

Time to ask tough questions on immigration

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FRESNO, CA-- “Had I been given a choice I would not have migrated to the United States,” Rosa, a farm worker who hails from southern Mexico said to me, “as soon as I was able to do so I left in search of work; first in Mexico’s northern states, then I continued north, following the crops, to toll in the California’s fields.”

Rosa’s story is painfully repeated to me time and time again by immigrants who, like her now call the Valley home.

From its beginnings the Central Valley’s agricultural industry has relied on easily exploitable labor, documented or not. Also from its beginnings these workers have been demonized in language designed to hide their enormous value to the industry and to our communities. What’s happening today is no different – despite the growing demand for immigrants’ services.

There’s no clearer example of dehumanizing immigrants than the mainstreaming of the term *illegal* to describe workers like Rosa.

Immigrants tell me all the time that they do not leave their countries by choice, that they were forced to migrate, even if it meant circumventing current immigration laws. The human instinct to survive and economic factors are more powerful than immigration laws.

But in the day and age of instant news, we prefer catch words that simplify complex social issues, even if this means negating the perspective of those most impacted by our policies.

Under the pretext of the *illegality* of our friends and neighbors, laws and policies that persecute workers, separate families and devastate entire communities are implemented by government officials and applauded by a growing sector of our society.

The name-calling has all but delayed legislative action on immigration, prolonging the multiple concerns surrounding the debate and has led us down the path of a near irreconcilable polarization. But the cost has been even larger for immigrant workers and their families; they have been subjected to the point of dehumanization where their basic human rights are negated under the guise of their *illegal* status.

At best immigrant workers in our country are acknowledged for their back-breaking work. It’s repeatedly mentioned that immigrants pick the fruits and vegetables we eat, clean our homes and take care of our children.

Immigrants are more than the work they do: they are human beings, they also struggle to have a political voice, they enrich the culture of our communities, they worry about their

children's future, they excel in education—many speak two or three languages--, they have a solid moral and work ethic.

It's absolutely true, immigration is regulated by laws, but laws have changed in order to respond to the economic rules of the moment. Just one example is the Bracero Program (1946-1964): it was fast-tracked when Mexican laborers were desperately needed and cancelled as soon as the demand for workers had declined.

Laws are not meant to last forever, they change in response to immediate needs. Law makers understand their role in ensuring that our society is not bogged down by obsolete and unjust laws. But lawmakers are standing in the way overhauling our immigration policies and that clearly points to the entrenched contradictions in our political system and our unwillingness to overcome them. We want immigrant labor but we don't want them here, we don't want their children and most certainly we don't want them to obtain political power. We want to keep them *illegal*, because by doing so we will keep them in the same low paying and unbearable jobs. We want immigrants to remain the perpetual *them*.

Our current situation is unsustainable. The immigration issue requires us to jointly find permanent and sustainable solutions that do not only respond to the shifting political winds and are not stuck on labels.

I often get asked what part of *illegal* I don't understand, answering the question will almost always mean ending up in a circular debate.

The question we should be asking is when will we start to understand each other. Let's start by upholding the worth and dignity of all people. The time to approach the immigration issue from a human rights framework is long over due.

Myrna Martinez Nateras of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) founded the Pan Valley Institute (PVI), a popular education center which provides a learning and gathering space for immigrants - Mexican, indigenous Mexican and Southeast Asian - as they strive to participate in the civic, economic and political life of the Valley. Participants focus on women's, youth, family separation and generational conflict issues; cross-cultural relations; and worker and human rights. Myrna also directs the AFSC's Proyecto Campesino in Visalia and Proyecto Voz in Stockton.