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COMMENTARY

Bringing Immigration Into The 21st Century

By Michael Wildes

A new year carries with it the promise of change and fresh beginnings. Unencumbered by broken resolutions, it presents the opportunity to push aside disappointments of the past year and start anew. While the rest of us struggle to uphold our resolutions to be more active and eat healthier, we look to our leaders to institute positive changes in our nation's policies.

From an immigration standpoint, 2010 bears the promise of significant legislative reform for the first time in nearly 25 years. President Barack Obama is hardly the first leader to emphasize the necessity of immigration reform; every president since Ronald Reagan has resolved, but subsequently failed, to implement meaningful reform.

Obama's administration has committed to instituting immigration reform in early 2010 and doubtless it will be no easy task. Against the backdrop of the struggling economy and the contentious new health care plan, the current administration could find it tempting to delay immigration reform until further notice. Yet the

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need for reform is great and of increasing importance.

Fiscally speaking, legalizing undocumented but otherwise law-abiding immigrants is a smart idea. Doing so will not only permit them to be taxed and to participate fully in the economy, but also will prevent employers from undercutting the value of American labor. Immigrants will be paid a fairer wage and gain purchasing power that will be reflected in consumer markets.

Americans are understandably frustrated about paying for public services, which undocumented immigrants often access free of charge; however, as Americans, we value our inalienable human rights and find it inhumane and unjust to refuse to treat the sick and injured.

As a result, hospitals often strain under the weight of undocumented immigrants seeking urgent care. Even if we endeavored to deport every undocumented alien living in the United States today, we have neither the manpower nor the handcuffs needed to implement such an effort. The expense would be prohibitive; it would cost about \$2.6 trillion in lost gross domestic product over 10 years, according to the Immigration Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

The United States was founded as a nation of immigrants and remains so today. Much lip service has been paid to our grandfathers and great-grandfathers

immigrating "legally," but immigration in the 19th century was very different from what it is today. Back then, rapid industrial growth created a nearly insatiable need for manual labor and waves of "new immigrants" arrived in droves to fill that gap. It was merely an absence of regulation that permitted our forebears to immigrate legally — had they attempted to arrive today, most would have been forced to live clandestinely.

Until very recently, the United States enjoyed a sustained period of growth and expansion that mirrored in certain ways the rapid development of the mid- to late 19th century. The commercial and residential real estate boom fed a thriving construction industry that in many cases attracted and benefited from undocumented labor. Because the current immigration quotas strongly favor higher-educated professionals, many foreign-born laborers were unable to find means of legal immigration. And yet, from 1997 to 2007, our economy boasted an average unemployment rate of only 4.9 percent. It seems that the economy was easily capable of simultaneously sustaining both native-born workers and waves of new immigrants.

One might speculate that some of that success was *owed* to undocumented labor. Due to their poor leverage in the workplace, undocumented workers were often willing to accept wages lower than the legal minimum, work overtime without pay, and without union representation. That kind of cheap labor fuels rapid expansion at the expense of the American worker — yet to the benefit of American business. Improving the path to legal immigration will shift some of the wealth back to native-born labor by reducing the demand for undocumented workers.

At the same time, it will serve to reduce immigrant exploitation and foster a fairer workplace environment.

Now that times have changed and the unemployment rate is in double digits, it is imperative that Washington forge ahead on immigration reform and follow through once and for all. Let's extend the free mar-

ket philosophy to immigration and let foreign labor in the technology sector inspire us to improve math and science curricula in the U.S. Let's create guest worker programs that discourage substandard wages and keep American and foreign-born labor the same price. In the spirit of traditional American values, let's allow work to go to

the best candidate for the job, regardless of national origin.

Bringing the American immigration system into the 21st century is a long overdue task that cannot be put off any longer. Here's hoping that this administration's New Year's resolution is one it can keep. ■