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EDITORIAL

Immigration Reform and Hard Times

The Obama administration said last week that it would begin a major push for immigration reform this year. The country's two big labor federations just announced that they are joining forces to support that effort, which includes a path to citizenship for undocumented workers. That's double good news.

The administration is saying that it will keep its promise to fix the broken system, even if it means pushing the hottest of hot buttons: legalization, the dreaded "amnesty" that sets the Republican right wing ablaze and makes many Democrats quiver.

We are also heartened that American labor is speaking with a united voice in hard times, rejecting the false claim that fixing the immigration system will somehow hurt American workers. Even in a bad economy — especially in a bad economy — getting undocumented immigrants on the right side of the law only makes sense.

Administration officials said President Obama planned to speak publicly about the issue next month and would convene working groups this summer, à la health care, to begin discussing future legislation. Immigrant advocates were ecstatic, though it is important to note that this was not a promise to move a bill, only to start the debate. Even that is not going to be easy. Reform was thwarted in the last two Congresses by obstructionist Republicans committed to the delusion that expelling 12 million people amounts to a realistic policy.

The country has suffered mightily in the meantime. American workers and businesses continue to be undercut by the underground economy. The economic potential of some of the country's most industrious workers is thwarted. Working off the books — and living in constant fear of apprehension — they earn less, spend less, pay less in taxes and have little ability to report abuses or to improve their skills or job prospects.

The ingredients of reform are clear: legalization for the 12 million, to yield bumper crops of new citizens, to make it easier to weed out criminals and to end the fear and hopelessness of life in the shadows; sensible enforcement at the border that focuses resources on fighting crime, drugs and violence; a strengthened employment system that punishes businesses that exploit illegal labor; and a future flow of workers that is attuned to the economy's needs and fully protects workers'

rights.

The last point has been a sticky one with some unions. The agreement between the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and Change to Win — a rival federation that includes service employees, the Teamsters and carpenters — will center on a new approach to future immigration, a compromise in which an independent national commission calibrates the size of temporary-worker programs each year, based on conditions in labor markets. It may not be a perfect plan, but after years of vitriol, it's encouraging to hear calmer voices outlining smart reform.

We expect to hear more from Mr. Obama soon. It will take courage to defend the wisdom and necessity of fixing the immigration system. It will take even more courage to engage in the serious fight to do so. It is what the country needs and what American voters elected Mr. Obama to do.

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