

First Fired – The Recession Hits Undocumented Immigrants

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Life is tough for undocumented immigrants even in prosperous times. But in a recession, it can be downright brutal.

“I’d say my income has gone down about 40%,” says Manuel (not his real name), a dishwasher in a local restaurant. “There aren’t many people going out to restaurants, so everything has fallen off a lot compared to what it was like before.”

His friend, “Pedro,” an office cleaner, agrees. “I work for a cleaning company that charges a lot, and many of their customers don’t have money to pay them,” he says. “So they’re taking out their own garbage and cleaning their own offices, to avoid that expense. I used to clean 11 buildings and send back \$300 to my family in Mexico every two weeks. But now I’m down to eight buildings, and I just send \$80 or \$100.”

The recession has also brought unexpected competition into job markets that undocumented immigrants usually dominate. “You feel pressured, because before almost nobody went looking for cleaning jobs – just us Latinos,” Pedro says. “But now even Americans want to do this work! So your bosses pressure you to work harder, because if you don’t, there’s someone else who wants to do your job.”

Charo Ledon owns Olas Travel, a travel agency geared toward Spanish-speaking clients, half of whom she estimates are undocumented. She says her business began to struggle well before the current recession, because her undocumented customers are particularly vulnerable to any downturns in the economy. “They are the first to be let go, because their employers save on unemployment insurance, since undocumented immigrants do not file for unemployment benefits. They are also not counted in the unemployment figures as a result. If they were, the percentage would be even higher than it is.”

The recession has worsened what was already a difficult period for Ann Arbor’s undocumented community. In January of 2008, Michigan began denying driver’s licenses to people who can’t prove legal U.S. residency. And in the spring of that year, there was a noticeable uptick in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in the area. According to Laura Sanders, co-coordinator of the Washtenaw County Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, the raids have shown no signs of abating.

“The ICE raids have not slowed down with the Obama transition as we had hoped,” she says. “In fact, they recently targeted a trailer park on Carpenter Road. We have now responded to 48 cases and counting. It looks like they wait until they have a list of people that they’re looking for in one area, then they target that area and end up taking people who aren’t on their list, and who they don’t have warrants for.”

With dwindling job opportunities and the stress of living illegally in the U.S., one might expect undocumented immigrants to just pack up and go home. But neither Manuel nor Pedro have plans to do so. “People are frustrated, and they’re scared about what’s happening with the economy here,” Manuel says. “But then you call your country and you hear that they’re going through the same thing. So you’re not going to solve anything by going back. There’s no work there either.”

Pedro agrees. “You’ve got to stay here through the good and the bad times, because it’s worse back home. Besides, I’ve got family here. My kids were born here, and they’re in school. We’re not going to take them out because of this. We’ve got to stay, see what happens, and put up with it.

“I’ve been here nine years, and I haven’t been back to Mexico in all that time. I’m all right here with my family. I’m not planning on leaving until they kick me out!”