**A plea to Biden from longtime undocumented immigrants in Chicago: 'Please don't forget about us, we need job permits too'**

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Johanna Rangel and her mother, Juana Arreguin, prepare food at their family's shop, Nevería El Sabor de México, in Pilsen on Oct. 12, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

When recently arrived migrants, mostly from Venezuela, began to show up at Juana Arreguin's ice cream shop in Pilsen over the summer — some begging for money, others asking for a job — all she could do was feed them. Sometimes, she said, she would give them a few dollars or point them to someone who could maybe hire them.

"I wish I could help them, I know how it is to start from zero," said Arreguin, 52.

With the help of her husband, she managed to open the shop after nearly 30 years in the U.S. The couple, both of whom entered the country illegally from Mexico, said they used all their savings from working without job permits in the Chicago area their entire adult lives to open the shop.

They prayed the risk they were taking would be worth it.

It hasn't been easy, Arreguin said, but she's grateful for the ice cream shop with a dozen colorful tables and even more flavors and Mexican snacks.

Lately, however, she's felt a little disillusioned, perhaps frustrated.

Some of those new migrants — who she's been helping feed and guide in the city she's called home for decades — can now apply for job permits after President Joe Biden expedited work permits for migrants from mostly Venezuela, as well as Nicaragua, Cuba and Haiti.

Though Arreguin celebrates the increased opportunities for newly arrived Venezuelans in Chicago, she feels abandoned. She couldn't hold back the tears as she implored government officials to expand the program to other immigrant groups, like herself.

"Please don't forget about us. We need job permits too," she said while sitting in one of the benches of the ice cream shop.

She's joining the voices of thousands of other immigrants who live in Chicago without legal authorization and are demanding the Biden administration give them the opportunity to work legally as well. Bipartisan advocates leading the "Work Permits for All" campaign say Biden could change the lives of workers like Arreguin through the existing federal parole program that he used to provide work authorization for the newly arrived migrants**.**

Thousands of workers without permanent legal status — mostly from Mexico — traveled to Washington, D.C., last month along with community organizers, political leaders and even employers to push for the executive order. Though Arreguin couldn't go, she said she shared her story with the Tribune to empower other immigrants to speak up and bolster the movement that could materialize work permits for the estimated 7.8 million workers in the U.S. without legal permission.

The work authorization, advocates say, would allow those immigrants to step out from the shadows and improve their lives exponentially. They would receive workplace protections and legally set wages that they may be too afraid to demand under the current circumstances.

And they could visit their home countries without sacrificing the lives they have built in the United States. Many living in the country illegally go the rest of their lives without seeing family because they would be barred from reentering the U.S. if they left.

For a long time, Arreguin — who missed her father's funeral in 2004 — kept these hardships to herself. She was afraid to talk about her immigration status and lived in fear that she could be deported at any moment. It made her feel invisible.

Not anymore.

"If I don't speak up and show people what we're capable of doing even without government support, who will?" she said. "They (politicians) need to realize that we're no different from the new migrants who are also coming here for a better life. The only difference is that we have been here for decades and they have not acknowledged us even though we pay millions in taxes."

**Working without authorization, reporting taxes**

In Illinois, there are more than 300,000 workers without permanent legal status, mostly Mexican and many now in mixed-status families, who have been working and paying taxes without a job permit, according to the most recent Pew Research data. Most use an individual taxpayer identification number — provided by the federal government to report income instead of a Social Security number — to file their taxes.


Hundreds rally in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood on Oct. 12, 2023, to demand work permits for all immigrants. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

Some people find work by using fake documents.

Others use somebody else's Social Security number or work under the table to get paid in cash. The only legal way for those who don't have a job permit to work is to become contractors, like Arreguin.

Regardless of how they pay into the system, most file their taxes using the ITIN number even if they're not eligible for government entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicaid.

Arreguin was able to get her business license with the ITIN number she's been using to pay her taxes since she arrived in the country in the early '90s. Last year, she paid more than $13,000 in taxes.

Undocumented workers in Illinois pay an estimated $900 million in federal taxes and $700 million in state and local taxes, according to the latest report from the American Immigration Council. And in the past year, some have decided to make their presence known in more than just dollars and cents.

At a recent rally in Pilsen, several of those workers took to the stage to share their stories — and, for some, their heartache — in hopes that officials recognize their economic contribution and put them back on the agenda.

Many cried, holding signs with the number of years that they have been working in the country without a job permit: 17, 20, 29, 30, 33.

“We are being forgotten,” Consuelo Martinez, a mother of two, said in Spanish when she took the stage as she held a sign with the number 27.

Martinez isn’t afraid anymore either. She is stepping out of the shadows on behalf of herself and the estimated 180,000 workers in Chicago without permanent legal status.

