

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE ON IMMIGRATION REFORM

JULY 16, 2005

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

On Saturday, July 16th, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas visited Oakland's First Congregational Church to hold a dialogue with members of the community, labor organizations and faith groups about her immigration reform proposal - HR 2092, also known as the "*Save America Comprehensive Immigration Act of 2005*". Over 100 members of the Bay Area community attended the forum and it was broadcast live on KPFA public radio (94.1FM). Throughout the event the church was filled with the joyful sounds of applause, laughter, and deep conversation.

The Congresswoman's visit was organized by an ad hoc committee made up of Bay Area immigrant rights, labor and community organizations who were all interested in raising awareness in the Bay Area about immigration reform. Members of the committee believed there was an urgent need to undertake this initiative because dialogue on immigration reform had been mainly focused on the "middle ground" proposal by Senators Kennedy and McCain. This week, the very conservative proposal introduced by Senators Cornyn and Kyl has been the focus of discussion for many immigrant rights advocates.

It is a sad reality that the dialogue on such an extremely important issue that affects millions of families has been distorted by mention of vigilantes, Minutemen, border security, terrorism and other terms that conjure up negative images. But now discussion of immigration reform has been infused with a dialogue of optimism, humanity, and justice. Now immigration reform is taking a direction that truly reflects the multi cultural mosaic that the US has always been. The starting point for the community dialogue was an effort to discuss what reforms our communities *really* need, not limited ourselves to only those a Republican-dominated Congress might approve.

HR 2092 provides a generous program offering legal status to the nation's undocumented, allowing people to qualify after residing in the US for five years and obtaining a knowledge of English. It actually has two legalization programs, one for people who have lived here for five years when the bill is enacted and a second for students who live here for five years at any time. It also changes the registry date from 1972 to 1986, which will permit many people who have been residing in the US since the revised latter year to apply as permanent residents.

HR 2092 also addresses the draconian overkill of the 1996 Act to restore fairness and due process to legal permanent residents in immigration legal proceedings, eliminates misdemeanors as deportable offenses and makes discretionary relief available for deserving cases. It contains important protections for the rights of immigrants. It would make threats in the workplace based on immigration status, an unfair labor practice, and asks the Secretary of Labor to conduct a survey to determine the extent of violations to immigrants' workplace rights. The bill is family-friendly. It doubles the number of visas available for family-based immigration, and expands the availability of the K visa, which allows certain categories of relatives to wait here while their paperwork is processed.

Instead of setting up a new guest worker program, HR 2092 focuses on finding solutions that work to the mutual benefit of immigrants and communities in the US which have suffered historically high levels of unemployment and discrimination, and works to reduce job competition. It stipulates that money from the application fees for legalization be set aside for job training and job creation programs.

The words imparted at the forum by Congresswoman Jackson Lee were very motivating and optimistic. She spoke about the right of immigrants to have healthy, stable, and prosperous lives as humans, as workers, as heads of families, and tax paying residents of this country. She recognized that the fight would be long and tiring but she admonished everyone with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King to "recapture the revolutionary spirit in a hostile world". She encouraged each one of us to "carry on" in this fight as Dr. King would have said to his brothers and sisters.

Without a doubt we are fighting the Civil Rights struggle of the 21st century. Yes, the struggle will be lengthy and sometimes very difficult. But as long as we remain united, determined, and true to our values we will win all that we demand.

Immigration reform needs to reflect the values which are at the core of our unity and strength as advocates of comprehensive immigration reform. These are legalization, a pathway to citizenship, family reunification, an end to employer sanctions and immigration raids, and workplace and civil rights for everyone. Immigrants have a right to community and equality. Temporary work programs which merely treat them as labor for employers violate those rights, lack respect for immigrants as full human beings and subject them to endless abuse. In this hostile climate of fear and intolerance it is good to be reminded of the virtue and power of our own values which reflect justice, humanity, and decency.

With all this said, the Planning Committee strongly encourages all communities nationwide to consider Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee's proposals as a viable and decent step toward comprehensive immigration reform. Moreover, we invite you to take full advantage of the willingness of the Congresswoman to visit your area and speak directly to the members of your community about her proposal. The Planning Committee is currently developing a resource guide of materials to help others plan a forum such as the one we held in Oakland. Until then, feel free to contact any of the members of the planning committee with questions or comments.

Thank you and carry on.

Planning Committee members: Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition (BAIRC), Coalicion Nacional de Inmigrantes Guatemaltecos (CONGUATE), Communication Workers of America District 9, East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE), East Bay Jobs With Justice, Filipino Civil Rights Advocates (FilCRA), Filipinos for Affirmative Action (FAA), San Francisco Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, Northern California District Council of Laborers, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Oakland Community Action Network, Priority Africa Network, UC Berkeley Labor Center, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 428.