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Take Back America Conference Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

Acceptance of Paul Wellstone Citizen Leadership Award Wednesday, June 4, 2003 Washington, DC

Se puede! Thank you, David Wellstone, very much. It's an extreme honor to not only receive it, but to be the first. I attribute the work that I do to the very many hundreds and hundreds of courageous workers and leaders in our union and I'm so proud to be a part of the Hotel Workers and Restaurant Workers Union. I would like the tables of our leaders to please stand up and, because they're here because they are representatives of the many, many struggles of working people throughout this nation.

I just want to share that the first time I directly heard of Senator Wellstone's work with our union was when he stood in the forefront of fighting for eight undocumented Mexican housekeepers in Minneapolis. You see, they had been leaders in a union organizing drive in that hotel. But because they had led the drive – and the unions – their vote had been overwhelmingly in favor of the union, the employer decided that the best way to go was to call INS. So they called INS into the hotel to have those women deported. Senator Wellstone with our union leader there, J. Rakunic, led the fight for those workers to be able to stay in this country and fight that employer and other employers and they were successful!

I got to meet him personally was in 2000 when the National Democratic convention came to Los Angeles. The hotel workers in Santa Monica were engaged in a very, very bitter and hostile campaign to organize. The owners were highly regarded within the top circles of the Democratic party for their fundraising skills, if you know what I mean. So you can imagine the demonstrations at this particular hotel at the time of the National Democratic Convention were not warmly embraced by some. But as you can also imagine, Senator Wellstone was one of a handful of elected officials to stand there on the side of the workers and tell it like it was! You know, maybe it was because his father was a Russian immigrant, who I understand spoke ten languages, but “still did not fit in.” Or that his mother was the daughter of Ukranian immigrants and a school cafeteria worker. His parents, grandparents, like my parents who came from Mexico, like millions of immigrants, were forced to move, forced to leave their homes, you think for a better climate? Or for lower taxes? Or maybe for better schools? Maybe they were forced because their country's wealth was drained by powers across the border. Powers, across the world in fact. Maybe they were forced by seeing too many of their own children die before they even had a chance to live. Maybe they were forced by armies or police, who threaten their lives. But once they decided to move, they were again forced to face death under the desert sun, or by asphyxiation, inside a locked trailer,

truck trailer, like the 19 Mexicans, who just two weeks ago were found dead in Texas, including a father and his 5 year old son who wanted to start all over again.

The surge of immigrants who increasingly perform America's labor is dramatic and it's growing in almost every single corner of this nation. So the question is not whether they will remain in this country, because America's economy cannot survive without them! The fruits and the vegetables that we eat, and the manufactured products and the human services all Americans have come to rely upon, depend upon immigrant labor. The only question is, whether these men and women will continue living in the shadows of fear, continue to be exploited, continue to be separated from their families and be denied a voice in a country that relies so heavily on their contributions and sacrifices. Well thank God we have taken a new direction, and we're going to Take America Back!

Immigrant workers and allies will seek the basic rights by embarking upon the Freedom Ride inspired by the 1960 Civil Rights movement. The Freedom Ride of 2003 seeks to fulfill the promise that this country holds out to its people, a promise that too long has been denied because of the language that we speak or our national origin or the color of our skin. This promise was born of a commitment 227 years ago—that all men, *and* women, are created equal.

Immigrant workers are moving together, but this time we're moving to find justice and equality. We're moving with clergy, we're moving with the AFL-CIO, we're moving with students and progressives to Take Back America. We are setting out from 10 cities in buses and we're going to travel across the country. Hundreds in those buses will arrive here in Washington, DC on October 1st and we expect to see you all, join us! We're going to meet with our congressional representatives and at the White House and we're going to demand respect and recognition. The new Freedom Riders will then go to New York City, the capital of immigrants and the traditional strength of our labor movement, for a mass rally on October 4th. Join us there too!

We invite you, we invite you to join with local coalitions that are being built. From the NAACP, to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to student organizations and the AFL-CIO. Join us for vigils in front of a meat packing plant in Omaha. Or to thank the governor of New Mexico, Governor Richardson, for his courage to stand on the side of immigrants. We're going to rally with the Emacoli farm workers and we're going to visit with them in the Dr. King center where a star to Cesar Chavez will be unveiled when the Freedom Ride passes through.

We're going to emphasize the urgency to vote because in order to change the immigration laws, we need to change those who are in Congress and the White House right now! And the only ones we're going to elect are the ones who have the backbone to fight with us, like Senator Paul Wellstone did. You see, we are all Americans because we live here. We work hard, we pay taxes, we serve in the armed forces and we give our lives for freedom and equality. The fight for the rights of immigrants is a fight for our civil liberties. The fight for immigrants is a fight for housing and it's a fight for good paying jobs. Together, we're going to build a progressive movement, together we're

going to fight for union jobs. Together we're going to fight for good health care and good education. And together we're going to fight for equality of all. Viva Senator Wellstone, and don't forget, "Si Se Puede!"