“Biden, listen to us, we want to work without fear, like our Venezuelan brothers and sisters,” she said.

**‘It is only fair’**


DACA recipient Erendira Rendon, left, weeps with emotion and is comforted by Julieta Bolivar following a rally for work permits on Oct. 12, 2023, in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

The song “Mojado”' by Ricardo Arjona played in the background of the Pilsen rally. An ode to the millions of people who have crossed the southern border into the United States through the Rio Grande, its title means “Wetback “in English.

When Erendira Rendon heard the song, she couldn’t hold back tears.

She cried as she hugged some of the women who stood by her side telling their stories. They reminded her of her Mexican parents who made their journey north in 1987.

As a young girl, Rendon was inspired to pursue advocacy work because of her own immigration status, living in the country without authorization, and the desire to help her family. In 2012, she got a job permit and protection from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, an Obama-era policy for which she pushed hard.

Now as the vice president of Immigrant Justice at Resurrection Project, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that advocates for immigrant rights, Rendon has been at the forefront of addressing the needs of the migrants since the first group arrived on a bus sent from Texas by Gov. Greg Abbott in late August 2022.

Rendon and her team are now organizing legal clinics across the city to help new migrants apply for expedited work permits. The group is also helping Venezuelan migrants apply for the extension of temporary protected status, a program that allows people whose home countries are considered unsafe the right to live and work in the United States.

Though she has been making a difference in the lives of asylum-seekers, Rendon suddenly felt futile when the Biden administration announced it was granting work permits to recently arrived migrants.

It is something she has wanted for her community all her life, she said.

“We deserve a job permit. It is only fair,” Rendon said.

But longtime unauthorized immigrants have little hope of ever fixing their status.

Many of the Mexican immigrants who entered the country came with the understanding that they were crossing illegally and went into hiding, said Rendon. Some are still afraid to ask for community resources or apply for government resources for their U.S.-born children because they fear deportation, she added.

Despite crossing without authorization, most immigrants reunited with family or friends and had a support network already in place.

Venezuelans do not.

Most new migrants are part of the first wave into the country, many of them seeking asylum. Without a safety net in place, the state of Illinois and city of Chicago have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in the past year to provide shelter, food, permanent housing, health care and now legal aid to process work permits for the new migrants.

**Resentment and frustration**

That government help has raised feelings of resentment and frustration among some who arrived in the country decades ago from Mexico and other countries. Many say they also ran away from violence and poverty, but did not receive — and will never receive — that kind of public aid.

It has been voiced in community meetings hosted by the city regarding the opening of new shelters and, more notably, in the number of protests against the erection of winterized tents to house the migrants from the cold in Brighton Park, a predominantly Latino immigrant neighborhood with a growing Asian population.

It's a resentment stoked by the government's own tangled policies.

It begins with a federal humanitarian program that allows migrants from certain countries to seek asylum but does not grant them automatic work authorization. It's further compounded by a system that regards some migration as forced and others as voluntary regardless of the similar hardships endured in their native countries.

"In each and every turn, longtime undocumented immigrants in the United States have seen other populations move forward and have been told to take the back seat and to wait," said Angela Garcia, a sociologist and assistant professor at the University of Chicago whose work focuses on unauthorized immigrants from Mexico in Chicago.

There is little hope that anything will change soon.

Efforts to legalize the 11 million people living in the country without authorization have stalled for decades, with the last relief coming in 1986 through the Immigration Reform and Control Act, also called the Reagan Amnesty.

Rendon predicts that the lack of action from political leaders will have an impact in the upcoming presidential elections. And even affect local politics.

U.S.-born children of the longtime unauthorized workers who are eligible to vote are most likely keeping tabs on how their parents and elders are being treated by the leaders, Rendon said.

A recent poll commissioned by the American Business Immigration Coalition showed that voters in seven key states support the expansion of work permits for immigrants living here illegally. The poll, by Lake Research Partners, found even deeper support among certain groups of voters. Eight in 10 Mexican American voters in these states and over eight in 10 Democrats support the policy. U.S. citizens in mixed-status families are essentially unanimously in support, with nearly nine in 10 strongly supportive.

