changes associated with their new Spanish-speaking neighbors. The East Tennessee Catholic Diocese, with a growing Latino membership, was one of the first to support and reach out to Latinos through a Hispanic Ministry, Spanish language masses and other initiatives. This work continues through diocesan-supported meetings with Tennessee government officials and visits of the Mexican Consulate to provide Mexican identification cards. Some Protestant churches have also begun providing English and Spanish classes and other community ministries.

Service organizations have been providing an array of programs to the Latino immigrant community. Reach-Out has been delivering pre-natal care to pregnant women, and Stepping Out Ministries has begun offering its training support to Latino women. In 1996, local service providers and non-profit organizations came together under the umbrella of the Alianza Hispana, or Hispanic Alliance. This group continues to meet monthly to share information on challenges facing the immigrant community and different programs to address them; on some occasions, the alliance has provided support to immigrants in controversial situations, such as the migrant Head Start episode. Individuals associated with the alliance have also worked to influence Tennessee legislators to support a law allowing immigrants without social security numbers to obtain driver's licenses.

Businesses are responding to the potential Latino market by posting signs in Spanish and hiring employees who are bilingual. Suntrust Bank led the way in offering bank accounts to immigrants without social security numbers. This made good business sense, but it also helped reduce the risk to immigrants who were carrying large amounts of cash from their wages around with them or hiding it in their homes. Bank accounts have also helped immigrants transfer money more economically back to their families in Mexico and other countries.

Local government agencies have also sought to ease Latino integration into the community. English language classes and a special migrant student program serve Latino students in the public schools. The police department has been working to build bridges to the Latino community, whose members seldom contact police when they are victimized by crime.

Non-profit organizations have expanded their constituencies and programming to encompass Latinos. The Southern Empowerment Project of Maryville, Tennessee, which

trains community organizers, initiated the formation of Latinos Unidos, in which Latinos are organizing themselves to address their needs and advance their rights. The Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network has been sponsoring worker-to-worker exchanges between the U.S. and Mexico. The Rose Center, a culturally-focused community center, has organized International Festivals, where people from all over the world who now live in Morristown share food, music and information from their homelands. (See the section on case studies of collaboration.)

Efforts such as these reflect the diversity of responses to Latino immigrants in east Tennessee. Individuals and organizations are building cultural bridges, providing bilingual services, and defending the rights of Latino immigrants. Much work remains to be done, however, as the potential for tension and conflict persists just under the surface.