Immigration

They Helped Re-Build New Orleans
Now They Face Deportation

Bill Quigley

BEFORE YOU READ: Share what you know about civil disobedience. What are some times in history when it has been used as a tactic to bring about change? What do you think of it as a tactic?

Risking Jail for Justice

In the 36 years I have been a lawyer, I have seen many people take brave moral actions. I have represented hundreds in Louisiana and across our country who have been arrested for protesting for peace, civil rights, economic justice, and human rights for all. It is amazing to see people put their freedom on the line when they risk jail for justice.

None are braver than the 17 immigrant workers arrested in New Orleans at the office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These mothers and fathers, members of the Congress of Day Laborers at the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, are standing up for justice and risking being deported from the U.S. They risk being separated from their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens.

They Did the Dirty Work

These workers simply ask for the right to remain in the city they helped rebuild. I was in New Orleans before, during, and after Katrina. ["Katrina" was a Level 5 hurricane that devastated the Gulf coast of the United States in 2005, killing almost 2000 people and doing $81 billion in damage. New Orleans, where the levees failed, experienced the most damage.] Thousands of immigrant workers arrived and labored to help us rebuild our communities. They often did the dirty work, the unsafe work, for minimal wages. They stood with us in our time of need. Now it is our time to stand with them.

Now They Live in Terror

The workers and families who helped rebuild New Orleans live in terror today. One of them is Irma Esperanza Lemus. Irma is married with three children, two of whom are U.S. citizens. One morning, while Irma and her husband were getting ready to take their children on a fishing trip, ICE agents with bulletproof vests and guns stormed up to their door. The ICE agents forced Irma to put her baby down, fingerprinted and handcuffed her, and led her away while her husband and two children watched. Irma is now scheduled to be deported, and has to wear an electronic monitoring bracelet at all times.

Another is Jimmy Barraza, who lives with his wife and stepson Carlos. One night,
while Jimmy and his wife were unloading groceries in their apartment parking lot, ICE agents surrounded them, guns drawn. They immediately handcuffed Jimmy and questioned his wife. When Carlos came out of the house, hoping to translate for his parents, ICE agents pinned him against a wall, cuffed him, and threw him to the ground in front of his mother. “For God’s sake, let him go,” his mother said.

An ICE agent answered: “There is no God here. I’m the only one in charge here.”

Immigrant workers and family members like these live in constant fear. If they leave their homes to walk their children to school, if they go to the laundromat or the barber shop or the grocery store, they will be targeted for nothing more than looking Latino, and their families will never see them again.

Immigration Reform and an End to Raids

Stories like Irma’s and Jimmy’s, and there are hundreds of them in New Orleans alone, are the reason that we need to end the raids and begin comprehensive immigration reform with strong worker protections. Until we do, people like these will have to continue standing up for justice: immigrants, people of faith, civil and labor rights leaders, and ordinary people from all walks of life who believe that all workers deserve dignity and all families belong together.

I volunteered to represent these mothers and fathers because they are struggling for human dignity, human rights, and for social justice for their children and for others. I am a Catholic social justice lawyer. How could I not stand in solidarity with these mothers and fathers? I am inspired by their courage and passion for justice. It is an honor to defend them.

What did immigrant workers do in New Orleans?

“They are the backbone of post-Hurricane Katrina reconstruction,” says USA Today. They are the workers who “converge at dawn and wait to be picked up for 14-hour shifts of hauling debris, ripping out drywall and nailing walls.” Yet these workers earned significantly less than documented workers. According to a study by Tulane University, they were exposed to harmful substances, but only one third of them understood the dangers. And only a third had access to protective clothing.

Many felt they could not complain. “It’s too dangerous for my body,” said one undocumented immigrant from Mexico. “But I don’t say anything. If I do, the boss says, ‘Hey, if you don’t work hard, I’ll take you to immigration.’”

FIND OUT MORE. See Issue #36 of The Change Agent, “Good Jobs, Not Just Any Jobs” to learn more about the rights of undocumented workers (pp. 40-41).


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