

INTERNATIONAL ATLANTA;

A weekly column from and about the ethnic communities of Atlanta;

Waging war on cheap labor

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Body

Recently I got a call at the Mexican consulate that made me feel as if I was living one of those surreal stories of Latin American literature.

Someone from a manufacturing company in Nashville wanted to find out how he could hire Mexican workers. We get this type of request many times a month. What made this one different was the timing.

When the phone call came in, I was in the middle of receiving a report **about** hundreds of undocumented Mexican workers who were being detained on **Atlanta** construction sites, to be sent back to Mexico.

This contradiction is a good example of the complex questions that make the issue of immigration in general, and undocumented immigration in particular, the subject of proposals, counterproposals, political grandstanding and serious misinfor-mation. It is difficult to separate all the subjective, and often valid, concerns from the objective reality of a problem that affects citizens and immigrants alike.

I have no answers, but I have many questions. These questions, if answered, could perhaps lead to a more realistic focus on a problem that is touching all of us in one way or another.

But before I "throw my spoon into the boiling pot," as we say in Mexico, let me state some principles I believe to be true:

1. The responsibility for solving the problem of Mexicans' having to leave their homes in search of a better economic life falls primarily on Mexico. It is up to us to give our people the possibility of a standard of living that will allow them to remain in the country they love and not have to leave for purely economic reasons.
2. The United States has the absolute right to put into effect any laws it deems necessary to regulate its immigration.
3. People - whether documented or not, whether legally here or not - must be treated with all the dignity and respect any human being deserves. (In my experience, the Immigration and Naturalization Service in **Atlanta** has always dealt with our undocumented nationals in a humane and sensitive manner.)

My questioning is based on those precepts. It is based, as well, on the belief in one of the main principles of a free-market economy, a system the United States has taught the world, sometimes benevolently, sometimes not: the principle of supply and demand.

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Many enterprises are looking for immigrant labor. And many people from Mexico, Central and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe are taking enormous risks to go to an unknown country, an unknown culture with an unknown language, to take those jobs. Isn't that a perfect example of supply and demand? Hasn't that been the history of the United States?

Are higher fences and more patrols and more discriminatory legislation going to stop this natural flow of supply and demand?

Perhaps we can look for more logical, more realistic options: maybe temporary seasonal worker agreements or other means of resolving together - Mexico and the United States, in our case - a situation that could either become an issue of confrontation or, hopefully, one more issue of friendship and collaboration.

Teodoro Maus is Mexican consul general in Atlanta.

Graphic

Illustration: Person carrying a box looks through a hole in a concrete- block wall at another person / Katherine Kanner / special

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