



COMMUNIQUE

AMERICA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MELTING POT WHY IMMIGRATION IS SUCH A HOT TOPIC NOW

By Edward Yood & Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

America is a country built on immigration. Unless your family is Native American, then you are from an immigrant family yourself. We all are. Most citizens tracing their roots will not have to search through many generations before stumbling across a relative born outside of the country.

Ellis Island, as the gateway for more than 12 million immigrants to the United States, was the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 until 1954. In the early 1900s – the peak years of Ellis Island's operation – between 5,000 and 10,000 people passed through the immigration station every single day. In addition, in the 35 years before Ellis Island even opened, more than eight million immigrants arrived in New York. No matter how you slice it, that's a lot of immigrants. It has been estimated that close to 40 percent of all current U.S. citizens can trace at least one of their ancestors to Ellis Island, according to the website History.

Immigration has been a subject taught in schools for decades. In fact, the Emma Lazarus sonnet on the base of the Statue of Liberty that reads "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" is something that children have memorized and written about in a multitude of assignments throughout the years. So why has the topic of immigration suddenly become a panic button in our country?

When Ellis Island opened, a great change was taking place in immigration to the United States. People began pouring into this country from northern and western Europe, places like Germany, Ireland, Britain and the Scandinavian countries. When that wave slowed, America saw an increase in immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, including Jews escaping from political and economic oppression, and Italians escaping poverty in their country. There were also Polish, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Slovaks and Greeks, along with non-Europeans from Syria, Turkey and Armenia. They left their homes for a multitude of reasons, including war, drought, famine and religious persecution, and all had hopes for a better life in the New World. That's what immigration was about then, and that's what immigration is still about today.

America began as one huge melting pot, and nothing has changed other than the fact that immigration is making more headlines in recent years. "As the world globalizes in terms of nations' economies, trade, and investment, borders are opened up more easily for 'freer' flow of goods

and products" (globalissues.org). With this, however, comes a "freer" flow of people as well.

This free flow of immigrants scares Americans. Amid numerous terrorist attacks starting with the worst one on 9/11, slow economic growth, and the recent presidential campaigning with immigration as a central theme, the Migration Fear Index as measured by Economic Policy Uncertainty has skyrocketed in the last few years.

And that fear is being exacerbated by President-elect Donald Trump's claim that on day one in office he intends to build his impenetrable physical wall on the border between the United States and Mexico that Mexico will pay for. The question remains, though, as to whether immigration is any more of a problem than it has been in the past several decades.

"Immigration has become a central part of the political discussion, as Donald Trump...has stoked concern about immigration, blaming it as one of the reasons for economic shortcomings among the middle class and as being among the sources of the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino, California, and Orlando, Florida," claims Business Insider.

Immigrants themselves don't seem to be what Americans fear. Remember, most of us are from immigrant families. Rather, there is an increasing fear of illegal immigrants.

Americans fear illegal immigrants because they see them as a drain on society and a danger to communities. The reality is, however, that immigrants have played significant roles in our country and have made substantial contributions in the fields of medicine, economics, and manufacturing. The problem is when fear begets fear, which turns into a rampant attack on the overall immigrant system.

In June 2012, the Obama Administration started Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that allows certain so-called undocumented immigrants to the United States who entered the country before their 16th birthday and before June 2007 to receive a renewable two-year work permit and exemption from deportation. DACA confers non-immigrant legal status but does not provide a path to citizenship. In November 2014, the President expanded DACA to include so-called undocumented immigrants who entered the country before 2010, eliminating the requirement that applicants be younger than 31 years old, and lengthening the renewable deferral period to two years.

Slightly more than two years later, in November 2014, President Obama announced the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), a planned American immigration policy to grant deferred action status to certain illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States since 2010 and have children who are either American citizens or lawful permanent residents. Deferred action is not full legal status, but would come with a three-year, renewable work permit and exemption from deportation.

One month after that, Texas and 25 other states sued in the District Court for the Southern District of Texas asking the Court to enjoin implementation of both DAPA and the DACA expansion. On February 16, 2015, a preliminary injunction was issued that blocked the program from going into effect while *Texas v. United States* proceeded.

On June 23, 2016, the U.S. Supreme Court announced it was deadlocked 4-4 in a decision that read, in its entirety, "The judgement is affirmed by an equally divided court." The ruling set no precedent and simply leaves in place the lower court's preliminary injunction blocking the program. Unfortunately, the flip side of Democratic President Obama's immigration "progressive reforms" policy has been an escalation in deportations, raids and arrests, and mass arrests of immigrant men, women, and children by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

In response to these raids, CWA Local 1180 issued the following statement: "No workers in the United States should depart for work in the morning fearing that they will not make it home to their families at the end of the day. No worker should be silenced from speaking up about workplace hazards or sexual harassment or wage theft because he or she fears being rounded up in a deportation raid. Central American immigrants face serious and growing threats and violence in their countries of origin, due in part to social upheaval resulting from America's failed trade policies. These immigrants should be given humanitarian protection rather than face detention and deportation. CWA condemns the fear, division and xenophobia that are driving the policies of exclusion and making us weak. We demand that the Administration not give in to the messengers of hatred divisiveness by victimizing refugees who are already victims of violence and terror."

