

Opinion Exchar.

REACTIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

Unjust laws must be resisted

● Today's immigration system brings to mind the laws encountered in 1930s Germany and the "Jim Crow" era.

By VIC ROSENTHAL
and JULIE PLAUT

The Senate's attempted immigration bill made us wonder whether the laws governing immigration are just and fair. If not, are we obligated to uphold them, or do we have a higher obligation to resist them, to advocate change and protect human rights?

In the 1930s, Germany adopted a series of laws designed to segregate one group of people and deny them basic rights. Under these "Nuremberg laws," Jews were forced to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David, saw many of their schools and businesses closed, and suffered other indignities. In the United States, from the 1890s until the 1960s, many states adopted so-called Jim Crow laws. Like the Nuremberg laws, they were designed to segregate and denigrate one group of people. Black citizens were denied voting rights, access to schools and public accommodations, and protection from violence.

It must be remembered that these discriminatory laws, like so many others, were passed by democratically elected govern-

ment officials and enforced by the police and others supposedly dedicated to serving the public.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us that resisting unjust laws is important to a democratic society. In a 1963 letter from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote, "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

Most everyone agrees that our current immigration system is broken. But more than broken, our immigration laws are unjust. Current laws deny workers due process and the right to organize. Visa quotas and backlogs keep families apart, sometimes for more than 10 years. Children of immigrants, who did not make the decision to immigrate to this country, are nonetheless punished, denied access to health care and affordable higher education. Undocumented immigrants help meet the market's demand for labor, yet are

forced to live in fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in their workplaces and neighborhoods. Our current system provides no legal avenue for the victims of failed trade policy and global poverty to immigrate to this country and make a better life for their families, as many of our ancestors did.

King called on Americans to resist unjust laws because God's law was a truer moral guide than any nation's laws. In the 1930s, the Nuremberg laws were not resisted, and the Holocaust that followed killed millions. Prior to the organized resistance and defeat of the Jim Crow laws, millions of African-Americans met with degradation, humiliation and death. Now unjust laws mean undocumented immigrants in the United States are subjected to dangerous working conditions, separated from families and terrorized by raids. Arrests and deportations happen without consideration of their impact on children or the larger community.

The bill in the Senate would have fixed some of these injustices but brought forth new ones. It eliminated several categories of family-based immigration and shifted green-card distribution toward a point-based system that favors the

highly educated and skilled, thereby splitting apart countless families and creating class-based criteria for becoming an American. It created a temporary-worker program that provides no path to permanent residency and denied workers full employment and civil rights protections, thereby creating a new underclass in our country and driving down the wages and benefits of all workers. It included high fees, fines and touch-back provisions that unfairly and arbitrarily penalize and separate immigrant families. Our moral responsibility is to stand against the unjust and for the just, not to replace one set of injustices with another.

It is time for Americans to come together and pass humane, workable immigration reform that creates a path to U.S. citizenship for all current and future immigrants, reunites families, ensures due process and protects worker and human rights. Let us act today on the shoulders of all who have demonstrated the highest respect for the law by resisting its immoralities and pursuing its honorable reform.

Vic Rosenthal is executive director and Julie Plaut is board chair of Jewish Community Action in Minneapolis.

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