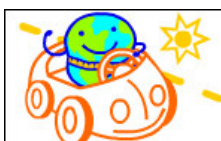




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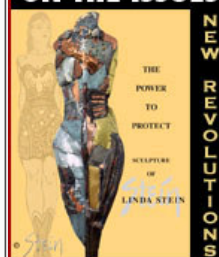


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Christine Neumann-Ortiz: Immigration Reform



Immigration reform is back in the news. I asked [Christine Neumann-Ortiz](#), founding executive director of [Voces de la Frontera](#) based in Wisconsin, to help explain the latest developments.

Here's Christine...

What are the issues at hand when "immigration reform" is discussed? And does the term mean different things to different groups? The Obama administration is advocating for "comprehensive immigration reform."

The phrase "comprehensive immigration reform" has been used in the past to describe legislation that would address a broad set of problems with our broken immigration system such as: backlogs of up to 10-20 years for close relatives who petition a family member, unrealistically low numbers of employment visas for workers who are an integral part of our economy, and reversing policies that have systematically eroded legal avenues for immigrants from certain countries.

But the phrase can definitely mean different things to

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Thursday, 23 April 2009
07:00 PM to 10:00 PM
Grand Lake Theater
Oakland, CA

different people. As defined by the Obama Administration, it would not just include a process for legalizing the status of immigrant workers and their families, but, more than likely, a stronger crack down on employers that hire undocumented workers and more money into border enforcement. For many in the business sector comprehensive immigration reform means an expanded guest-worker program; while for both national labor union federations, Change to Win and the AFL-CIO, a guest worker program in 2009 is unacceptable.

Personally, I no longer use the phrase "comprehensive immigration reform" because it is both vague and represents such conflicting interests. Instead, I call for a pro-worker legalization bill or humane legalization. By this I mean, a legalization program that benefits low-income working class families over business interests; i.e. it provides a path to citizenship, is simple, and affordable. Any legalization program has historically included a basic English competency exam, civic knowledge, a fine, and background check.

Can you discuss the latest developments around immigration reform? What does this mean going forward?

The greatest development was the front page story in *The New York Times* stating that immigration reform was a priority for the Obama administration this year. Despite some back and forth from administration officials, it appears that the Obama Administration will indeed tackle immigration reform and plans to convene working groups made up of advocates and lawmakers over the summer to draft legislation.

This shift by the Democratic Party is recognition of the importance of the Latino vote in the 2008 elections, particularly in swing states, as Latinos voters turned away from the anti-immigrant hate mongering of the Republican Party platform. Of all ethnic groups, Latinos represented the greatest shift for Obama with more than 2 in 3 voting for him; in large part because of his stated support for immigration reform. Indeed, as an electoral strategy, anti-immigrant candidates lost abysmally in the 2008 elections. In a weak economy, voters wanted substantive answers and not just the politics of hate.

Another significant development occurred this week as both national labor union federations, the [AFL-CIO](#) and [Change to Win](#) announced the framework for a legalization bill that they want passed this year. The bill would legalize most of the nation's 12 million undocumented immigrants and form an independent commission to address future flows of foreign workers. The unions oppose any new guest worker programs that would allow employers to bring foreigners in on a temporary basis. This is great news because it addresses one of the failures of the immigrant rights movement in 2007 in moving immigration legislation. Basically, the movement fractured along the lines of what kind of reform to support. There was also a sense that as a movement, primarily of low-income immigrant working-class families, we relied too much on large business interests to move the agenda. Indeed, building a strong coalition of the Left, that is united (to the greatest extent possible) in support of a common framework will be imperative to making humane immigration reform a reality this year. Nationally, the next phase is to evaluate the level of support for labor's proposal by immigrant-based organizations, who have already had some input into the process.

As executive director of Voces de la Frontera based in Wisconsin, what do you see as being some of the recurring immigrant rights issues in this part of the country? And do you see any particular issues that have arisen or been heightened by the recession, especially for immigrant women?

There are too many days with heartbreaking stories of the on-going problem with the legacy of Bush enforcement-only policies which increased arrests and deportations of working-class families. In Wisconsin, there was a raid in Whitewater that resulted in the arrest and detention of 25 workers. One woman who was held in detention expressed her concern for her baby since she was breastfeeding her child, the guard simply told her, "maybe an American family will adopt your baby." Another woman, a grandmother, who was diabetic was held in isolation for over 48 hours without food, water, or medication in retaliation for the fact that she vomited and started to cry when it came to change from her clothes to the jail uniform and she was overwhelmed with grief.

Along the border, documentation by border groups, [Amnesty International](#), and [National Lawyer's Guild](#) have started bringing to light the reality of these private, for-profit detention centers. In one of the few cases, when immigrants received medical care in a delivery room a pregnant woman was handcuffed to the bed, and the border agent, who insisted on keeping the door open, started to shout obscenities at the

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woman who was crying out during delivery, yelling, "Shut the fuck up, I don't want to have to listen to this shit." The nurse finally shut the door on him.

