

CONNECTING THE DOTS: IMMIGRATION REFORM & CIVIL RIGHTS

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THE 1790 Naturalization Act was the first US law passed to define naturalization and citizenship policies. It reserved citizenship for *free whites only* – and barred the significant number of People of Color already in the new United States from citizenship. Over time additional laws were passed reinforcing this US system of apartheid.

ALL PEOPLE OF COLOR GROUPS were oppressed and exploited based directly on the benefit to White society. Native Americans were subjected to strategies that reduced their populations – initially through wars of conquest, and then by the imposition of *blood quantum* which established a minimum quantity of *blood* of 1/2 from one tribe in order to be identified as Native. This was as effective as outright genocide in clearing the land of Native people, and transferring their land and resources to Whites. Simultaneously, laws defining African American identity emphasized a very small amount of *blood* was needed to justify a person's perpetual enslavement – as little as one drop. For Asian immigrants, denied citizenship meant large numbers of workers did not have constitutional rights and protection. For workers from Mexico, Latin and South America, the US created a revolving door that exploited poor workers then shipped them back to their home countries when their usefulness ended.

ALTHOUGH LEGAL RACIAL citizenship prohibitions were lifted in 1952, the immigration quota system of the 1920's that favored northern European immigrants stayed in place until 1965. And despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision changing racial socio-political barriers in the law, the exploitation of People of Color and immigrant workers continues to this day.

THE CURRENT DEBATE on Mexican immigration and a guest worker program is the most recent attempt to maintain a revolving door policy relative to the importation and exploitation of workers. It creates a two-fold strategy to suppress wages in the low wage sectors of the US economy: first, it floods the marketplace with unskilled labor. At the same time, it excludes a significant portion of these low wage earners from citizenship and constitutional protections. As such, the current immigrant rights struggle is also a civil rights struggle.

LIKE ANY DYNAMIC in US socio-political life, it is crucial to put current trends and reality into their historical context to discern consistent behavior patterns. There are several instances that predict current US behavior and policy on this issue; perhaps most notably the Braceros Program during World War II. At that time the US made agreements with the Mexican government on wage guarantees, workers' transportation from Mexico to the US and back, and standards for working and housing conditions. Those agreements included assurances that the US would close its borders to

undocumented workers to prevent under-cutting the agreed upon minimum wages for the documented guest workers.

THE BRACEROS PROGRAM brought in Mexican workers to replace the low wage earning Mexican Americans and African Americans drafted into the newly integrated armed services. They also replaced Japanese workers interned in concentration camps and removed from the labor market altogether. Mexican workers were also used to break strikes in urban areas. This all guaranteed low wages throughout the marketplace.

THE US CONSISTENTLY violated the agreements with the Mexican government, including leaving its borders porous during times of war. Employers preferred hiring undocumented workers unencumbered by the guest worker programs in order to avoid wage guarantees and other mandates of the programs, thus suppressing the wages of all workers in low paying jobs. Once the war ended the market was oversupplied with unskilled labor. Returning veterans – especially People of Color – were forced to compete for low wage jobs in a marketplace where wages were unnaturally suppressed, and where they were not even able to fully take advantage of their GI benefits.

THE US CONTINUES to exploit guest workers, and subject them to unconscionably dangerous working conditions and unsanitary living conditions. When their usefulness is over, the US unceremoniously abandons them back to Mexico – often in mass deportations labeled *repatriation* strategies. These *repatriated* workers have historically included US citizens and their children. Families were broken up and destroyed.

CITIZENSHIP AND PERMANENT legal immigrant status are difficult for guest workers to achieve. There are countless undocumented Mexican workers who have been in the US for 20 or more years, have children and even grandchildren who were born here who are legal citizens, and yet these workers are not able to become US citizens themselves.

THE RESULT OF ALL THIS IS the perpetuation of a United States for White People only. The US uses its considerable bargaining power to benefit employers and keep cheap labor in the marketplace plentiful, easily accessible, and disorganized. At the same time, these workers are denied access to US social and political institutions. To deny citizenship to guest workers from Mexico, the US hides behind the rhetoric of protecting US workers and the American way of life from foreign influence. Yet it is this endless cycle of recruiting and deporting undocumented workers that undermines our social fabric by maintaining a permanent underclass in our society.

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE are here from Mexico, Latin, and South America. They work, raise families, get sick, create social networks, and contribute to the economic and social capital of our society. Surely we can do better than another guest worker program complete with round-ups and deportations. We must be more creative than this. Guest worker programs must include provisions for workers' participation in political processes and move them toward citizenship, if that is what they desire. And we must recognize that immigration reform is another face of the civil rights struggle.