



Are we a just society?

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November 14, 2019

On a moonless summer night, a migrant worker met a reporter on a gravel road in central Wisconsin.

She spoke hesitantly, accompanied by a friend who acted as an interpreter.

She had agreed to meet only on condition that her name would not be used because she feared for her family's jobs in agricultural field work. But she wanted to tell her story of grim living conditions in the grower-provided housing.

I was there on that night some 50 years ago. As a reporter for the then-Milwaukee Journal, I was writing about migrant labor in Wisconsin and the state's efforts to improve their living conditions and the fairness of the labor contractors who arranged their employment.

Then-Gov. Patrick Lucey in 1971 had named a task force to recommend state action. Whether immigrants or, in some cases migrants from south Texas, their help was essential for the farmers who hired them to tend or harvest their crops such as pickles and cherries.

Circumstances have changed over the years, with some crop operations being automated and the need for hand labor reduced. But agriculture still needs immigrant labor.

That's especially so in the dairy industry where some 50 percent of the labor force is immigrant, according to a 2015 survey. And fear is still a factor; immigrants fear having their lives disrupted and dairy farmers fear the loss of their labor as the federal government cracks down on illegal immigration.

Although Wisconsin did improve conditions all those years ago (to his credit, Lucey once personally inspected a migrant camp to raise public awareness of the problem), the state and the nation have never come to grips with the role immigrant labor plays in our lives; we are glad for their help, but poor to reward it with a path to citizenship.

I thought of the woman on the road recently when I read of a proposed bill in Congress to overhaul agricultural labor programs — The Farm Workforce Modernization Act. The bill, which was introduced with bipartisan support, would offer a path to legal status for undocumented farm laborers who have been working in agriculture for at least two years and plan to continue.

The bill contains special consideration for dairy farming and other operations that need year-round workers, offering 40,000 extra green cards and granting three-year visas for workers in certain sectors like dairy.

Reaction from the farm community has been positive.

Progressive Dairy magazine quoted Brody Stapel, president of Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative and a dairy farmer in eastern Wisconsin: “Changes in demographics, labor patterns and the nature of the jobs have made it impossible for farmers to fill all available positions with American citizens. So, dairy farming has come to increasingly depend on foreign-born employees, who have proven to be invaluable.”

But there is no universal path to citizenship for those providing “invaluable” service. Those who are able to get green cards under the proposed program could apply for citizenship after five years with English and a civics exam, according to a Cato Institute immigration specialist. But it’s not like another immigrant program I’m familiar with.

The stewards who served meals in the officers’ mess on the ship where I served in the Navy were often Filipinos whom the Navy for decades recruited and trained for a variety of duties. They were eligible to apply for naturalization under an immigration law that allowed Filipinos serving on active duty in the military during a declared conflict to apply — a program that ended after the close of the Vietnam War.

According to the Los Angeles Times, “Between 1917, when America entered World War I, and continuing sporadically through Oct. 15, 1978, when Congress declared the Vietnam War officially over, about 30,000 Filipino sailors became citizens by virtue of the wars that involved the United States.” Why not give similar treatment to others providing valuable service to the country? What about our allies in the battles in the Middle East — people who risked their lives to help our troops?

When will Americans acknowledge our long history of using immigrant labor for their “invaluable” contributions without truly valuing it as in providing a pathway to citizenship. Yes, the dairy industry needs more help, but our immigration reform needs to go much deeper than a labor boost for farmers.

For example, the U.S. Supreme Court is now poised to decide whether the temporary program protecting undocumented migrants who arrived in the U.S. as children — the so-called Dreamers — will be allowed more time here under a program initiated by President Obama.

The Trump administration has moved to end that program, creating uncertainty for nearly 800,000 people on whether they will be deported to countries where they have never lived.

We must finally ask ourselves, are we a just society or not? The court’s decision will give us a clue.