

Letter from the Panda Express Workers to President-Elect Barack Obama

December 10, 2008

Dear President-Elect Obama:

We would first like to congratulate you on your election and your work in your community. Our names are Marlen Moreno-Peralta, Omar Espino-Lara, and Rosalia Araceli Torres-Ruiz, and we are three of 11 Panda Express workers arrested on March 18, 2008, in Tucson, Arizona. We were charged with “aggravated identity theft,” a class 3 felony, under a new law that took effect in September 2007 in the state of Arizona to include the use of a false Social Security number to obtain work.

That morning eleven of us, ordinary working people, were torn from our families, including U. S. citizen children, and were kept in custody in the Pima County Jail without bond without regard to our ties to the community. Under Proposition 100, passed in 2006, we were held under “no bail” provisions simply due to our status as undocumented, resulting in an almost 5-month county jail stint and separation from our families.

Faced with indefinite detention pending our legal battle, we finally decided to plead guilty to a misdemeanor offense of “criminal impersonation,” even though our attorneys assured us of a high probability of success on the “no bail” decision as well as the underlying charges. We were sentenced to “time served” and were released with no probation term, directly to the hands of the immigration authorities.

The three of us are the only ones that were granted bail by the immigration court, and only with the help of community groups were we able to post high bonds in order to continue our legal attempt to remain with our families in Tucson, Arizona. We were all brought over as children by our parents, who were simply trying to make a life for us and to unite with our families in the U.S. We all have U.S. citizen children, some of us with lawful spouses and other family members, and a great love for this country. We do not know any other place as our home.

We write you this letter to implore your new administration to consider the following actions as high priority as you begin your presidency:

1. That you immediately call for a complete halt to criminal prosecutions of immigrants on charges of identity theft when they are simply working to earn a living;
2. That you call for a halt to raids on immigrants and for ending the detention of massive numbers of immigrants.

You said in your campaign that you will act on behalf of all in this country, and for the good of the world. Hundreds of thousands rallied around your call for “change we need.” The change we need in the area of immigration, while multi-layered, must include a halt to the ever-growing enforcement. Immigrants, especially from Mexico, have only helped to build this country. We have actually brought greater “security” by working for our families and improving their lives, and we are now dismayed that we are accused of the opposite. We trust you will listen to our just demands, and that you will bring the change we need.

Sincerely,

Marlen Moreno-Peralta
Omar Espino-Lara
Rosalia Araceli Torres-Ruiz