

Possible Sec. of Commerce Nominee is More of the Same When it Comes to H-1Bs

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As many of you know, though I'm a lifelong Democrat, I have not been happy with the party's nominees for the presidency in recent elections (nor have I liked the Republicans). And though I was quite pleased that an African-American won the election, and I find Obama to be an inspiring speaker, I don't think his promise for Change will be fulfilled. On the contrary, I'm thinking of the French saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

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Case in point is the report that Symantec CEO John Thompson may be Obama's choice for Sec. of Commerce [1]. Talk about NON-change! Just a few minutes of Web browsing revealed a Thompson letter to a Symantec PAC, reported in a critical blog under the title, "US company Symantec using PAC to bypass campaign contribution limits 2008." I then found several articles showing that Symantec does a substantial--and apparently increasing--fraction of its R&D in India [2].

Equally disturbing is the list of people pushing Thompson's candidacy. We find that Thompson was suggested to Obama by Rep. Zoe Lofgren, Queen of H-1B, and he has enthusiastic support from the ITAA's Phillip Bond (who came to ITAA from the Dept. of Commerce). There's also Carl Guardino, one of the most outspoken advocates for increasing the H-1B cap. It's clear that they all expect Thompson to advance their agenda at DOC.

Indeed, Bond's description of Thompson as "globally experienced" is very telling. The firm says about 30% of its engineers are in India, and last year Symantec opened a second R&D center there.

Meanwhile the front runner for Obama's new national CTO position is said to be Padmasree Warrior of Cisco Systems. Seems like Obama intends Business As Usual in his administration.

I must interject here that Hilda Solis, Obama's pick for Sec. of Labor, did say in her confirmation hearing that employers should do a better job of looking for Americans before hiring H-1Bs. (This was in response to a question from Sen. Johnny Isakson.) But she prefaced her remarks by conceding that she didn't know much about H-1B, and it was clear that she didn't know that (other than a minuscule exceptional category) H-1B law doesn't require recruiting Americans. Though some H-1B reform activists were excited by her remarks, I believe it means nothing. Once she gets educated (not least by the industry lobbyists), she'll be speaking the industry party line, "H-1Bs for now, better K-12 education for the future labor supply." Solis seems to be a decent person (I've followed her career a bit the last few years), but the reality is that she will be required to support the industry.

Let's hope I'm wrong about these people.

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