

Why preach about immigration reform on Labor Sunday?

By a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement. Since that time, labor leaders have spoken in many pulpits throughout the U.S. on the first Sunday in September.

Each year on Labor Day the nation pays tribute to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker. Ironically, since the early nineteenth century, many, though not all, of those workers have been recent immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren.

Throughout the twentieth century, laborers of various kinds were the bedrock of the U.S. economy and culture. But toward the end of the last century the pressures of globalization led to labor-intensive jobs moving to third world countries, where labor was only a fraction of the cost as here in the U.S.

Meanwhile, in the U.S. more and more citizen children went to college and entered into business, commerce, and technology occupations. With less people entering into menial-labor occupations, business owners began to look beyond our borders for laborers. As more illegal immigrants entered the workforce, this opened the door for unscrupulous employers to lower labor costs in fields like construction, agribusiness, and hospitality. These were labor jobs that could not, by their nature, be exported. Soon these job sectors were brought to the playing field at the level set by those who hired illegal workers.

Following the 1986 immigration amnesty under President Reagan, salaries in these occupations spiked briefly; but a huge influx of new illegal immigrant workers throughout the 1990s turned that trend back. Today, many assume in error that menial jobs are by definition low paying and that Americans workers don't want them.

Under the current immigration system, illegal immigrants caught in these jobs are condemned to low paying jobs that are nevertheless essential to the U.S. economy. At the same time, this is often the demographic group that is raising many of America's children, albeit in poverty.

This Labor Sunday gives us a great opportunity to pause and reflect on how comprehensive immigration reform could lead to growing salaries for both citizens and immigrants alike in these essential labor occupations. Such growth at the base of our economy is a proven engine for economic recovery, as increase wages translates into increase purchasing power and investment. Our workers deserve that chance.