

What America Owes Its 'Illegals'

by *Barbara Ehrenreich*

Rush Limbaugh has been expecting liberals to start "whining" about the \$5000 fine undocumented immigrants will have to pay to gain citizenship under the new immigration bill, but most liberals have been too busy chortling about the immigration-induced split in the GOP to make their own case against the bill. So let a mighty whine rise over the land: Undocumented workers shouldn't be fined; they should get a hefty bonus!

All right, they committed a "crime"--the international equivalent of breaking and entry. But breaking and entry is usually a prelude to a much worse crime, like robbery or rape. What have the immigrants been doing once they get into the US? Taking up time on the elliptical trainers in our health clubs? Getting ahead of us on the wait-lists for elite private nursery schools?

In case you don't know what immigrants do in this country, the Latinos have a word for it--*trabajo*. They've been mowing the lawns, cleaning the offices, hammering the nails and picking the tomatoes, not to mention all that dish-washing, diaper-changing, meat-packing and poultry-plucking.

The punitive rage directed at illegal immigrants grows out of a larger blindness to the manual labor that makes our lives possible: The touching belief, in the class occupied by Rush Limbaugh among many others, that offices clean themselves at night and salad greens spring straight from the soil onto one's plate.

Native-born workers share in this invisibility, but it's far worse in the case of immigrant workers, who are often, for all practical purposes, nameless. In the recent book *There's No José Here: Following the Lives of Mexican Immigrants*, Gabriel Thompson cites a construction company manager who says things like, "I've got to get myself a couple of Josés for this job if we're going to have that roof patched up by Saturday." Forget the Juans, Diegos, and Eduardos - they're all interchangeable "Josés."

Hence no doubt the ease with which some prominent immigrant-bashers forget their own personal reliance on immigrant labor, like Nevada's Governor Jim Gibbons, who, it turns out, once employed an undocumented nanny. And as the *Boston Globe* revealed late last year, Mitt Romney's lawn in suburban Boston was maintained by illegal immigrants from Guatemala.

The only question is how much we owe our undocumented immigrant workers. First, those who do not remain to enjoy the benefits of old age in America will have to be reimbursed for their contributions to Medicare and Social Security, and here I quote the website of the San Diego ACLU:

Undocumented immigrants annually pay an estimated \$7 billion more than they take out into Social Security, and \$1.5 billion more into Medicare.... A study by the National Academy of Sciences also found that tax payments generated by immigrants outweighed any costs associated with services used by immigrants.

Second, someone is going to have to calculate what is owed to "illegals" for wages withheld by unscrupulous employers: The homeowner who tells his or her domestic

worker that the wage is actually several hundred dollars a month less than she had been promised, and that the homeowner will be "holding" it for her. Or the landscaping service that stiffes its undocumented workers for their labor. Who's the "illegal" here?

Third, there's the massive compensation owed to undocumented immigrants for preventable injuries on the job. In her book *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights*, Jennifer Gordon reports such gruesome cases as a Honduran who died from inhaling paint while sanding yachts in Long Island and a Guatemalan worker whose boss intentionally burned him with hot pans of oil for not washing dishes fast enough. "Death rates for Latino workers," Gordon reports, "have risen over the past decade even as workplace fatality rates for non-Latinos have fallen."

When our debt to America's undocumented workers is eventually tallied, I'm confident that it will be well in excess of the \$5000 fine the immigration bill proposes. There is still the issue of the original "crime." If someone breaks into my property for the purpose of trashing and looting, I would be hell-bent on restitution. But if they break in for the purpose of cleaning it--scrubbing the bathroom, mowing the lawn--then, in my way of thinking anyway, the debt goes in the other direction.

About The Author

Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of *Nickel and Dimed* (Owl), is the winner of the 2004 Puffin/Nation Prize.