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A Nation of Immigrants

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Standing Up for Immigrant Workers—A Call to Action

When we met in Los Angeles in October 1999, AFL-CIO Convention delegates began a long-overdue discussion about immigrants and immigration reform, and we asked ourselves a question that every generation of trade unionists has asked: “Which side are you on?” Four months later, in its groundbreaking February 2000 New Orleans statement, the AFL-CIO Executive Council placed our movement squarely and rightly on the side of immigrant workers. We reiterated that resolve in another unanimous resolution passed by the council when it met in Chicago in July 2001. At that moment, we believed—justifiably and with great excitement—that the movement toward reform we helped ignite two years earlier would soon lead to positive change for immigrant workers and their families.

Today we meet at a different time and in a different place. With the nation engaged in war sparked by the horrific terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, a growing tolerance, respect and understanding of immigrants who live and work among us has been replaced in some quarters with fear and scapegoating. Many who have always opposed immigration and fair treatment of immigrants now seek to capitalize on this fear to push for policies and practices that penalize hard-working immigrants for the deplorable acts of criminals who came to the United States not to pursue the American dream, but to destroy it.

The attacks of Sept. 11 and their aftermath, including the sharp economic downturn that has imposed such a great burden on immigrants, force us once again to ask of ourselves, “Which side are we on?” And they bear pointed and painful testament to the urgency of answering that question and standing in unequivocal solidarity with our immigrant co-workers and their families.

Today, we do so. We reaffirm our commitment to stand with and to stand up for immigrant workers in our workplaces, our society and our movement.

And we remain committed to pursuing an agenda that seeks legal status, opportunity for citizenship, protection of workplace rights, deterrence of employer abuse and opportunities for full civic participation for hardworking immigrant workers and their families.

The union movement never has shirked and never flinched in protecting this land we love. We are fully committed to defending our nation and to restoring our security. We recognize that the nature of the war in which we are now engaged may justify some tightening of immigration laws and procedures, where necessary and done in a careful and targeted manner, to deter terrorists or other ill-intentioned persons who enter the United States to do harm. At the same time, it is critical that measures to ensure our security not overreach to permit discrimination, racial or ethnic profiling or other abusive treatment of honest, hardworking immigrants or to countenance workplace inequities.

The last major act of terrorism on American soil, in Oklahoma City, was committed by white, native-born Americans. Immigrants are not terrorists. Terrorists are criminals, no matter where they come from. We will speak out forcibly and often on the necessity of distinguishing foreign-born criminals who came here to destroy us from the millions of documented and undocumented immigrants who came here seeking only to build better lives—and, in turn, have made our country richer and stronger.

With this resolution, we renew our call for:

- Legalization of the undocumented among us who are working hard, paying taxes and contributing to their communities and the nation.
- Federal, state and local action to ensure that immigrant workers and their families who were also direct victims of the Sept. 11 attacks, as well as those who are suffering from the aftermath of those attacks, be treated the same as their U.S. citizen counterparts with regard to benefits and services.
- Repeal and replacement of the employer sanctions/I-9 immigration enforcement scheme that neither deters the flow of undocumented immigrants nor protects the rights of any workers or the interests of honest employers.
- Full protection of workplace rights, including the right to organize, for all workers, regardless of their immigration status, and stiff and meaningful penalties for employers who break immigration and labor laws in order to exploit workers.

- Reform, not expansion, of guest worker programs.
- Commitment to the political process of building broad democratic grassroots power to achieve action on these immigrant issues in the local and national political processes.

We stand with immigrant workers to demand that they be treated with dignity and fairness, on and off the job. We will continue to blow the whistle on practices such as the outrageous behavior of the Holiday Inn Express in Minneapolis, where hotel management responded to a successful organizing campaign among a largely immigrant and female workforce by calling in federal immigration officials, who then jailed many of these hardworking, honest women. We took to the streets and the courts in protest, and justice prevailed: The women were freed, the hotel was penalized and the process of securing immigration and workplace protection for these courageous women moved forward.

We will continue to challenge systemic injustices, such as the exclusion of immigrants from unemployment insurance and other safety net programs during economic crises despite the contributions they and their employers make to finance these programs. And nationally and at the grassroots level, we will work in coalition with our allies to strengthen the political power of demands for justice for immigrant workers.

We believe the workers who chose us to represent them and to lead this movement elected us not for the good times but for moments like these, when the challenges are great and the times are tough. We know how much our immigrant members and immigrant workers have risked to build better lives for themselves and their families. We will not let them down. We know—and we are determined that they know, and that the whole nation knows—which side we are on.

Strengthening a Special Bond: Unions and Immigrants

Immigrants and native-born workers founded the American union movement to fight exploitation and abuse and to bring about improved working conditions and living standards for all working families. Today as well, many immigrant workers are fighting injustice and finding their voice at work by joining together into unions.

For immigrant workers, union membership is a powerful antidote to poverty and job insecurity. Union membership raises pay for immigrants and

substantially increases the likelihood of access to health insurance and, hence, health care. Unions are also a buffer against workplace injustice. Immigrants are even more likely than native workers to face exploitation and discrimination at the hands of unscrupulous employers. With a union card, immigrant workers know they have rights and allies to champion these rights.

The bond that unites immigrants and unions is not a one-way street: Immigrants enrich our movement too. The protections union membership provides for immigrants in turn builds a stronger, fairer and safer workplace for all workers. And immigrants are helping us expand our ranks and gain a stronger presence in new and growing sectors of the economy.

We are committed firmly to building bridges—and to tearing down walls within our own ranks. We will educate our members about the nation's immigration system and the problems faced by newcomers. We will work to teach all our members the importance of solidarity and that our destinies as workers are intertwined regardless of immigration status or country of origin.

Building Community Coalitions and Civic Participation

The most recent picture of our country, provided by the 2000 census, shows that—just as we are experiencing in our unions—immigrants are vital and growing parts of our communities throughout the country. And, in increasing numbers, immigrants and their sons and daughters are voting participants in our democracy. The AFL-CIO will increase the vigor and the reach of our participation in community coalition-building on immigrant issues with meetings and forums on the importance of full workplace and civic participation. With our partners in the faith-based, civil rights and immigrant advocate communities, we will work to increase public understanding of the contribution of immigrants in these communities and to generate political responsiveness to the needs of immigrants locally and nationally. We will continue to find public forums to advance civic integration and political participation.

Implementation of Immigration Law

At the same time, the promise of legalization is only real when the agency administering the program has the staff and resources necessary to process applications and provide other benefits in a fair and efficient manner. The failure of our current immigration system to promptly process immigration applications is one reason for undocumented immigration. As well, some family and country categories are so oversubscribed that family members must wait for more than a decade to join loved ones. All immigrant services and applications, whether for visas, work authorization or citizenship, should be processed

efficiently and expeditiously. Congress should ensure that all immigration functions are funded adequately.

Unions are playing an important role in bridging the gap between immigrant and nonimmigrant workers. We are uniquely situated to facilitate dialogue in our workplaces and our communities that we believe ultimately will lead to a stronger nation in which diversity is greeted with respect, not suspicion. Fairness and inclusion, not exclusion, will prove to be our strongest weapon against those who would tear our country apart.