

Mexican Immigrants Await Reforms: Negotiating an Enduring Framework for Immigrants

Notre Dame professor Jorge Bustamante concludes that both the U.S. and Mexican economies benefit by “regularizing” undocumented immigrants. Current immigration restrictions disrupt labor flows and lives along U.S.-Mexican border.

A Unified Recovery

“Geopolitics between Mexico and the United States has never been so overlapping as it is today¹,” writes Notre Dame professor Jorge Bustamante in his recent report on relations between the U.S. and Mexico after September 11. In his paper, Dr. Bustamante explains how both countries’ economies have been enormously affected by the terrorist attacks, and how each will continue to suffer until a comprehensive immigration plan is solidified.

In Bustamante’s analysis, the recent reduction of immigration to the U.S. means many service, manufacturing and agricultural industries will continue to suffer from labor shortages. At the same time, Mexico’s economic recession worsens due to the lack of nearly 7 billion “migra” dollars normally remitted to Mexico by immigrants working in the U.S. Only exports of Mexican oil, industrial manufactures, and tourism, have produced more U.S. dollars per year than the remittances of the Mexican migrant workers.

Bustamante believes restricting immigration among such close neighbors is not a solution that will help both countries recover from such devastating incidents as the attacks of September 11.

The Crystal Border

From his previous exposure to life in a border town, Bustamante notes that for the 12 million people that daily interacted on both sides of the border, the recent immigration restrictions have disrupted more than the flow of work; they have altered people’s lives.

Before September 11, the border between the U.S. and Mexico seemed more virtual than real. Now, with the notable increase in security along the borders, many immigrants are once again reminded of the differences that separate the two cultures. Despite the progress shared by both countries, many immigrants find their aspirations for a better life altered at the border.

A Sad Pattern

Bustamante argues that until a bilateral agreement between Mexico and the U.S. can be reached, the realities of the immigration phenomena among politicians and the general public will remain contradictory.

While many restrictionist organizations have used the events of September 11 to generate public opposition to any “regularization” program with Mexico, policymakers and economic experts warn that restricting immigration flows into the U.S. could have far worse economic repercussions than those felt by terrorism.

From the first U.S. economic recession of the 20th Century in 1907, to all subsequent periods, Bustamante points to a pattern that repeatedly appears:

- The rise of unemployment rates and other signs of recession catch the public’s attention.

Politicians make an association between the rise of unemployment and the presence of immigrant workers.

There is a social construction of immigrant workers as “scapegoats” of the recession.

Politicians then propose anti-immigration measures as a solution to the economic crisis.

The vulnerability of immigrants as subjects of human rights violations increases together with the impunity of abusers.

The economic recession subsides.

Recovery from the crisis brings an end to anti-immigrant furor.

Bustamante refers to the words of a 1994 U.S. Department of Labor report to justify the important presence of immigrant labor within the U.S. “In effect, migrant workers, so necessary for the success of the labor-intensive U.S. agricultural system, subsidize that very system with their own families’ indigence.” To refer to migrant workers as a “subsidy” illustrates the positive impact immigrants have on the U.S. economy, according to Bustamante.

The Past Struggles

For nearly a century now, U.S. and Mexican leaders have attempted to establish immigration policies that benefit both countries. The opportunity to create such equitable legislation is a daunting task. Within the framework of any enduring policy there are conditions that must be met – the protection of human rights, equal wages and access to government programs, to name a few

Past legislation, such as the Wagner Labor Act of 1935 and later the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 established the legal parameters within which labor relations were to be conducted. These laws were welcomed by the industrial workers but excluded the farm workers from equal labor rights. Because farm workers were not defined as “employees” in the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 they were unable to organize and bargain collectively.

Perhaps the most well-known U.S.-Mexico labor agreement was the Bracero Program. Initiated in 1942, “Braceros” became a valuable source of labor for the U.S. and contributed to a quick recovery from WWII.

Conclusion

For nearly a century, Bustamante concludes, government officials have ignored the value of essential workers. However, today Mexican immigrants are optimistic Presidents Bush and Fox will be able to create a new bi-lateral immigration policy that protects against, among other things, human rights violations and wage exploitation. Designated “heroes” by President Fox, migrant laborers are once again being recognized for their contributions both domestically and abroad.

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