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**March 28, 2007**

EDITORIAL

## **In Defense of Day Laborers**

In cities and suburbs across America, the confluence of homes, big-box stores and striving immigrant men has created an informal, often unruly job marketplace that has survived every effort to ban it or harass it out of existence.

This market, of Latino day laborers, is hardly the only manifestation of the shadow immigrant economy, but it is the hardest to ignore. These are the immigrants whom localities seem the most desperate to subdue, usually with laws against loitering and job solicitation. A Los Angeles suburb, Baldwin Park, is the latest of dozens to tackle the problem, with an antisoliciting bill written broadly enough to cover cookie-selling Girl Scouts but really meant for the Latino men at Home Depot.

Such crackdowns are constitutionally dubious and usually fail, and some lawmakers are having doubts about them. Last week, on Long Island, the Suffolk County Legislature defeated a bill to drive away day laborers by forbidding them to “obstruct” county roads. The majority understood that the dimly reasoned measure would have simply diverted workers and contractors’ trucks onto other roads while inviting civil-rights lawsuits. It would not have reduced the population of day laborers the least bit.

It was a good outcome for a bad bill, but the county is still stuck where it has been for years — wondering how to handle a volatile mixture of men and trucks in a suburb that wishes they would go away. A good next step for Suffolk would be to come around to a solution that other communities have tried, with generally positive results: a hiring site.

One can oppose illegal immigration and still approve of hiring sites, places where laborers can find shade, toilets and a safe place to negotiate jobs with contractors and homeowners. The most obvious reasons are crowd control and traffic safety.

But an equally compelling reason is that hiring sites impose order on free-market chaos. An unregulated day-labor bazaar wallows in the mud flats of capitalism, benefiting sleazy contractors and fostering rock-bottom wages and working conditions for all laborers, legal or not. Hiring sites that register and monitor contractors and laborers can hold them all to account. Employers who undercut competitors and rob workers will find it hard to return to a well-established hiring site, and drunks and belligerents among the laborers will be pressured to toe the line. These places are sometimes called “shape-up sites,” an apt term in more ways than one.

Some lawmakers have gotten over the notion that hiring sites are gifts to illegals, and have concluded that approaching day laborers as community members, with rights and civic responsibilities, is smarter than

ranting about them as pests. It is heartening that some local officials are willing to confront the realities of a flawed immigration system and to work responsibly to lessen its troublesome side effects.

Then there are those who hold out hope that with just one more crackdown, one more ticketing blitz, the men who make our suburbs gleam will take their sweat and muscle elsewhere and leave us alone to tend our homes and hedges by ourselves. Government officials on Long Island, as elsewhere, have tried stiff-necked hostility to day laborers, and have reaped years of failure. They should consider hiring sites as the next, positive step — one that promises not only to be practical and humane, but also effective.

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