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Moneymakers

Worker issues foremost for immigrants' advocate

By jenalia.moreno@chron.com

Poverty and civil war drove Nelson Reyes from El Salvador when he was a teen.

Now 31 and the executive director of the Gulfton Area Neighborhood Organization/Central American Refugee Center, Reyes helps the growing Central American population navigate life in the United States.

He is a strong opponent of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which has been signed by the United States and six countries, because he believes it won't help the rural poor.

Chronicle reporter Jenalia Moreno spoke with Reyes in his office in the Gulfton area, where many Central Americans live and work.

Q: Are we seeing an increase in immigrants from one country in particular?

A: Yes, they're coming from Honduras. ... Our economies never have been ready to provide support for these families to stay there and look for a better life. So they have to run out and look for something else, somewhere else.

Q: Why do you think so many companies are now supporting immigration reform, whereas a few years ago companies said they didn't hire undocumented workers?

A: Right now, what they are saying is, "Yeah, let's do it because our president, Mr. Bush, says that that's the right thing to do." Politically, they want to be correct. They don't want to be saying something against their leader. But economically they know they are going to lose. At some level, they're going to have to pay more money to these workers.

Q: What do you think will be the economic impact of CAFTA on the Central American region?

A: The same thing that happened in Mexico or worse. CAFTA is not a negotiation. It's very hard when you negotiate with someone who is stronger than you. ... What will you do with thousands of people working in the fields of Guatemala, Nicaragua, parts of Honduras, El Salvador and parts of Costa Rica? Well, it makes no sense for them to cultivate the land. They have to go somewhere else. Basically what we will see is an impact in the rural areas. More people will be coming to the United States.

Q: What do you think of OSHA and other groups spotlighting the high rate of Hispanics' on-the-job injuries?

A: First of all, it looks like all of these agencies, unions and the government discovered Latino immigrants in the United States like it's new. .. They recognize - what we have said for so long - that we are here, that they need to pay more attention to our workers.

Q: What do you think of union efforts to organize undocumented workers?

A: Unions: They just made a U-turn three or four years ago. Before, they were against (undocumented workers). Now, they say, yes, we have workers here. It was a win-win situation for them because if they want to survive as a union including immigrants, they have to support immigrant issues.

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