

VIVENCIAS: Reports from the field

RIVERS THAT WE CROSS... OUR NEW WAVE OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE SOUTH

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This speech was prepared but due to time constraints was delivered in a shortened version at the immigration rights rally in Lexington, Kentucky on Monday, April 10, 2006 in front of the county courthouse before a crowd of approximately 7,000 people. This Rally was sponsored by KCCIR, Kentucky Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

¡Si se Puede! ¡Si se Puede! yes we can! yes we can!

Good morning, it is so great to be here with you this morning on this historic day where several thousands gathered right here in Lexington have joined with many more thousands of other women, men and children all across this country to say that we are ALL HUMAN BEINGS and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect...to say that immigrant rights are human rights!...and to say that immigrant rights are civil rights!

This Immigrant Rights Rally here in Lexington is also in a historic place because directly behind this stage is the old courthouse...the building with the clock, where only 150 years ago this area around the courthouse was an auction block where African people said by whites to be less than human and denied rights were bought and sold into slavery. Right next to the courthouse is the street called Cheapside. It was so named because this is where white people could go to buy or sell an African person who might have been old, crippled or very young and in their eyes not very valuable and thus would go for a cheaper price compared to those very healthy and strong young men and women who were sold on the other side of the courthouse. Thus the name Cheapside has remained all these years. When you leave this rally or in days to come I encourage you to walk down this street and think



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of the sounds...the sights...and the smells that accompany an auction block for human bondage.

But of course Africans who were enslaved worked for **NO wages**...and immigrants today are forced to work for **LOW wages**.

During the years of slavery African people would try to escape slavery by crossing the Ohio River to the North. The Ohio River was the border between the free states of the north and slavery states of the south. These African people were seeking freedom from enslavement. They were seeking citizenship rights and they were seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Even after crossing the Ohio River many of these African people could not produce their freedom papers...or let's say that they were undocumented...and thus they were rounded up as illegals in the North, were chained and brought back to this very spot here in Lexington...whipped and beaten...and often were then sold back into slavery and deported to the deeper South where the conditions of slavery were much more harsh and cruel. Some Africans who managed to buy and regain their freedom and had documents showing that they were free people were still rounded up and brought back to Lexington and sold back into slavery. Lexington at this courthouse was one of the country's largest markets for the buying and selling of African people during the years of enslavement. Those conditions during enslavement of African people...people risking their lives by escaping from slavery in the South on the underground railroad and crossing the Ohio River...are quite similar to Mexican people and others today risking their lives by crossing the Rio Grande and the desert on a similar underground railroad seeking a better life for their families. Still today without your "freedom papers" or being undocumented, immigrants can be rounded up and sent back across a similar border and river separating North from South. The denial of freedom, respect and full citizenship rights to African people years ago was immoral and unjust and today the denial of respect and citizenship rights to immigrants from Mexico and around the world is also immoral and unjust. Because of our unique and continuous struggle for freedom, rights and equality, African-Americans should be very supportive and in the forefront of the struggles by other people in this country and around the world who are denied full equality, respect and rights as citizens of this earth.

I began with this because I want us all to understand that this struggle today of immigrant rights for human dignity...for respect...for citizenship rights is nothing new. This country, the United States, has had a love-hate relationship with immigrants since the founding of our country. The Irish, German and others coming here from Europe were needed to work the menial jobs and were treated with discrimination and disrespect. The Irish were called paddies, a derogatory term, and from there comes the term paddy wagon. Chinese Americans, called coolies, were brought here to build the railroads across the west, were treated with all forms of disrespect and were blamed for taking jobs from other people. Filipinos brought here after World War I and II to work in

the service industry and farm fields were treated with disrespect and discrimination. Japanese came to the US to live and work and were rounded up during World War II, lost their homes and properties and were sent to concentration camps. And during the 1920s Mexicans were recruited by Henry Ford to work in the auto plants in Detroit as well as the farm fields and service areas in the Midwest and Farwest. Then during the Depression years 1929–1932 these Mexican workers and their children – who were born in this country and were US citizens – were rounded up all across America. They were rounded up from the beet sugar fields in the Midwest...from the meat packing plants in Chicago...from auto plants in Detroit...from farms throughout California. These Los Repatriados, by the millions were deported or repatriated back to Mexico. The suffering was great and many died. We must not forget these histories of the different people who have immigrated to this country and their struggle for human dignity, respect and citizenship rights.

