

Boycott Effective Tool for Change

The news has been chock full of pictures and commentaries by people passionately interested in immigration issues. This month's column will focus on the role of immigration in our "free market" economy and a discussion of the use of economic boycotts to achieve political goals.

The United States has obviously been built by waves of immigrants throughout our history. Most of us can trace our roots and know the story of how our ancestors came to this country. The vast majority of American's sympathize with others who struggle to achieve, through education and assimilation, the language and culture. Our economy is founded on the theoretically "free" exchange of labor, capital and goods. The free flow of capital, or money, is an easy concept for American businesses, as we clearly want access to Asia's capital markets and have no trouble berating governments overseas for closed door policies that shut out our financial service firms.

When we look at the free flow of goods, for example those imported from China, there are calls for tariffs, protective laws and taxes to aid U.S. industries. Most people understand that America's consumers lose under tariffs because prices go up. Eventually, retaliatory action on the part of affected nations would escalate backlashes leading everyone worldwide to a much lower standard of living. This is what happened during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

The issue of free exchange of labor is much more emotionally charged! American industries such as agriculture, construction, and foodservices depend heavily on immigrant labor and much of that labor force lacks official paperwork.

Under current proposals being debated in Congress, illegal immigrants already in the United States would be prohibited from using previously presented false papers in order to continue their employment. They would fall into a black hole as there is no clear cut way for them to obtain legitimate authority to work in the U.S. The mass demonstrations that took place across the country recently had as their goal the legalization of undocumented workers. Whether the current law under debate in Congress ultimately provides this, is uncertain.

Our government is in a tight spot. Advocates of keeping illegal immigrants out of the U.S. garner support from voters concerned about the increased cost of public education and health should these services be extended to a larger population base. There are those who believe that encouraging current and future immigration is essential to the workings of the American economy. Even the new Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke, who is a well known scholar of the Great Depression, is greatly concerned. He warns that

“growing inequality threatens the U.S.’s commitments to open markets. Our society is based on opportunity, it’s based on flexibility in labor markets and product markets, and it’s based on open and fair trade. And all of those things are at risk if a growing portion of the population feels they are not sharing in the benefits from those changes.”

Did the recent one day action aid or hurt the cause of immigrants seeking legalization? Are economic boycotts a good or bad thing for our society? Politicians such as President G. W. Bush and New Mexico’s Governor Bill Richardson clearly feel that boycotts are an inappropriate expression because it hurts trade. I, on the other hand, feel that boycotts are one of the few effective tools available to populist movements. People can express their dissatisfaction effectively with the current system by withdrawing their labor and their capital. If everyone who was concerned with global warming rode bicycles to work and school one day a week, what a difference it might make. If only 10% of the people who profess to be vehemently opposed to American troops being deployed in Iraq agreed not to eat out at restaurants, buy fast food or go more than a few miles from home for recreation or vacations until the troops were withdrawn, our military involvement in Iraq would be over in a few months.

It is interesting to note that employers whose workforce consists mainly of immigrant labor supported the recent demonstrations and made allowances for their workers to attend. This is because they need the continued goodwill of the immigrant workforce in order to be globally competitive.

The reality of our situation is that many jobs would not get done if immigrants were unavailable to fill those positions. We need immigrant labor, yet we resent their potential weight on our social service systems. In much the same way, we resent China for its large trade surplus with the U.S. as we enjoy the benefits of that trade in the form of cheap consumer goods.

On the day of the boycott I was traveling in rural New Mexico. The hotel had on the Fox News channel in the lobby. I believe a gentleman named Xavier Gonzales, one of the organizers of the boycott, was speaking. He was being aggressively challenged by the Fox News commentator about how people breaking the law could justify doing so because they have legitimate cause. Mr. Gonzales, who was also interviewed on NPR the next day, held the high intellectual and spiritual ground over his challenger. He spoke articulately about the reliance of Americans on undocumented workers and defended the use of boycotts as wake-up calls. A humorous movie “A Day Without Mexicans” makes a similar point.

Do boycotts work? Looking back at the boycott of firms doing business in South Africa, and the previous successful boycotting of the grape industry in California during the 1960’s, it seems that boycotts can and do sometimes work. If there is a clear and concise message, it’s that if enough people believe in the actions proposed, and if the desired result can be implemented relatively quickly, then a small number of citizens acting in a concerted fashion can be effective.

This is not at all to say that the issue of immigration will be solved by any one piece of legislation. Due to the timely and critical nature of people earning a living, it is likely that we will see further actions similar to the recent one day boycott.

In consideration of American businesses, the boycott organizers gave employers enough advance notice so that they were able to reduce their operations ahead of time and not incur substantial losses. U.S. labor law protects participation in boycotts and so workers, at least those who are legally registered, are not at risk of losing their jobs.

Not everyone participating in the boycott had high aspirations for this first action. Arnaldo Garcia, of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugees Rights said, "There's a big gap between what advocates in Washington D.C. are negotiating and what the immigrant communities are really demanding." One thing is for certain, basic demographics are changing, and we cannot escape the economic social trend, the browning of America, which creates the need for further strong-armed actions to establish the rights of people who are part of the most recent tidal wave of immigration. It should be very exciting, at least for those of us who speak Spanish.

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