

# Unions and the military view immigrants as vital and also as potential threats

January 6 2025, by Julie Greco

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

How unions and the military frame the role of immigrants within their institutions and help influence attitudes in U.S. society is the focus of new collaborative research by Shannon Gleeson, the Edmund Ezra Day

Professor of Labor Relations, Law and History in the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR).

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Critical Sociology*.

Gleeson found three core themes in these institutions' framing of immigrants, who are viewed as potential threats, essential workers, and a source of diversity.

"In some ways, U.S. unions and the U.S. military couldn't be more different institutions, but they actually talk about immigrants in very similar ways," Gleeson said. "So that's the surprising finding. We have these two politically and structurally different institutions that actually reflect what we argue is the overarching posture towards immigrants in the United States."

In the paper, titled "Framing the Immigrant in Labor Unions and the Military in the United States," Gleeson and co-author Sofya Apteekar, associate professor at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, focus on [labor unions](#) and the U.S. military as powerful players in setting the terms of immigration debates and immigration policies.

Both have key sites of partisan influence, and both have an outsize impact on the socioeconomic status of their members. Both also reflect, Gleeson said, a slice of U.S. politics with wide mainstream appeal and comparable proportions of the U.S. adult population.

The researchers focused on the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the United States, as well as the Change to Win coalition, led by the Service Employees International Union; the United Food and Commercial Workers; and North America's Building Trades Unions.

To ascertain each group's public-facing discourse on immigrants, the

researchers examined the unions' archival materials and media statements and conducted a systematic search of Department of Defense websites, congressional records, federal court records and military-related media.

They found that both institutions couch their positive support for immigration reform and [immigrant](#) contributions in terms that value some immigrants as deserving. However, these researchers also noted a concurrent fear within the labor movement of certain immigrant populations as undermining the position of U.S. workers.

Meanwhile, military documents—despite lauding immigrants as workers with language, cultural and other skills that are critical to [military operations](#)—also hint at anxiety about their loyalty, and at security concerns.

Gleeson and Aptekar find that both unions and the military favorably frame immigrants as critical members of the labor force. U.S. labor unions are currently advocating for immigrants as workers who provide essential labor and are a source of organizing potential. Likewise, the U.S. military views immigrants as a valuable source of labor, especially during recruitment shortfalls. Both institutions see immigrants as a solution to a productivity and labor quality shortage.

Both unions and the military also view immigration as a practical way to improve diversity in their ranks. For organized labor, this stance provides a way to distance itself from a past in which it historically engaged in racial gatekeeping to protect white privilege. Immigrants are also thought to increase union strength across borders.

For the military, diversity is viewed as a vehicle for building a "force multiplier" abroad—enhancing the combat power of a fighting force while expending no additional resources—through immigrant assets such

as language and cultural competence. Immigrant diversity also helps to build the military's legitimacy among some constituencies.

"There is often a tradeoff in terms of who—and what kind of stereotypes—we are reifying, the bounds we draw around deservingness, and the bases for inclusion," Gleeson said.

"We tend to fixate on really exclusive language and racist language, but even within 'pro-migrant spaces,' which I think unions would consider themselves to be, popular narratives also reflect society's ambivalence about immigration and social belonging more generally."

**More information:** Sofya Aptekar et al, Framing the Immigrant in Labor Unions and the Military in the United States, *Critical Sociology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/08969205241301064](https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241301064)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Unions and the military view immigrants as vital and also as potential threats (2025, January 6) retrieved 24 January 2025 from <https://phys.org/news/2025-01-unions-military-view-immigrants-vital.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.