Some people in this country blame the immigrants from Mexico, from Latin America, from Africa and the Middle East for most all of the problems in our country. They are blamed for the lack of jobs. They are blamed for causing low wages. But of course we know that these hardworking people do not decide how much they should be paid. These people who were seeking a better life are not the ones to blame for these conditions. But using this logic then we could then blame workers not in unions for causing low wages. Or we could blame those persons working in the fast food industry for lowering the wages. Or we can blame our children who are working as teenagers for keeping the Federal minimum wage so low. WE MUST challenge this insane notion of immigrants or working people being responsible or being blamed for low wages. We must speak very clearly that it is the corporate-controlled federal and state governments...it is the power of the profit-driven multinational corporations...it is the money hungry agri-business operations...it is our misguided capitalistic value system that prefers to exploit and oppress people rather than provide wages and services that enhance people's lives, that keep wages low.

I would submit that the immigration rights struggle should unify with the living wage struggle demanding that the federal, state and local governments pass laws that require all corporations, all small and large companies, all agricultural and horse farms to pay a living wage of about \$10 or \$12.00 an hour. This immigration rights struggle needs to be connected to the universal healthcare struggle where we demand that the federal government provide free health care for ALL people...citizens AND immigrants. The kind of free health care that is available in Canada, in Europe...even in Cuba and Trinidad. The immigration rights struggle needs to be connected to the education/school reform movement that would provide not only much greater financial resources but also radical changes in the structures and curriculum that provide meaningful and purposeful experiences for students that are directed towards solving community problems.

Immigrants to our country are oftentimes called illegal but we should say very clearly that human beings are not illegal nor illegitimate. We should say that people are not illegal but war, poverty, lack of health care, lies by the government, torture of prisoners ALL are illegal. We should say that people are not illegal but the super-greedy-for-profits corporations like Wal-Mart, Exxon, Haliburton, Sedexo and so on...are illegal. We should say that our problems are not caused by illegal immigrants but our problems are caused by governments fighting illegal wars that create so many refugees, destruction of homes, hospitals...so much chaos, conflict and death. We should say that the problems are caused by illegal corporations exploiting the workers around the world forcing people to work in sweatshops and in other dangerous and unhealthy conditions We should say that the problems are caused by illegal trade agreements...like GRAFTA(NAFTA)...and groups like the WTO and IMF that create high national debt, unemployment and poor working conditions for workers around the world...we should say that the problems are caused by illegal corporations and chemical companies devastating the environment and polluting the water...the air...and the land...forcing people to work, go to school or live in toxic conditions.

In 1963 at the historic March on Washington the demands were for Jobs and Equality. Our cries and demands today are still for jobs with a living wage, human equality with citizenship rights... and also our demands are for radical immigration reform, no discrimination, universal and free health care, living wages and...for respect and human dignity.

I could say more but my time is up...we love you...we love you...

¡Hasta la victoria...siempre!

¡Si se Puede! ¡Si se Puede! yes we can! yes we can!

About the author

Jim Embry has been a community activist for more than 40 years beginning as a CORE civil rights activist in 1960 as a 10 year old in Kentucky. Over the years his involvement in movement building has included the student, black power, labor, socialist, peace, environmental, natural foods and various people of color movements. His travels to Brazil for the World Social Forum, to Cuba, various Caribbean countries and India has allowed his direct participation in the global civil society movement. In Lexington, Kentucky Jim works to synthesize these movements into the creation of sustainable communities based upon a sacred connection with the earth.

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