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# A Change of Heart on Guest Workers

After President Bush highlighted the need for a temporary-worker program as part of a larger immigration reform in his State of the Union address, Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) compared the president's proposal to slavery. Rangel is right to be concerned. Our nation's history with such programs has been dreadful.

Many Latinos still have searing memories of the infamous *bracero* program, which more than 50 years ago became synonymous with worker abuse. The current guest-worker programs for agriculture and other "non-skilled" labor are not much better. Experience tells us that there is good reason to be concerned that a new worker visa program could repeat these mistakes, creating a permanent, sizable subclass of workers who endure harsh treatment while simultaneously undercutting their American co-workers.

Despite these concerns, after decades of strongly opposing temporary-worker programs for the very reasons that Rangel articulates, my organization and many Latino leaders find ourselves in the interesting position of being principal advocates for a sig-

nificant new worker visa program as part of comprehensive immigration reform.

Some think we got here as the result of some devil's bargain with our allies among business leaders: They get a new worker program, and we get a path to citizenship for undocumented workers. Not so. We have concluded that a new legal pathway for the future flow of immigrant workers to the United States is the safest, most reasonable path for immigrant workers, for their co-workers in this country, and for a nation hungry for order and control at the border.

We share that hunger. Latinos know that even if we pass immigration reforms that include a path to citizenship for millions of immigrants who work, pay taxes and otherwise contribute to the United States, we will have failed to fix our nation's broken immigration system unless we do what previous reforms did not: Acknowledge that there will continue to be a flow across the border and that we will do everything we can to control and regulate it.

If this year's immigration debate accomplishes what the debate in 1986 did — marry a legalization program with additional

enforcement without addressing the future flow of migrants — we will have addressed the symptoms of our broken system without repairing it. The cost of this mistake will be enormous: a continued death toll at the border; a sizable flow of undocumented workers who come to this country under harsher conditions; increased harassment of and discrimination against Hispanic Americans often mistaken for immigrants; and exacerbated public frustration that the immigration issue is still not under control.

But we do not have to repeat past mistakes. The immigration reform bill the Senate passed last year contains a much different model of a worker visa program than the unjust model we have lived with for decades. Workers would not be at the mercy of abusive employers in that they could change jobs and alert the authorities to mistreatment. Rather than becoming a permanent second-class workforce, they would have the opportunity to earn a path to permanent status — and ultimately citizenship — as one of the only classes of migrants able to petition for themselves rather than relying on an employer or relative to petition for

them. There are important labor protections for immigrant workers as well as for their American co-workers, including a requirement that immigrant workers be paid the prevailing wage in an industry to avoid undercutting the wages of American workers employed there. The 110th Congress has an opportunity to build from this strong start and do even better.

We are deeply aware of the risks of going down this path in the immigration reform debate, including accusations that we are selling out one group of immigrant workers to help another. But our critics offer no practical solutions for the flow of migrants that will surely continue or for the abuses these workers will face if they survive the trip across the border. We owe it to migrants, as well as to the nation that their hard work will sustain, to shape a new path for migration that is legal, safe and endowed with protections for immigrant and American workers alike.

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