In terms of the recession, undocumented immigrants who are part of the workforce, some for as long as 20 years, are being hit hard by unemployment in the same way other workers are being affected: less hours and layoffs. However, what makes it especially hard for workers, and immigrant women who are the head of their household, is that undocumented immigrants cannot apply for unemployment benefits, even though they contribute to the system.

In terms, of medical care, though there are some differences among states, undocumented immigrants do not qualify to receive public medical benefits leaving them very dependent on their job for health care. The only right they have is to emergency medical care.

On an everyday level, what do immigrant rights mean? And how do immigrant rights affect Americans who are not recent immigrants?

On an everyday level, immigrant rights means the right to be free of fear. Fear that at any moment you can be picked up and be separated from your family; the sense that everything you have worked for is fragile. Having to live with the fear of traveling within the U.S. and being stopped by police and questioned about your status, fear of not having identification that is so necessary in everyday life, the fear of crossing the border to be reunited with your family because of the danger if you try to come back. Fear of approaching the police if you are the victim of a crime. Fear of jail. Fear of hunger. The anguish of having to make the choice between seeing your family, in many cases your children or your aging parents, or sending them money to help them survive.

Immigrant rights affects all workers because historically, we have only raised the quality of life for working people in the U.S. by organizing across ethnic, racial, and gender lines. Immigrant workers are one segment of low-income workers in this country. If we are going to turn low-income industries into living wage industries immigrant workers have to be organized and the threat of deportation is a powerful weapon that employers use to threaten workers.

How did you become involved in advocating for immigrant and workers rights?

In 1994, when I was attending the University of Austin -Texas, I had the opportunity to travel along the U.S.-Mexico border and support efforts by workers in the maquiladora industry who were organizing for better working conditions and quality of life in the colonias. I was confronted with the harsh reality of children born with severe birth defects because the lack of enforcement around health and safety regulations under the North American Free Trade Agreement. I met with women in the maquiladora industry who organized against an employer in Tijuana who forced them into a bikini contest and refused to negotiate higher wages. Indeed, I was affected by the level of abuse, and sexual abuse, that women, especially single mothers had to endure to put crumbs of food on the table. From that experience I saw the benefits of workers' centers, as a focal points for organizing for workers who face big challenges.

I moved to Wisconsin in 1998 and worked as director of the [Wisconsin Committee on Occupational Safety and Health](#) and it was a privilege to work with unionized workers in industries such as hotels, manufacturing and paper mills. I then had the opportunity to work with the [Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee](#), a worker's center in the northside of Milwaukee that worked primarily with low-income Latino and African-American workers to help gain employment and acquire skills within certain industries. Once again I saw the ugly head of what I had seen at the border - hotel workers with back injuries who are blacklisted and discriminated against for being an injured worker; the challenges of poverty on families.

But my focal point around immigration organizing occurred in 2000 when a diverse group of people and myself came together to start a Wisconsin coalition to support legalization in the wake of declarations by the AFL-CIO, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Catholic Conference of Bishops in support of legalization for the undocumented. In organizing for policy changes, it became apparent that there were immediate needs around employment rights for immigrant workers. It was this need, and my experience from the border that resulted in starting a worker's center at the end of 2001 and later in Racine in 2003. The centers were started at the initiative of workers and we are a membership-based organization. We are a bilingual resource for all workers and have a dynamic and growing multi-racial youth chapters. We are committed to the rights of all working people to live free of fear and want.

Do you have a retrospective gauge of immigrant rights in the U.S.? What do you consider to be the lowest and highest points of immigrant rights history in the U.S.?

In terms of recent history, one of the darkest chapters has been the criminalization of the undocumented and the consequent growth of private, for-profit detention centers, such as Corrections Corporation of America, that have no government oversight. Only now, in a limited way, is the level of abuse, including rape and death, being exposed. Even U.S. citizens and immigrants with legal status have been caught up in this destructive, cruel system.

On the other hand, the mass marches of 2006 have been one of the highest points in U.S. immigrant history. This was not a spontaneous outpouring, but part of a national call for action that warned of a pending law by Wisconsin's Congressman Sensenbrenner, HR 4437, that would have turned all immigrants, including children, into aggravated felons and anyone who knew them and did not turn them in, into felons. The mass marches were a blow against tyranny that was not just against immigrants but unions that organize immigrant workers, workers centers, churches, and people of conscious. Nationally over 1.5 million people took to the streets in 2006 and prevented the law from happening.

This May 1st, the immigrant rights movement is marching again, in cities across the U.S. but with the hope and enthusiasm that the justice they have sought for so long will finally be achieved this year. I hope you'll join us. For more information about the May 1 actions in a city near you, go to www.anewdayforimmigration.org/.

Posted by [Celina](#) - April 18, 2009, at [09:43AM](#) | in [Activism](#) , [Human Rights](#) , [Immigration](#) , [Interviews](#) , [Politics](#) , [Violence Against Women](#) , [Women of Color](#) , [Work](#)

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Mmm. Will have to consider having our Women's Center invite her to come speak at my U.

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