The Guest Worker Program Is No Simple Solution

By Lydia Chávez

Photo by Mimi Chakarova.

Farm workers pick nectarines in California's Central Valley.

The great debate on immigration took a decided turn in late spring when the country's 12 million undocumented immigrants upstaged and outclassed our elected officials. Backed by the Catholic Church and spurred on by popular Spanish-language radio personalities, the undocumented took to the streets in some of the most massive marches since the Vietnam War. It was hard not to be inspired.

And, oddly enough, it appeared that many in Washington were listening. It was still unclear if Congress would act this spring, but the new immigrant movement triggered a slew of meetings and talk of a compromise to offer comprehensive legislation rather than the enforcement-only bill the House of Representatives approved late last year.

Still, one of the most contentious issues remained — what to do about regulating the flow of undocumented who will continue to come. The House solution was to build a wall, but the most probable outcome is some sort of guest worker program: it satisfies businesses needs and it placates those who think undocumented immigration can be

controlled by offering temporary access to U.S. jobs.

But those who know anything about immigration understand that the guest worker solution is replete with problems. First, the name leads us to believe that the visitors will be guests and the arrangement temporary, *pero no es verdad*. The guests stay. The bill offered by Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator John McCain recognized this by including in their proposal a guest worker path to legalization.

But the bigger problem with the guest worker program — there is talk of bringing in some 400,000 new workers a year — is its impact on those already here. It depresses wages.

The only guarantee of a guest worker program is that it will keep wage rates low — for the guests and for U.S. citizens. Politicians don't have to worry about this cohort because the voting bloc is small, poor *y pues sin poder*. Agribusiness, construction and service industries on the other hand, are neither small nor poor. A guest worker program that guarantees cheap labor is exactly what business wants. Few are talking about guarantees for the employee — to organize, to earn a living wage, to someday become a citizen.

Political contributions aside, let's be clear about what will happen with the current guest worker proposals. Heavily immigrant cities in California will be burdened for decades with low-wage, needy residents who can't vote. Do they need more unskilled labor? No. Cities with unemployment rates of 20 percent don't need more workers, they need more jobs. It's hard to be moved by the Central Valley labor contractor Fred Garza who told Los Angeles Times reporter Solomon Moore that he couldn't find enough workers to pick nectarines because they were being lured way by the higher pay in construction. Mr. Garza, pay more.

The labor cost of one nectarine is pennies. The labor cost of lettuce is a penny a head.

UC Davis labor economist Philip Martin, found that the farm workers who got amnesty in 1986 moved to other jobs because of "falling real wages and shrinking benefits" in agriculture. At the CLAS Future's Forum in February, Martin talked about immigration and the need to look at each job and consider the question of whether it should be filled. He offered the example of the proliferation of migrants who work as gardeners, a job that homeowners once did for themselves. Would the economy suffer without the gardeners? The alternative example is construction where many migrants have become skilled workers, and without them, the industry would suffer a shortage, he said.

A proliferation of cheap labor means that wages for unskilled labor fall. The Pew Hispanic Center concluded in 2004 that wages for Latinos in low-skilled jobs fell two years in a row. "No other major group of workers has suffered a two-year decline in wages," the report concluded. And this was during a time of prosperity.

Guest worker programs fail on so many fronts that history and numerous commissions "all warn in the starkest of terms against pursuing such programs," Dr. Vernon Briggs, a professor of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University testified last year before Congress. He continued, "I know of no other element of immigration policy in which the message not to do something is so unequivocal."

Regardless, Congress is poised to try once again. The upside this time around is that the experience this spring has taught immigrants the benefits of organizing.

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