

SI, SE PUEDE

by Michael Ventura

Letters at 3AM – May 12, 2006

Almost everyone agrees that undocumented Hispanic laborers (most of whom are Mexican) work well and hard at jobs Anglos won't do. Informed people know they pay taxes, and hence are not "stealing" medical, social, and educational services. Not many are aware that "almost 50% of Latino immigrants are homeowners," and that "80% of second generation Hispanics graduate high school." [*The Week*, April 24, p.4] Many praise their extended-family values, and some have connected those values to this fact: "as immigration has surged, violent crime in the U.S. has fallen 57%." [*The Week*, ditto] All of which describes pretty good neighbors.

Still they're called "illegals," they're called "aliens," and the most repeated arguments against their new mass movement are: 1) they're breaking the law just by being here; 2) they should not be allowed to "cut to the front of the line" before legal candidates for citizenship; and 3) many Republicans and some worried African-Americans "bristle at the [Hispanics'] comparison between the civil rights movement and the immigrant demonstrations, pointing out that black protesters in the 1960s were American citizens and had endured many centuries of enslavement, rapes, lynching, and discrimination before they started marching." [*NY Times*, May 4, p.1]

These views ignore, or show ignorance of, the economic and historical contexts of Hispanics (especially Mexicans) in the United States.

Yes, *technically* undocumented laborers are here illegally. Yes, they break immigration laws. But in their specific case, the laws constitute a lie -- because for the better part of a century, these people have been *invited* here. Not by law; not by public pronouncement; nevertheless, by intention -- they have been invited by widespread and accepted business practice. And every American profits from their presence.

Before some amongst you boil over with rage, let me specifically demonstrate:

On May 1st, the statistic often quoted on CNN was that the undocumented compose 29% of our agricultural workforce. How CNN arrived at this figure I'm not sure, because the U.S. Department of Labor puts the number at 50%. [*Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, April 13, p.1] The A-J's article went on to quote an American Farm Bureau Federation statement that without these workers agribusiness "would lose potentially between \$5 and \$9 billion annually. We can't afford that." The article stated that dairy and cotton are in similar straits. So is the meatpacking industry [*NY Times*, April 25, p.1] As for construction, a conservative estimate is that 30% of its workers are undocumented [CNN, Anderson Cooper 360, May 1st]. There are no dependable figures for restaurant, hotel, and janitorial labor, but everyone knows the numbers are massive. Some trade groups (usually Republican allies) are now refusing to donate money to GOP politicians who are draconian on immigration -- among them, the American Nursery and Landscape Association, which states that laws further criminalizing the undocumented "will severely harm or destroy the industry." [*NY Times*, April 15, p.11] In other words:

Present immigration laws, as they apply to Mexicans and other Hispanics, don't exist to keep people "out" or to regulate who comes in; they exist to keep Hispanics "illegal," in order to supply cheap labor for a wide spectrum of U.S. business. That is the nature of the "invitation." It is intentional, systemic, and applies across the board. As business lobbyists testify, these people are *wanted and needed*. If to be a citizen is to work constructively in your community; to raise families; to pay taxes; to follow as many of the *other* laws as most law-abiding people; and to contribute body and soul to your country -- then these people are citizens in all but law and name.

To give them amnesty is but to give them their due.

To change laws to respect them, is but to restore the law to honor.

As for "cutting in front of the line" -- the line of Hispanic laborers has been cueing up for a century, an accepted practice *parallel* to legal immigration. To confuse the two is to fall for the lie. There are two separate, distinct immigrations taking place: sanctioned immigration according

to the written law; and *equally sanctioned* immigration for Hispanics according to unwritten but accepted business practice. This “unwritten invitation” to Mexicans represents a century of exploitation that a just country must put right.

It is worth examining what makes Mexican exploitation in the U.S. possible. “The income gap between the U.S. and Mexico is the widest of any two contiguous countries in the world.” [Newsweek, quoted in *The Week*, April 14, p. 14] No powerful nation welcomes a rival power on its border; it has been the United States’ consistent policy to support powerful Mexican oligarchies that keep Mexico anything but a rival, and keep the Mexican people powerless. How powerless? Half of Mexico’s population of 105 million live on less than \$5 a day. [CNN, Anderson Cooper 360, May 1st] This insures a 52.5 million pool of cheap labor for both Mexican oligarchs and U.S. industries.

What does this mean in real every-day terms for American citizens? If you buy a newly built home, or renovate your existing abode; if you eat American-grown fruit, vegetables, grain, dairy, or meat; if you buy flowers for your significant other or to pretty up your rooms; if you eat out; if you sleep at good hotels; if you hire cleaning crews for your offices and schools -- you are being subsidized by Mexican poverty. In this sense, poverty is Mexico’s leading industry. Mexican poverty’s “product,” its “export” (our “import”) of cheap labor, cuts costs to the average American significantly, every day, in billions of purchases.

If you don’t believe me, ask lobbyists of small and big businesses who are working frantically on Congress to stop this situation from spinning out of control. [NY Times, April 15, p.11] Those lobbyists put Congressional Republicans between a very large rock and a very hard place. Republicans have ignited their now-traditional *voting* base against undocumented immigrants; but they’ve upset their traditional *financial* base -- businesses of all kinds. Republicans can’t afford to alienate either. The irony is, they also can’t afford to alienate Hispanics.

Here are facts that African-American and other traditionally progressive constituencies should find interesting:

Los Angeles Times [online May 2]: Thirty-nine percent -- or roughly 16 million -- of the nation’s eligible Latino voters went to the polls in 2004. Forty-four percent of those voted for Bush. The *Christian Science Monitor* [online, May 2] has different figures, from the Pew Center: 47% of eligible Latinos voted in 2004, “accounting for 6% of all votes cast.” Think about the margins in the last two presidential elections -- 6% more than makes the difference. Think about Florida. The *Miami Herald* [online, May 2]: 30,000 hit the streets across Florida, and 2000 of those were in traditionally Republican Little Havana. In short, last December’s GOP House bill, HR 4437, criminalizing the undocumented and anyone who so much as gives them a ride to work, almost certainly lost those 44% who voted for Bush, and energized untold numbers who will vote against the GOP. Which means Republicans can lose Congress. *Si, se puede*. Yes, it can be done.

Only one commentator I saw on May 1st hit the nail square. Nativio Lopez said, “Today’s movement translated into voter power.” Apart from the boycott, and separate from it, the theme of May 1st was, over and over: register and vote. Hundreds of hand-painted signs: MARCH TODAY - VOTE TOMORROW. Most estimates agree that at least 1.1 million people were in the streets -- on a Monday! That is unprecedented in American history and demonstrates incredible enthusiasm and organization among Hispanics. And the entire point was: vote. Given the enthusiasm, given the organization, it is not unreasonable to expect 60 or even 70% of eligible Hispanic voters at the polls next November. They won’t be voting Republican. And if these people have reason to believe they’ve been cheated by electronic voting machines, it’s a safe bet they will not meekly return home and content themselves with resentful emails; Hispanic-Americans will likely be in the streets, demanding honesty.

Right now, if you’re still interested in living in a democratic republic, the place to be is on their side.

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