

Time for America to pay its bills for cheap labor

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The bill for the cheap labor provided by immigrants has come due, and Americans do not want to pay it.

Legal residents or not, these immigrants live and work here and they have basic needs. Refusing to pay for their needs after exploiting them is what makes Proposition 187 immoral.

We should explore solutions elsewhere: 1) pay fair wages, 2) tighten the border without discriminating against Mexican-Americans, 3) reform welfare so that it does not punish people for working, and 4) a fair foreign policy that promotes economic development in Mexico. These are difficult and costly proposals. Proposition 187 is an easy solution.

Illegal immigration is a complex issue, however. It continues because many profit from it, including:

- Those who employ immigrants at below the going wage.
- Those who buy houses, vegetables and other agricultural products, processed foods, restaurant meals, and utilize maid services, etc. at below fair cost.
- Retailers, large and small, who have Mexican customers and do not want to send any message saying “Mexicans are not welcome.”
- Those with businesses in Mexico who get a friendly reception because immigrants stimulate the Mexican economy, defusing political crises there.
- Those (fewer) who rent and sell to undocumented immigrants.

Directly or indirectly, that is all of us!

We like immigrant laborers. They live in fear and do not complain. Contrary to what Proposition 187 implies, immigrants actually pay more in taxes than they take in services. Additionally they work hard because they generally anticipate not staying in the United States very long — and indeed most do not. They are driven back to Mexico by the Border Patrol, by unemployment, and by their own personal interests to return to their homeland and rejoin their families.

This to-and-from flow is actually what society wants. Of course, we cannot have a completely open border (as we did for all practical purposes up to 1930), so the Border Patrol limits the number of Mexicans who enter illegally. But the Border Patrol is not really supposed to prohibit all undocumented entry, otherwise agribusiness and others would scream.

Once the crops are harvested in the fields, the Border Patrol conveniently rounds up the illegals and ships them back to Mexico. The same thing happens in the cities in times of depression.

History shows this pulling and pushing of immigrants. In the early decades of the 20th century, labor agents were recruiting laborers inside Mexico or nabbing them as they crossed the bridge and signing them up to work in the fields of the Southwest.

During World War II through the 1960s, undocumented laborers worked undisturbed side by side with contracted *braceros* as Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans moved to the cities. And during the Reagan boom (fueled by savings and loans schemes later made up with taxpayer dollars), Mexican workers constructed the (still) empty buildings.

In times of depression, immigrants were driven out. The crisis of the Great Depression inspired the creation of the Border Patrol. Immigrants and Mexican Americans who could not prove their citizenship on the spot were deported by the trainload. In the early 1950s, a severe recession prompted “Operation Wetback,” a massive campaign of dragnets through the barrios to apprehend and send the undocumented back. The 1982 recession inspired employer sanctions and other restrictions to control migration. It should not surprise us, then, that the economic woes California is undergoing have given birth to Proposition 187.

With or without a depression, the bill for using cheap labor comes due. Instead of going back and forth — or being pushed back, some decide to remain to stay. That is when the undocumented become “a burden.”

Ultimately, immigrants are not just a commodity — cheap labor — as we would like to think; they are human beings with needs. They have ordinary health care needs. They have medical emergencies. They have children who have to be educated. They need housing. They have to eat, even during periods of unemployment.

Recent demagoguery in California, however, has created a national immigration “crisis.” Taxpayer associations have contributed to the panic. So has racism, since some of the immigrant-bashing is disguised anti-Mexican-American sentiment.