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“Winning the Future:
The Fight for Comprehensive Immigration Reform”

by
Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress from Texas
United States House of Representatives

"Su voto es su voz" (your vote is your voice).

Willie Velasquez

INTRODUCTION

Thank you so much for that warm introduction. It is a great privilege to be back in San Antonio. I have been honored many times to visit this historic city which was built by the sweat and toil and brains of so many of the people you serve and represent.

I am delighted to be reunited with my House colleague Congressman Charlie Gonzalez and my good friend Milton Rosado, LCLAA President. I am particularly happy to be here on the occasion of your honoring my good friends UAW President Ron Gettlefinger and UCFW President Joseph Hansen with the Montemayor-Barraza Distinguished Service Award. In addition, I cannot think of anyone more deserving of the *Abriendo Puertas* Award than Sen. Hillary Clinton.

It is indeed an honor to address the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), the official Latino

constituency group of the AFL-CIO. The LCLAA is the first national organization to represent the views of not only Latino trade unionists but all Latino workers seeking justice in the workplace.

Since its founding in 1972, LCLAA has spent the last 34 years working for economic and social justice and greater inclusion and participation of Hispanic trade unionists. Like the great social, political, and civil rights organizations of the past, LCLAA understands that political empowerment is an indispensable element of the struggle for economic and social justice for all workers. As Willie Velasquez said, “*your vote is your voice. Su voto es su voz.*”

I am so proud to stand with LCLAA because you stand with workers. You provide a much needed and powerful voice for Latino working families. You work in coalition with other leading Hispanic organizations to maximize support for economic and social policies that are essential to advancing the interests of your

community and, indeed, for all American workers. You and I have partnered successfully on a number of occasions to combat legislation that poses a threat to the communities we serve.

PURPOSE AND OCCASION

My friends, no one knows better than we here in this room that our nation's immigration system is broken. Without the enactment of comprehensive immigration reform, our nation's security will remain vulnerable while our communities of hard-working, tax-paying, law-abiding immigrants continue to be exploited and marginalized. That is why we must pass legislation this year. In my view, the problem we face is so urgent that failure or delay simply is not a viable option. The Congress and the Federal Government has already ignored the problem for too long.

As I have often said, immigration is a national security issue. But it is also a matter of life and death for many living along the border. Each day hundreds of people traverse our borders. The vast majority of them come here in search only of better lives for

themselves and their families. They come to fill low-paying jobs at businesses and farms, many of which struggle with real labor shortages.

As a senior member of the House Homeland Security Committee and the ranking member of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, Claims, I did not need the Republicans to conduct a traveling circus to know how important border control is to our national security. We have long known that our borders must be secure and that our immigration system must be overhauled.

But unlike those out-of-touch Washington politicians who believe all our problems will be solved by constructing a Steel Wall or Iron Curtain along our southern border, you and I recognize that the only lasting solution to the pending crisis is to reform the immigration system in a manner that it is both comprehensive and humane. Otherwise, we will be revisiting this problem in a decade if not sooner.

It is generally accepted that there are nearly 12 million people in America today who came here illegally. That is more people than live in the state of Ohio. These undocumented immigrants live in our cities and towns and rural communities. They harvest our crops, tend our gardens, work in our restaurants, clean our houses, and care for our children and parents. They came to America, as others before them came, to build better lives for their families and a better America. We should be proud of that.

Now I know that some Americans believe we should find all these millions, round them up and send them back to the countries they came from. I don't know how we could do that. It would be like deporting every person living in the state of Ohio. Last August we saw how difficult it was to evacuate New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina and Houston before Hurricane Rita. Can you imagine trying to evacuate Cleveland, Cincinnati, Akron, Dayton, Columbus, Toledo, at the same time? Not to mention all the small towns and rural areas? The Center for American Progress

estimates the cost of deporting illegal immigrants at more than \$40 billion per year.

My friends, America's labor needs will become more acute in the years ahead as more workers retire and the number of younger workers dwindles. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over the next 30 years, 60 million Americans will retire. By 2010, America will have 168 million jobs and only 158 million Americans in those jobs. In 10 years, the first of the baby boomer generation will reach retirement age, further depleting the size of the American workforce.

The fastest growing jobs are those requiring skills and education that fewer American workers are undertaking, such as science, mathematics, and engineering. Also, experts estimate that there may be as many as 10 million undocumented workers in the country who are performing tasks that most Americans take for granted but will not do themselves, in such industries as

construction, landscaping, health care, restaurants and hotels, and others.

By not creating adequate legal avenues for hiring foreign workers and not addressing the status of workers already here, Congress and the Bush administration are failing to safeguard the future of our economy.

