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## ***Room For Debate: The Competition for Low-Wage Jobs***

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### **Expect More Workplace Abuses**

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Immigrant workers in the low-wage labor market are experiencing a lot of what workers born in the United States are experiencing: higher unemployment, loss of hours, unpredictability of pay and schedules, increased work loads. And we will undoubtedly see heightened competition for jobs — that always happens when unemployment goes up as workers become more willing to consider lower-level jobs.

So we may see some increased mixing in the range of workers competing for low-wage jobs.

But what we should really be concerned about is that all low-wage workers are vulnerable to abuse in the current recession. Violations of minimum-wage and overtime laws are on the rise as employers focus on cutting costs and as workers have fewer options. For example, employers are asking workers to forgo overtime pay, or take a pay cut to below the minimum wage while business is slow. This trend was already building in low-wage industries before the recession hit. But it's only getting worse.

Public policy needs to intervene and re-establish workplace protections that were put into place during the last century: the minimum wage, overtime pay, health and safety on the job, the right to organize. We need to reinvigorate the United States Department of Labor so that it actually does its job and enforces the protections that many of us take for granted, but that growing numbers of workers are left without. It also means making those protections stronger.

Finally, we need to push forward on comprehensive immigration reform, with an unerring focus on ensuring that immigrant workers have equal status in the workplace. Any other solution that creates a second class of workers only opens the door to exploitative business practices, which inevitably spill over to hurt us all.

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