

**A path to *movement* citizenship:
PCUN/CAUSA's political vision for comprehensive immigration reform**

By Larry Kleinman

All around us, and within ourselves, we can feel the anxiety level rising: every time we face an enforcement-first budget rider, a Napolitano speech *sans* immigration reform, a White House meeting postponed or deemed as underperforming...every day Sheriff Arpaio abuses 287g powers (is there a day that he *doesn't?*), every "desk-top" raid, every pessimistic assessment about the prospects for passing health care reform (immigration reform's political pace-setter), every...*is our anxiety high enough yet?*

We—and those we organize and represent in this struggle—are right to feel anxious. Our anger is justified and our disillusionment understandable. Each anxiety-provoking development raises anew the nagging and discomfiting question: "when do we throw in the towel labeled "united front for immigration reform," quit compromising or holding back, and unrestrainedly take on our adversaries, untested friends, and shaky allies?"

Though we do ourselves and our base a disservice if we deny or ignore this anxiety, it's our job, as movement leaders, to resist it or, at least, to keep it in context. For PCUN and CAUSA, a central feature of that context is our vision for what we believe comprehensive immigration reform would make possible for our movement and our countries. As the tension rises, we must keep in mind the "size" of the prize and what we intend to do with it *if when* we get it.

It's not, in our experience, a binary calculation, but more of a balancing act. Our vision, described below, is central, but only one of the major ingredients in The Comprehensive Immigration Reform Dilemma. Here are some others:

- In our hearts, we all have a longing for "unconditional amnesty," a program which includes *everyone* and asks of them only what they have already contributed to society. It's the right thing to do and it underscores the struggle between the moral and political dimensions.
- There's the range of interests and sensibilities of those we represent, and the yawning gap between what they deserve and what they will settle for.
- The trend since the PATRIOT Act and REAL ID suggests that many of the bad provisions that will figure in reform—national ID card, border enforcement, some (can we hope for less oppressive?) form of interior enforcement—seem likely to be imposed with or without comprehensive reform.
- Even if full residency and citizenship takes years to achieve, legalization "front loads" reform's benefits, meaning that immigrants feel and get relief sooner than most of CIR's negatives kick in.
- Though everyone involved may evaluate them differently, we all can agree that the risks are daunting and the trade-offs are wrenching.

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Into this mix, we pour our vision for immigration reform as catalyst for building long-term political power. Before sketching how putting millions on the path to citizenship would change the political environment, we take account of *how it already has*. Where, for example, did those ten million Latinos who voted in 2008 come from? Though we've seen no statistical estimates, we're confident that a substantial percentage gained legal status through the Immigration Reform and Control Act or "IRCA" enacted in 1986, became citizens in the 90's, obtained legal status for their spouses and children, and had children born in the US, many now reaching voting age.

Less than three million immigrants gained status under IRCA. Imagine, therefore, the direct and indirect effects of six, eight, ten or twelve million qualifying in 2010. That's what we try to envision.

An overview of our vision touches on legalization's psychological and humanitarian, labor, political-electoral, and movement-building impacts, ranging from immediate to 2020 and beyond.

The psychological dimensions are as varied as they are powerful. As political organizers, we pay particular attention to immigrants and their families visualizing a more secure place in the U.S. and reaching the tipping point which unleashes their held-back investment in a financial, political and social future here.

For labor organizing, even conditional release from the grip being of undocumented will increase receptivity to collective bargaining and reduce paralyzing legal barriers such as the denial of reinstatement as remedy for anti-union retaliation and the I-9 check's laceration of just cause termination protections and seniority rights.

In political terms, passage of comprehensive immigration reform would send a resonating message to immigrants and Latinos that our movement, our country and our president overcame the racists, validated immigrants, and delivered on change that Republicans had abandoned and obstructed. Combine that with the psychological effects and with the pace and geography of demographic trends and we get at least the makings of enduring political shift.

Legalization implementation offers us a once-in-generation opportunity to build our organizations in a host of ways:

- Growing our organizations from "mini" or "medium" to mass-scale, from "many" to massive;
- Surfacing and developing leadership via the gravitational pull, especially for the young-adult children of immigrants, to serve in a crucial time;
- Banking long-lasting political credit: we delivered the opportunity and ushered immigrants through the process;

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- Positioning us to broker with powerful institutions, for example, arranging for micro loan programs to cover legalization fees and costs;
- Surfacing and organizing constituencies discreet to specific issues (e.g., young voters, military families) by unobtrusively including them in our mass orientation meetings on requirements and procedures for legalization;
- Extending our engagement with a new/expanded base for over a decade or more in sequential phases: orientation, temporary residence application, income tax preparation (or referral) and English classes, lawful permanent residence application, and citizenship application;
- Fashioning a new progressive power: *Someone*—media, reactionary church groups—is going to shape immigrant community attitudes on the environment, sustainability, civil rights, labor, choice, marriage equity and much more. Our credibility and scale, achieved through legalization, will give us considerable access and appreciable sway. This is what makes immigration reform an issue that *every* progressive should care about, even if they don't care about immigration.

We acknowledge that comprehensive immigration reform is a huge gamble. We might get enforcement only and conclude that we could have defeated or limited it if we had taken a more militant posture. We might not have the capacity to capitalize on legalization to build and sustain our organizations. The predominant politics in immigrant communities may, despite our best efforts, fall prey to reactionary forces. We might not ever build enough political power to undo the provisions we oppose or to reform the broader immigration, economic and trade structures that propel compulsory immigration in the first place.

When we take account of our vision, we find that it counter-balances a good deal of the anxiety triggered by the daily ups and downs of reform's "stock." The vision impels us to summon from ourselves the energy to press on and the resolve to make hard choices and to prepare ourselves for the much harder ones the lie ahead.

Pick your slogan: "We're In It To *Win* It," "Forward Ever, Backward, Never," "*Si Se Puede*," or, more topically, "*La Reforma Espera Porque La Salud Es Primera*" (this, our latest coinage). They seldom ring hollow if they conjure a vision.