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Lourdes Acevedo, Latina Administrative Manager in the NYC Department of Transportation, CWA Local 1180 Recording Secretary, and longtime member of CWA Local 1180's Hispanic Heritage Committee, is an official Spanish Translator in the NYC Mayor's Office. She was assisting the Mayor's office to help immigrants secure their status and that of their families until the Court stopped DAPA and DACA. This assistance included minimizing their legal fees to an affordable \$760 when compared to the average fee of \$10,000 that attorneys often charge.

According to Acevedo, "Many immigrants must accept wages much less than the minimum wage for fear that if they complain, they will be reported, jailed for unlimited periods of time, and then deported." She has known people who had to cross the border into the U.S. through tunnels. She mentioned this suggesting that even the threat of President-elect Trump building a border wall will not stop those with a strong desire to emigrate to the United States in search of a better life.

This better life does not always come so easily to immigrants, however.

Quite often, immigrants have a difficult time integrating into an American society so different from their home country. The effects of immigration can be both positive and negative for the recipient country, in this case the United States, as well as the immigrants. Some of those positive benefits, according to globalissues.org, include:

- Immigrants often do jobs that people in the host country will not;
- Migrant workers often work longer hours and for lower salaries; while this is controversial and sometimes exploitive, it benefits the host country;
- Immigrants, when made to feel welcome, contribute to the diversity of that society, which can help with tolerance and understanding;
- Immigrants offer an increased talent pool if they have been well educated in their original country.

But there are also numerous drawbacks:

- Immigrants can be exploited for their cheap labor;
- Immigration can attract criminal elements;
- Immigration can become a social/political issue, where racism can be used to exploit feelings or as an excuse for current woes of local population;
- Where there is a perception that immigrants and refugees appear to get more benefits than local poor people, tensions and hostilities rise;
- Concerns about illegal immigration often spill over to ill-feelings toward the majority of immigrants who are law-abiding and contributing to the economy.

CWA Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotos told the Communique: "My father Nick Cheliotos stepped onto American soil in Tampa, Florida on August 26, 1926, as a stowaway hidden in the coal bins of a freighter from Havana, Cuba. Greeks were considered undesirables and immigration quotas from Greece were very low. According to congressional testimony, eugenics 'scientifically' demonstrated that southern and eastern Europeans with an inferior cephalic index would pollute the Nordic gene pool. Madison Grant wrote 'The Passing of the Great Race in America' (1916) that helped shape the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 that restricted immigration to less than 400 annually from Greece, while immigration quotas for Germany and Great Britain were in the tens of thousands.

The reality is that immigration to the United States is going to continue and Trump building a wall to keep out Mexicans is not going to actually stop them.

"We are in favor of granting undocumented workers the status they need to stay legally in America. Otherwise, they will stay here anyway and they will get exploited," Cheliotos said. "There is a long history of understanding that if immigrants want to come here, they will find a way no matter what. No retaining wall is going to keep them out. Immigrants are dreamers and when they dream of coming to the United States for a better life, they are going to achieve that dream even if it kills them. As we know, many have died trying to get to America."

He said that our country has already invested significant financial sums to educate children of illegal immigrants, so to expel them now would be pointless. Many of these children were born on American soil, thereby

making them full-fledged Americans. "What does the President-elect intend to do? Split up these families and send their parents back to their native countries? He can't kick out the children; they are Americans. Where are our family values? Many children of immigrants don't speak any language other than English," Cheliotas said.

According to a National Review article from September 2016, current immigration policy costs taxpayers \$300 billion a year. This fact is one that President-elect Trump has tossed about in an attempt to scare Americans into believing that immigration is bad. Another reason Americans are in a panic? Between the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the end of 2014, at least 380 foreign-born individuals were convicted in terror cases inside the United States, according to the U.S. Senate Immigration Subcommittee (June 22, 2016).

"We obviously need to deport immigrants, illegal or otherwise, if they are terrorists," Cheliotas said. "But the majority of immigrants come here wanting to make something of themselves. While Trump has declared that immigrants are taking away jobs that could go to Americans, the reality is that Americans do not want to do these types of jobs anyway."

He said a perfect example is the farm workers movement, where immigrants have notoriously been employed. This industry's history is based on immigrants working for near slave wages while being exploited and

mistreated, bent over for no less than eight hours a day picking crops. "I don't see that Americans would take these kinds of jobs," Cheliotas said. "Our best chance for success is to organize the immigrants and give them the protections they need and deserve. That's what happened to the farm workers back with Cesar Chavez and the UFW."

The textile industry is another example of immigrant workers taking jobs no one else wanted. Despite its dramatic and continued decline, apparel production remains the largest manufacturing industry in New York City. It is viable, in large part, due to the mass influx of new immigrants "sweating" it out in cramped, poorly ventilated factories for a piece-rate that averaged about a dollar per assembled garment. Today, immigrant Asian and Latino workers are concentrated in these labor-intensive industries that produce garments, textiles, furniture, electronics, and footwear. Close to three-quarters of New York City's garment production workers are from the People's Republic of China, Dominican Republic, Mexico, or South Korea.

"Immigration isn't going anywhere," Cheliotas said. "It's a matter of how we deal with it. And the way to deal with it is not erecting a wall. We are a country that traditionally has welcomed immigrants and we need to continue to open our doors and offer the support and assistance needed to help them make a new life for themselves if we are to become a civilized country."