To be sure, in this post 9/11 era, we must enforce its borders because there are people out there who wish to do us harm. We must vigilantly guard against them, spend whatever it takes, and allocate the resources necessary to achieve our objective.

But we must also be able to distinguish between those who have come here out of their love for the United States and what it represents and the opportunities it affords for a better life from those who come because they hate America and wish to kill or injure Americans.

Surely, it makes more sense to concentrate our resources on the latter and persuade the former to come out from the shadows.

We will not persuade them to come into the light if all we offer is an armed escort back to the place of economic or political hopelessness they fled. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, the original English conservative, we will not encourage undocumented workers to come out from the shadows if everywhere they look “they see nothing but the gallows.”

Why not, instead, say to those undocumented workers who are working jobs most Americans will not take: come out from the shadows and earn the chance to apply for citizenship in this country? You broke the law to come here, and you must acknowledge that you did by going to the back of the line, paying a substantial fine, staying employed, learning our language, paying taxes, obeying our laws, waiting your turn, and earning the right to become an American.

Earlier this year I was a member of Congressional delegation that visited Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries in the region. The highlight of my travels was meeting the young men

and women who are willingly risking their lives to defend the country they love more than life itself.

Right now, at this very moment, there are more than 9,000 soldiers fighting for us in Iraq and Afghanistan, who are not yet American citizens but who dream the dream that one day they and their children will be citizens of the nation they risk their lives to defend.

I know that many Americans of goodwill have a different view of the problem and advocate different solutions to the immigration challenge facing America. That does not make them bad people. It simply means we must redouble our efforts to get our message out. It means we need to work harder at rebutting the disinformation that is spread by right-wing pundits, commentators, and politicians. As President John Kennedy famously noted:

“The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie -- deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”

I think we should welcome the opportunity to debate comprehensive immigration reform. Truth and right is on our side. We will win the debate if we stand up for what we believe and engage in meaningful dialogue. After all, that is what it is going to take to find the common ground necessary to solve the immigration problem and move America forward.

And when we talk to our friends on the side of this great debate over Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR), these are the major points we should emphasize:

1. CIR must include an earned adjustment for immigrants currently working in the United States and reduce the vast backlogs in family-sponsored immigration;
2. CIR should protect all workers within our borders -- both native-born and foreign -- and at the same time guarantee the safety of our nation without compromising our fundamental civil rights and civil liberties;
3. CIR can and must be reformed in such a way that it does not generate future inequities or sacrifice future wages, labor protections, and working conditions of both American and future foreign workers;
4. CIR shall support keeping families together and treating immigrants with respect;

5. CIR must reject proposals that criminalize hard working immigrants and their families who are in this country to achieve the American dream and or the people and organizations that come in contact with them; and
6. Comprehensive Immigration Reform shall provide a realistic legal path to earned permanent residence and citizenship for those already within the United States.

CONCLUSION

I know this is hard and tiring work. But remember, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King often said:

“We shall overcome because the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right -- no lie can live forever. We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right -- truth crushed to earth will rise again.”

Do not be discouraged, my friends; be of good cheer for the Scriptures tell us that “weeping may last for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

This morning, as we gather on this great occasion to celebrate and reflect upon our long struggle for justice and equality and an

honored place in the American family, I want you to remember there is another family about to begin a similar quest.

Somewhere down South, more precisely down Southwest --- across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Laredo, Corpus Christi, or Brownsville Or maybe just south of Tuscon or San Diego or Douglass, Arizona – there is a family in Old Mexico anxiously about to embark on their own journey to the New World of America.

They come for the same reason so many millions came before them, in this century and last, from this continent and from every other. They come for the same reasons families have always come to America: to be free of fear and hunger, to better their condition, to begin their world anew, to give their children a chance for a better life.

Like previous waves of immigrants, they too will wage all and risk all to reach the sidewalks of Houston. Or Los Angeles. Or Phoenix. Or Chicago. Or Atlanta. Or Denver. Or Detroit. They

will risk death in the desert. They will brave the elements. They will risk capture and crime. They will endure separation from loved ones.

And if they make it to the American Promised Land, no job will be beneath them. They will cook our food, clean our houses, cut our grass, and care for our kids. They will be cheated by some and exploited by others. They work in sunlight but live in twilight, between the shadows; not fully welcome as new Americans but wanted as low-wage workers.

Somewhere near the borders tonight, a family will cross over into the New World, willed by the enduring power of the American Dream.

I leave you with this thought, eloquently expressed by the great abolitionist James Russell Lowell:

“Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the demon known, stands a God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.”

My friends, we are on the right side of history. Let us go out together and win this victory for our country. Sí, sí Puede. Thank you very much.