

Are We on Our Way to Immigration Reform?

Panelists: Nancy Ramirez, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Ira Mehlman, Federation for American Immigration Reform

Ruth Milkman, University of California, Los Angeles

Moderator: Randal Archibold, New York Times

Ms. Nancy Ramirez, of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), began by expressing frustration about the federal government's inability to pass comprehensive immigration reform in 2006 which resulted in cities and towns across the nation enacting their own immigration ordinances that violated federal immigration laws. Ms. Ramirez reiterated two immigration laws enacted at the state and city level; one in Arizona and in Hazelton, Pennsylvania that resulted in different outcomes when their legitimacy was challenged in court. Hazelton's ordinance was struck down by a Federal court in Pennsylvania, but the outcome of Arizona's ordinance was upheld when it was challenged at the Federal level.

Mr. Ira Mehlman, of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, asserted that migration is an act of self interest. For example, from the perspective of immigrants they immigrate to the United States out of self interest while on the other hand it is in the interest of businesses to secure cheap and readily available labor. Mr. Mehlman pointed out immigration has a ripple effect throughout society impacting every aspect of the life of citizens and residents already residing in the states: overcrowding in schools, limited employment opportunities or competition for jobs and increased cost in the provision of social services, etc. The likelihood of a comprehensive immigration reform within the next two years looks unlikely because of the economic downturn and other issues on the president's agenda which have higher priority.

Dr. Ruth Milkman from the University of California, Los Angeles stated that as a result of the backlash from Proposition 197, many legal residents in California applied for citizenship due to panic that they would lose certain rights. This created a huge voting bloc of new citizens who registered to vote and subsequently voted for Democratic candidates in the 2006 and successive elections. Dr. Milkman asserted that comprehensive immigration reform will occur during Obama's administration and is a

matter of when since there are other issues that take precedence such as the economic crisis, comprehensive healthcare reform, and energy.

Mr. Gary Toebben, of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, agreed that immigration reform at the federal level would not be visited by Congress this year because of other issues that are of immediate priority. Mr. Toebben reiterated that there is a need for immigration reform that provides a pathway to legalization for individuals who are residing in the United States and contributing to society. In addition, he stressed there should be a guest worker program that allows individuals to temporarily work in the United States. This will most likely lead to a decrease in illegal immigration, since temporary workers will be able to come into the United States and leave without any restrictions.

Moderator Randal Archibold asked the panel if anything could force Congress and the administration to deal with the immigration issue this year given all the other challenges facing the country. Ms. Ramirez acknowledged that the administration has been very careful in their wording, stating that it will begin discussions on immigration this year but that did not imply that legislation will be introduced this year. Mr. Mehlman affirmed that given the state of the economy, the President's agenda for this year and the political dynamics, immigration reform will not be a high priority this year. Dr. Milkman pointed out that there has been a dramatic change in policy under the Obama administration with respect to workplace raids as was the practice under the Bush administration. Mr. Mehlman argued that any immigration reform that grants amnesty will have a tremendous impact on the budgets of states and local governments. Individuals who are granted amnesty will subsequently be joined by their children and relatives, and the demand for social services by these new immigrants will stretch the budgets of states and local government for years to come. Given current budget constraints faced by states and cities, behind the scenes, they might not favor immigration reform. Ms. Ramirez counter-argued that in the long-run it is better to get people from the shadows so that they can contribute to the economy and society.