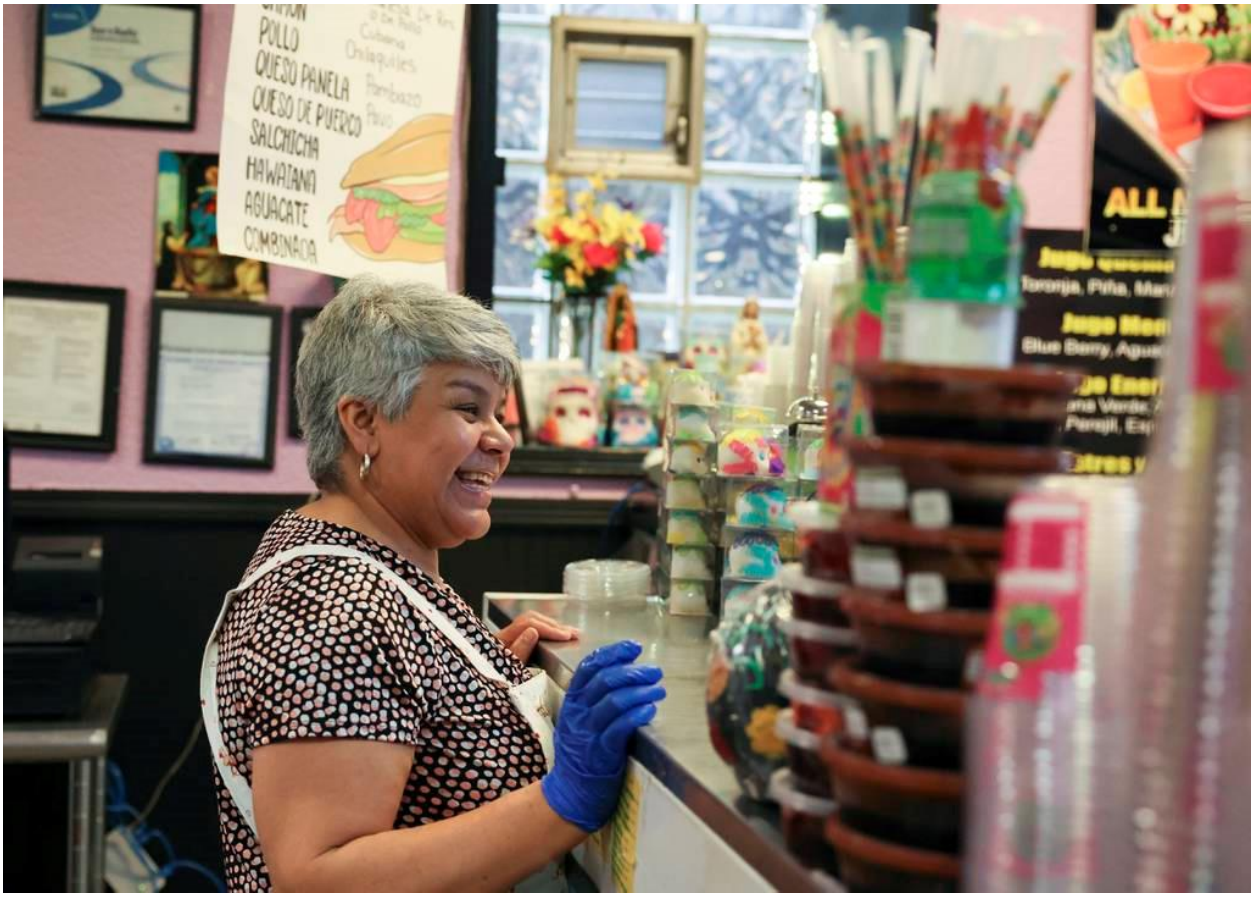
Arreguin's daughter, Johanna Rangel, 23, said she is planning to vote in the upcoming elections.

"For my parents," she smiled as she looked at her mother.

**Everyone eager to work**

Arreguin knows that some people are angered by the amount and type of assistance that new migrants are getting. But she is not one of them.

She remembers the day she crossed the southern border with her husband and the eldest of their three children, who was only 1 year old. Fleeing a world with high crime, organized crime and no access to education, the young family found refuge at her brother's home in the United States and lived with him until they could rent their own place.




Juana Arreguin helps a customer at her family's shop, Nevería El Sabor de México, in Pilsen. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

Arreguin easily sees herself in some of the Venezuelan mothers she's encountered, including a young migrant mother who recently came in with her child and asked for a job at the shop**.**

"I know that it is difficult for them, especially for the parents. I can't imagine living in a shelter, eating cold food or that your children are hungry," she said.

"It makes me sad but we can barely keep the business running on our own," said Arreguin. Her two young grandchildren, Rangel's children, often play in the store while their mother works.

One of the tables has their smiling faces painted on it. The shop is their second home, she said.

Despite the significant efforts to push for the expansion of the policy, Arreguin doesn't expect the Biden administration to step in for them anytime soon.

Either way, she says, making noise is worth the try.

"One day, God willing, we'll be recognized for all the work we've done," Arreguin said.

Her faith in God is rooted in the hope that she will get to see her mother, 85, who still lives in Michoacan, Mexico, one last time. She still thinks about her late father every day.

As autumn leaves fell on the ground, a customer entered and Arreguin stood up from the bench to walk behind the counter.

“*Buenas tardes,” she said. “Como le puedo servir?”*

“Good afternoon. How can I help you?”

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