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EDITORIAL

## Getting Immigration Right

It's way too early to tell whether the United States under President-elect Barack Obama will restore realism, sanity and lawfulness to its immigration system. But it's never too early to hope, and the stars seem to be lining up, at least among his cabinet nominees.

If Mr. Obama's team is confirmed, the country will have a homeland security secretary, Janet Napolitano of Arizona, and a commerce secretary, Bill Richardson of New Mexico, who understand the border region and share a well-informed disdain for foolish, inadequate enforcement schemes like the Bush administration's border fence. And it will have a labor secretary, Hilda Solis of California, who, as a state senator and congresswoman, has built a reputation as a staunch defender of immigrants and workers.

The confluence of immigrants and labor is exactly what this country — particularly, and disastrously, the Bush administration — has not been able to figure out.

In simplest terms, what Ms. Solis and Mr. Obama seem to know in their gut is this: If you uphold workers' rights, even for those here illegally, you uphold them for all working Americans. If you ignore and undercut the rights of illegal immigrants, you encourage the exploitation that erodes working conditions and job security everywhere. In a time of economic darkness, the stability and dignity of the work force are especially vital.

This is why it is so important to reverse the Bush administration's immigration tactics, which for years have attacked the problem upside down and backward. To appease Republican nativists, it lavished scarce resources solely on hunting down and punishing illegal immigrants. Its campaign of raids, detentions and border fencing was a moral failure. Among other things, it terrorized and broke apart families and led to some gruesome deaths in shoddy prisons. It mocked the American tradition of welcoming and assimilating immigrant workers.

But it also was a strategic failure because it did little or nothing to stem the illegal tide while creating the very conditions under which the off-the-books economy can thrive. Illegal immigrant workers are deterred from forming unions. And without a path to legalization and under the threat of a relentless enforcement-only regime, they cannot assert their rights.

It's a system that the grubbiest and shabbiest industries and business owners — think of the hellish slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, running with immigrant child labor — could not have designed better. Through it all, the Bush administration's response to criticism has been ever more enforcement.

Ms. Solis, whose father immigrated from Mexico and was a Teamsters shop steward and whose mother, from Nicaragua, worked on an assembly line, promises a clean break from that past. She lives in El Monte, a Los Angeles suburb where two compelling stories of immigrants and labor have emerged in recent years.

The first was tragic: a notorious 1995 raid at a sweatshop where Thai workers were kept in slave conditions behind barbed wire. The second is less well-known but far more encouraging: a present-day hiring site for day laborers at the edge of a Home Depot parking lot. The Latino men who gather in that safe, well-run space uphold an informal minimum wage and protect one another from abusive contractors and wage thieves. It's good for the store, its customers and the workers.

Ms. Solis is a defender of such sites and has opposed efforts in other cities to enact ordinances to disperse day laborers and force them underground. She understands that if day laborers end up in our suburbs, it is better to give them safe places to gather rather than allow an uncontrolled job bazaar to drive wages and working conditions down.

That's a bit of local wisdom that deserves to take root in the federal government.

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