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Sense and Sandwiches

By JOHN TIERNEY
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The proletariat celebrated May Day by taking to the streets of America to demand lower wages.





Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
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["The Effect of Low-skilled Immigration on U.S. Prices"](#)

That's effectively what immigrants across America were doing yesterday, at least according to the economists who believe that allowing more immigration would depress the wages of unskilled workers in America. If that's true, then the immigrants already working in low-paid jobs here will suffer if there's a surge of new arrivals.

Yet immigrants yesterday skipped work, boycotted stores and attended rallies to support freer immigration. Some are illegal immigrants who want Congress to legalize their status, but many of the protesters already have green cards. Why do they welcome new competitors for their jobs?

The clearest answers I've found come from the international panel of experts I consulted at the Sunrise Cafe, the deli near my office where I get tuna sandwiches. It's staffed by immigrants from five countries in Central America and South America. They offered a couple of explanations: one economic, one moral.

They wonder, to begin with, if new immigrants are really much of an economic threat, and they're not alone in their skepticism. Although some economists calculate that immigrants have depressed wages for low-skilled workers by 8 percent, many others estimate the decline is only half that much. And others believe there's virtually no harm done, because businesses expand to create new jobs.



Evidence from CPI

Data [PDF] by Patricia Cortes. Working paper, November 2005.

"The Evolution of the Mexican-Born Workforce in the United States" by George J. Borjas and Lawrence F. Katz. Working paper, April 2005

"Is the New Immigration Really So Bad?" [PDF] by David Card. Working paper, January 2005.

"Rethinking the Gains from Immigration: Theory and Evidence from the U.S." [PDF] by Gianmarco I.P. Ottaviano and Giovanni Peri. Working paper, January, 2006

To the extent that anyone's hurt by immigration, the burden **INSIDE** falls not so much on the people complaining the loudest — American-born workers — but on the immigrants who are already here. The new immigrants have a harder time competing for jobs against English-speaking natives than against fellow immigrants.

Patricia Cortes of M.I.T. calculates that a 10 percent increase in immigration would reduce the wages of low-skilled natives by less than 1 percent, while causing an 8 percent reduction in the pay of the low-skilled immigrants already here.

Some of the immigrants at the Sunrise Cafe suspect that their wages might be affected, but they're still committed to the pro-immigration cause. Although they went to work yesterday, they vowed not to do any shopping, and most planned to go to a rally or march after work.

They told me they didn't see themselves as activists marching for Latino civil rights or political power. They said they supported freer immigration not to help themselves — they were already citizens or had green cards — but simply to give others the same chance they'd had.

"People need to support their families," said one of the cashiers, Carmen Salcedo, who arrived three years ago from Panama. "Here you can earn four times as much as you could earn in my country."

In between grilling sandwiches, Jorge Alvarez said he couldn't blame anyone for leaving El Salvador, as he had 19 years earlier. "There are not enough good jobs there," he said. "If people want to work hard, it's not fair to deny them the opportunity to come here."

The reasoning at the deli makes more sense than what I've been hearing from some intellectuals who want to restrict immigration in the name of social justice. Although more immigration may be a net benefit to the American economy, they've argued, it's not fair because it hurts low-income Americans and exacerbates the gap between rich and poor.

But even if you accept the debatable economic premise that low-income workers are significantly harmed, the argument fails on moral grounds. It flunks the famous "veil of ignorance" test of John Rawls, the quintessential liberal philosopher who stressed protections for the least fortunate members of society. Social rules are fair, he wrote in "A

Theory of Justice," if you would endorse them without knowing what your position in society would be.

Suppose you were setting immigration policy from behind that veil of ignorance. Which of these would you choose?




(1) Restricting immigration to protect some of the lower-paid workers in America from a decline in wages that would be no more than 8 percent, if it occurred at all.

(2) Expanding immigration to benefit most Americans while also giving some non-Americans living in dire poverty the chance to quadruple their income.

You don't need to slog through "A Theory of Justice" to figure out this one. You can get the answer at the Sunrise Cafe — and an excellent sandwich, too.

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