



Published February 7, 2007

Guest-worker programs would hurt all workers

JOSEPH HANSEN
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

The recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids at Swift & Co. meatpacking plants have again focused attention on the need for national immigration reform. Guest-worker or temporary-worker programs have been suggested as part of the solution, but they're a bad idea.

Under such programs, permanent jobs will turn into temporary ones. Workers in our country must have the opportunity to work toward full inclusion into our society, not be cast aside and trapped in a second-tier system from which they can never escape.

For more than 100 years, the meatpacking industry, where our union represents 250,000 workers, has depended on immigrants. But immigrant workers are relied upon throughout our economy, whether in slaughterhouses, nursing homes, laundries, hotels, hospitals, construction or scores of other industries. The trouble is that our immigration system has failed to keep pace with the changes occurring in our economy. If guest workers fill these permanent and integral jobs in our local economies, it would be bad for workers, bad for employers, bad for communities and bad for our country.

In today's global economy, if companies can't export jobs in search of cheap wages and weak labor laws, they import workers to create a domestic pool of exploitable labor.

The failure of trade policy to include strong, enforceable labor standards is a significant factor in the creation of a vast international workforce willing to cross borders in search of employment. In low-wage industries where Americans work alongside illegal immigrants, everyone suffers equally in the form of lower pay, fewer benefits and substandard conditions.

The Swift raids are simply the latest in a long chain of disruptive and ineffectual actions resulting from the failure of our immigration system. It's time to put an end to this failure.

We need a comprehensive immigration system that secures our borders and strongly controls legal entry into this country. It should criminalize employer recruitment and importation of undocumented labor. Current employer sanctions are inadequate and ineffective. It should provide a path to legalization for immigrants who have worked here for years, paying taxes and contributing to their communities. And it should ensure that our immigration processes do not provide employers an incentive to undermine workplace standards that lower wages and benefits for all workers.

Temporary-worker programs would only exacerbate our problems by institutionalizing our current system, where immigrant workers are preyed upon and used as a wedge to lower wages and working conditions for all workers. Such programs create an underclass of workers and engender racial and other discriminatory attitudes toward individuals who are afforded neither full rights on the job nor participation in our society. This creates a culture in which people believe that a person's race, color, or national origin relegates them to a life of low-paying jobs with no future.

No matter how many protections get written into a temporary-worker program, the approach inherently provides employers with the opportunity to abuse and exploit workers, especially in low-wage jobs. I have witnessed how employers disregard the law and act to end workers' temporary work status when, coincidentally, they happen to be speaking out on behalf of safer workplaces or forming a union.

American democracy works because it is inclusive. Temporary-worker programs permanently exclude individuals who contribute to our economic well-being from participating in our democratic process. At its core, the inclusive nature of American democracy ensures respect for the individual and holds out hope that everyone can achieve the American dream.

We must have an immigration system that turns hope into reality for all workers.

JOSEPH T. HANSEN is international president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union.