RAISE WAGES, NOT WALLS

HON. CHARLES B. RANGEL

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, July 28, 2006

Mr. RANGEL. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to submit to the RECORD an opinion editorial from the July 25, New York Times entitled ''Raise Wages, Not Walls'' by former Governor and Democratic Presidential candidate Michael S. Dukakis and Daniel J.B. Mitchell in which the columnists openly criticize the current two primary policy approaches to illegal immigration, one being the erection of a wall along the Mexican border and the other being a temporary workers program. The apparent inefficiencies and problems inherent in both approaches have helped confirm that the raising of the minimum wage is the best and most efficient alternative.

It is a mistake to assume that the erection and maintenance of a wall will ever stop the influx of immigrants across American borders. Walls rarely work. Spending billions to erect something akin to the Berlin Wall is simply unnecessary, especially at a time when millions of Americans are unemployed. The approach by the Senate is also not very realistic. It created the temporary workers program, but requires employers first to attempt to recruit Americans to fill job openings. Also, its success is dependent on the creation and distribution of a costly national identification card. The cost for producing such a card for the 150 million people currently in the labor force—and the millions more who will seek work in the near future—extends to billions of dollars.

The time to raise the minimum wage is now. More States are raising their minimum wages, pushing hourly rates above $8 in some and shrinking the role of the Federal minimum wage, which hasn't gone up since 1997. It is difficult for Americans to work and sustain themselves with this wage. For full-time work, it doesn't even come close to the poverty line for an individual, let alone provide a family with a living wage. As a result, many immigrants are filling in the gaps left over by Americans, often working for minimum and sub-minimum earnings.

The minimum wage has already proven helpful to former welfare recipients who are entering the workforce. A study of a 1999 State minimum wage increase in Oregon found that as many as one-half of the welfare recipients entering the workforce in 1998 were likely to have received a raise due to the increase. After the increase, the real hourly starting wages for former welfare recipients rose to $7.23.

If we want to reduce illegal immigration, we must reduce the number of low paying jobs that fuels it. By raising the minimum wage, more Americans would be more willing to work in what is currently considered low paying jobs, denying them to people who aren't supposed to be here in the first place.

I enter into the RECORD the New York Times opinion editorial written by Governor Michael S. Dukakis and Daniel J.B. Mitchell and commend them for including raising minimum wage to the contentious debate concerning how to approach illegal immigration. I believe raising the minimum wage is by far a more effective way to deal with illegal immigration.

[From the New York Times, July 25, 2006]

RAISE WAGES, NOT WALLS

(By Michael S. Dukakis and Daniel J. B. Mitchell)

There are two approaches to illegal immigration currently being debated in Congress. One, supported by the House, emphasizes border control and law enforcement, including a wall along the Mexican border and increased border patrols. The other, which is supported by the Bush administration and has been passed by the Senate, relies on employers to police the workplace. Both proposals have serious flaws.

As opponents of the House plan have rightly pointed out, walls rarely work; illegal immigrants will get around them one way or another. Unless we erect something akin to the Berlin Wall, which would cost billions to build and police, a barrier on the border would be monitored by largely symbolic patrols and easily evaded.

The Senate approach is more realistic but it, too, has problems. It creates a temporary worker program but requires employers first to attempt to recruit American workers to fill job openings. It allows for more border fencing, but makes no effort to disguise the basic futility of the enterprise. Instead, it calls on employers to enforce immigration laws in the workplace, a plan that can only succeed through the creation and distribution of a costly national identification card.

A national ID card raises serious questions about civil liberties, but they are not the sole concern. The cost estimates for producing and distributing a counterfeit-proof card for the roughly 150 million people currently in the labor force—and the millions more who will seek work in the near future—extend into the billions of dollars. Employers would have to verify the identity of every American worker, otherwise the program would be as unreliable as the one in place now. Anyone erroneously denied a card in this bureaucratic labyrinth would be unemployable.

There is a simpler alternative. If we are really serious about turning back the tide of illegal immigration, we should start by raising the minimum wage from $5.15 per hour to something closer to $8. The Massachusetts legislature recently voted to raise the state minimum to $8 and California may soon set its minimum even higher. Once the minimum wage has been significantly increased, we can begin vigorously enforcing the wage law and other basic labor standards.

Millions of illegal immigrants work for minimum and even sub-minimum wages in workplaces that don't come close to meeting health and safety standards. It is nonsense to say, as President Bush did recently, that these jobs are filled by illegal immigrants because Americans won't do them. Before we had mass illegal immigration in this country, hotel beds were made, office floors were cleaned, restaurant dishes were washed and crops were picked—by Americans.

Americans will work at jobs that are risky, dirty or unpleasant so long as they provide decent wages and working conditions, especially if employers also provide health insurance. Plenty of Americans now work in such jobs, from mining coal to picking up garbage. The difference is they are paid a decent wage and provided benefits for their labor.

However, Americans won't work for peanuts, and these days the national minimum wage is less than peanuts. For full-time work, it doesn't even come close to the poverty line for an individual, let alone provide a family with a living wage. It hasn't been raised since 1997 and isn't enforced even at its currently ridiculous level.

Yet enforcing the minimum wage doesn't require walling off a porous border or trying to distinguish yesterday's illegal immigrant from tomorrow's ''guest worker.'' All it takes is a willingness by the federal government to inspect workplaces to determine which employers obey the law.

Curiously, most members of Congress who take a hard line on immigration also strongly oppose increasing the minimum wage, claiming it will hurt businesses and reduce jobs. For some reason, they don't seem eager to acknowledge that many of the jobs they claim to hold dear are held by the same illegal immigrants they are trying to deport.

But if we want to reduce illegal immigration, it makes sense to reduce the abundance of extremely low-paying jobs that fuels it. If we raise the minimum wage, it's possible some low-end jobs may be lost; but more Americans would also be willing to work in such jobs, thereby denying them to people who aren't supposed to be here in the first place. And tough enforcement of wage rules would curtail the growth of an underground economy in which both illegal immigration and employer abuses thrive.

Raising the minimum wage and increasing enforcement would prove far more effective and less costly than either proposal currently under consideration in Congress. If Congress would only remove its blinders about the minimum wage, it may see a plan to deal effectively with illegal immigration, too.

IN HONOR OF FRANCIS ALFONSE IANNI

HON. MICHAEL N. CASTLE

OF DELAWARE

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, July 28, 2006

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I rise today to pay tribute to Francis Alfonse Ianni, who is celebrating his 75th birthday this month. Throughout his life he has worked to protect and enhance the well being of the Delaware community and I join so many others in expressing thanks.

Frank began to serve his country at the early age of 13, enlisting in the Delaware State Guard in 1945. He quickly rose to the rank of Sergeant and transferred to the Delaware National Guard, where he served as a Staff Sergeant. He attended Valley Forge Military Academy and was designated as a distinguished, military graduate. In 1954 he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant to the 82nd Airborne division. Overseas, he served in Greenland, West Germany, and two tours in Vietnam. Upon his return, he continued to serve in the army as a Special Assistant for the National Security Council Affairs, and later, in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. In 1977, he went on to become the Adjunct General of the Delaware National Guard.

His dedication to protecting others transcends well beyond his military service. In 1981 he retired from the Delaware National Guard and accepted the position of Director of the Delaware Office of Highway Safety. While holding this position he was responsible for numerous significant advances in protecting our community, including: the Driving Under the Influence Law, Seat Belt Law, and Child Safety Seat Law. He also initiated the first sobriety checkpoints throughout Delaware, and was responsible for the first Alcohol Awareness Programs conducted around the holidays.