

A Great Opportunity for the Land of Opportunity

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

President Obama made the case in his State of the Union address last week for swift passage of comprehensive immigration reform. His powerful call for Congress to “get this done” brought members on both sides of the aisle to their feet and made it clear that, after decades of congressional inaction and presidential timidity, comprehensive immigration reform finally has a solid chance to pass.

Whether it's the realization that a nation made great by immigrants has a moral imperative to live up to our American values of democracy and opportunity, or because it's sound economic policy, or because it's just the right thing to do for hardworking families, reforming our immigration system makes sense.

President Obama's proposals for commonsense, compassionate, comprehensive immigration reform will strengthen our borders, ensure children who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants can go to school without fear, provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States, and promote better and better-paying jobs for all workers. His proposals will stop the tragic separation of families that have worked hard to contribute to their new land and to make a better life for their loved ones. And they include passing the DREAM Act, which would give hardworking students who came to this country at a young age an opportunity to pursue a college degree.

AFT members who work in high schools and colleges understand how life-changing the DREAM Act is for students who have done everything our society has asked them to do. They deserve a chance to attend college, enter military service if they choose, and further contribute to their communities and their adopted country without living with constant fear and uncertainty.

Congressional inaction and overzealous anti-immigration activists have led some states to pass policies that marginalize, intimidate and oppress people suspected of being in our country without authorization. An Arizona law effectively legalizes racial profiling by requiring police to detain people they

“reasonably suspect” are undocumented. In Alabama, teachers and other school employees were ordered to serve as de facto immigration officers charged with checking the immigration status of students in public schools. Our members saw the terrible effects on innocent kids—fear so great that many of them stopped coming to school. These laws have no place in a country whose founding principles include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The current immigration system adversely affects both native- and foreign-born workers in the United States. When immigrant workers are paid below the market rate, it drives down wages for all workers with similar skills. As Daniel Costa of the Economic Policy Institute writes, “The best way

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to protect the jobs, wages and working conditions for all workers, but especially low-wage workers, is to apply and enforce state and federal employment and labor standards equally. ... A worker's immigration status should be irrelevant.” Yet, funding to enforce labor standards and protect the rights of workers in the United States is only

about 9 percent of what the United States spent enforcing immigration laws last year.

This system has made undocumented workers and guest workers extremely vulnerable—to abusive practices, low pay, unsafe workplaces—and has created obstacles to seeking improved conditions. The outrageous abuses we have seen in some recruitment practices cry out for justice, and we have an obligation to reform the systems that are allowing them to happen. Three years ago, the AFT brought to light and helped end the abuses—including threats and extortion—of 350 Filipino teachers recruited to work in Louisiana. The AFT helped these teachers win a \$4.5 million settlement against the unscrupulous recruitment agency. I shudder to think what would have happened to them without their union.

Like many Americans, my grandparents were not born in the United States. They sacrificed much to get to their beloved adopted land, and they continued to sacrifice and strive once here. They faced the hostility and discrimination that plague many recent immigrants today, but it was their hope, hard work and dreams that prevailed. They loved America, and ultimately America embraced them. We need sound policies regarding who should enter, live and work in the United States, and on how to carry out these policies. And those policies should reflect the opportunity, equality and other core American values that embody our country's great motto: “E pluribus unum”—out of many, one.



Weingarten at the Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., protesting HB 56, the state law restricting the rights of immigrants.

Photo: David Bundy

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