

FOR THE RECORD

Testimony
of
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Before the
New York City Council
Committee on Immigration

on the
Immigration Bill Before Congress
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Good morning. I'm Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers and I thank you for the opportunity to testify today about this most important subject.

The UFT joins with its state and national affiliates and, indeed, most of the labor movement in decrying the hodge-podge of handful immigration legislation now being debated in the Congress. Most of it is a recipe for disaster.

We believe that the United States has become a great nation *because* it is a nation of immigrants whose labor, ingenuity and determination has benefited all its citizens through the generations.

We believe America's democratic traditions have led our nation to welcome refugees seeking to escape the violence of authoritarian regimes, religious persecution, and racial and ethnic intolerance.

We believe the prosperity of the United States is continually renewed when we share our economic opportunity with new immigrants.

We believe every American benefits when the rights of all American working people, immigrant and native born, are secured and protected.

We believe that the active participation of immigrant workers was a critical force in the establishment of America's unions, and will be equally indispensable in their revitalization in the 21st century.

We believe the security of the American people is best protected when we receive immigrants as full members of our civil society and our body politic.

We believe that the economic globalization of the last three decades has witnessed a 'race to the bottom' which has undermined the standard of living and labor rights throughout the world, accelerating the economic 'push' that fuels immigration to economically developed nations such as the United States.

We believe as a democratic nation of citizens, we must afford every immigrant the same opportunity to become a citizen provided to past generations of newcomers. No immigrant should be compelled to remain a "guest worker" unable to acquire the full rights of citizenship.

We believe that undocumented immigrant workers who have worked, paid taxes and made positive contributions to their communities should be given an opportunity to demonstrate that they are deserving of legal immigrant status. When deserving undocumented workers earn legal status, their wages and working conditions - and with them, the wages and working conditions of all American workers - improve.

We believe that labor shortages must be filled with workers with full rights. Where genuine shortages exist, they should be filled with workers possessing

permanent, work-based visas - green cards. Employers must not be allowed to turn permanent, full time jobs into temporary jobs held by "guest workers."

Because of these core beliefs, we believe immigration reform must be based on the following principles:

- the uniform enforcement of workplace standards must be a priority, ensuring
- real and enforceable remedies for labor and employment law violations for all workers, regardless of their immigration status, and that there must be a mechanism whereby all workers can protect their rights;
- reforms must provide a reasonable path to permanent residency for the currently undocumented workers;
- reform must reverse the practice of allowing employers to turn permanent, full-time, year-round jobs into temporary jobs by broadening the size and scope of so-called guest worker programs;
- all workers - foreign and native - must be guaranteed full workplace rights, including the right to organize and join unions;
- reform must ensure the safety of the United States without compromising our fundamental civil rights and civil liberties;
- reform of immigration laws must consider the root causes of migration that are pushing workers to migrate.

The bill in Congress would create interchangeable workers shuttling in and out of the country with no real chance to establish themselves. They would therefore have no political clout, would be unable to exercise their rights - if they even could learn what those rights are - and would be subject to abuse by unscrupulous employers.

At the same time, as the Drum Major Institute has said in its analysis of the proposed legislation: "Wages and working conditions for all U.S. workers are threatened as more and more jobs that once supported a middle-class standard of living instead become positions for temporary workers."

The current bill, with its complicated and frustrating time limits for immigrant workers to come to the U.S., then leave, then come back, then leave, will prove to be totally unworkable and merely invite violations. As AFL-CIO President John Sweeney put it, "Without a real path to legalization, the program will exclude millions of workers and thus ensure that America will have two classes of workers, only one of which can exercise workplace rights. As long as this two-tiered system exists, all workers will suffer because employers will have available a ready pool of labor they can exploit to drive down wages, benefits, health and safety protections and other workplace standards."

Lillian Rodriguez Lopez, president of the Hispanic Federation, said, "We cannot support the fact that this bill would do away with family reunification categories that Latinos rely on to reunite their families."

The bill has also been sharply criticized by the ACLU and the National Immigration Law Center for restricting the right of immigrants to appeal adverse decisions of immigration authorities and have their day in court.

Even the legalization process for current undocumented immigrants is seriously flawed. Esther Nieves, speaking for the American Friends Service Committee, said, "The proposed legislation does offer a limited path to citizenship, but unreasonable provisions, including lengthy waiting periods, fines, a new 'merit-based' system and other punitive hurdles mean that undocumented workers would need to wait for eight to 13 years to become citizens and pay the equivalent of up to six months' wages."

This simply will not do.

America deserves an immigration system that protects all workers- including immigrants - from workplace abuses. The current bill would not do that.

America deserves an immigration system that provides all workers with the opportunity to become economically secure. The current bill, instead, would create an underclass of workers and reduce the working standards for all workers.

America deserves an immigration system in which immigrant workers are protected. Instead, immigrant workers are overrepresented in the highest-risk, lowest-paid jobs.

America deserves an immigration system that is far, far better than what is now before the Congress.