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Op-Ed

Living An Illusion: The Contributions of Undocumented Workers and Immigration

Reform

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In a rather heated conversation that I had a few years ago over illegal immigration with a Mexican friend, he exclaimed, "What is illegal about working?" I could not come up with a good response. He was right, there is nothing illegal about working to earn a living. He emphasized for me that Mexican immigrants are coming to the United States to find work, earn a living and in many cases support a family. While they benefit from working in our country, we benefit equally or substantially more from their presence.

It is precisely this benefit that the U.S. Senate is struggling to grapple with as it debates immigration policy reforms. The Pew Hispanic Center reports just over 11 million undocumented persons are in the United States; 6 million of them are Mexicans (Passel, 2005). These undocumented persons work in the economic sectors of agriculture, construction, personal service, and retail sales. They fill a critical need in these sectors and their presence will continue to be needed as these sectors experience employment growth in the coming years.

Americans who are able and willing to fill low-skilled jobs are becoming fewer as we become more educated and older (The Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform: Serving Our National Economy, 2006). Immigrants' contributions to the overall U.S. economy far out way any negative impacts, such as job competition with native-born workers. They bring us lower prices, a variety of goods and services, and higher returns on investment (The Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform: Serving Our

National Economy, 2006). We have not seen high levels of unemployment with high levels of immigration, there appears to be no correlation. There are enough jobs to go around, illegal immigrants are not stealing jobs, in fact they may be creating them. As low-skilled immigrants move into service industries and other sectors, native-born workers are filling management and upper level positions. As Kathleen Newland, director and co-founder of the Migration Policy Institute put it in a recent *Time* magazine article; there is an “enormous appetite of the U.S. economy for labor – both skilled and unskilled. Unemployment is at historic lows, but employers have very limited options for bringing in low-skilled workers legally and no practical way to verify the legal status of their hires” (Tumulty, 2006).

We must welcome immigrant workers to the United States with open arms and develop policies that provide a legal avenue for their contributions. Maintaining the status quo or treading down a path of strict border enforcement will not work. It seems clear that stepped up enforcement policies of the past have not made a difference. We must establish a comprehensive policy that provides a channel toward citizenship for the already undocumented workers in the U.S. and establish guest worker visas for the thousands of immigrants coming to live out the American dream every year. By recognizing the undocumented workers already present in the country we bring out of the shadow an entire work force that is not interested in disrupting the peace or promoting terrorist activity, but rather in earning money to support their family.

In 2000, it was estimated that 3 million children who are U.S. citizens had parents who are undocumented (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2004). So to suggest that all undocumented immigrants are felons, as the passed House bill does, would put a substantial amount of parents of U.S. citizens in jeopardy of deportation or imprisonment. For a country so interested in supporting family values and upholding the moral character of the family, we certainly have little respect for immigrant families and those waiting for family unification.

Contrary to popular belief many undocumented workers contribute to the tax base. Many hold fake identification and Social Security numbers allowing them to pay into the system billions every year. The Center for Work and Community Development (2004) reported that non-native immigrant Hispanics in the State of Nevada contributed \$2.9 billion in federal and state taxes in 2001. In the State of Oregon, with a relatively low undocumented population of less than 200,000, tax contributions are estimated between \$66 – 77 million dollars annually. It was further estimated that undocumented workers in Oregon paid between \$58 – 67 million in Social Security taxes and an additional \$13-16 million in Medicare taxes (Oregon Center for Public Policy, 2006). We live an illusion in believing that undocumented immigrants are hurting our economy, stealing jobs and soaking up entitlements. The fact is that undocumented workers pay for entitlements they do not receive. They do not qualify for SSI, food stamps, TANF,

full-scope Medicaid, Social Security or Section 8 housing assistance (The Center on Work and Community Development, 2004).

If we provide a path toward legalization and a guest worker program we could help curb the growing problem of identify theft. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act required employers to ask for identification proving the job applicants eligibility to work in the United States. This requirement fueled an underground industry of fake document mills, producing driver's licenses, Social Security cards, green cards and more. Last year, in San Diego authorities broke up over a half dozen document mills ("Immigration Loophole," 2006).

Much could be solved if Congress can agree to pass comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path toward citizenship, not blanket amnesty, for the 11 million already present in the country and a guest worker program for those who wish to come. I agree with David Griswold, Director of the Cato Institute Center for Trade Policy Studies, whom laid-out before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship, options for dealing with illegal immigration. He said (2005), "...we can recognize reality, adopt comprehensive reform, and fix America's flawed immigration system so that it conforms to the realities of a free society and a free and efficient economy. A legalized system of migration would, in one stroke, bring a huge underground market into the open. It would raise wages and

working conditions for millions of low-skilled workers and spur investment in human capital.”

Let’s stop living an illusion and recognize the reality of the situation! As commentator Richard Rodriquez highlighted during *National Public Radio’s All Things Considered* recently, we owe an enormous thank you to the millions of undocumented immigrants who have cleaned our toilets, houses, cars, and swimming pools; who cook and serve our food in restaurants and make our beds in hotel rooms. Who pay taxes to support local and federal government entitlement programs. Who support and encourage economic growth by paying rent, purchasing cars and other consumer goods. Who share their culture, food and language with us (Rodriquez, 2006). America, stop living a nationalistic illusion and recognize we are a country of immigrants that needs to support our most recent arrivals.

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