

Unions Split on Immigrant Workers

By Krissah Williams Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, January 27, 2007; D01

Union leaders are fundamentally divided over how to best tackle immigration reform as they wrestle with how to convert illegal immigrants from job threats to dues-paying members. The split reflects long-standing questions over the place of undocumented immigrants in the labor movement.

One side supports a guest-worker program, which could permit hundreds of thousands of immigrants to enter the country annually depending on the needs of U.S. businesses. The other side says such programs encourage employers to pay less, exploit immigrant workers and drive down working conditions for everyone.

The Service Employees International Union, with many immigrants among its 1.8 million members, backs the guest-worker idea, leading it to an unusual labor-business alliance with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The AFL-CIO, a federation of 54 unions, calls guest-worker programs exploitative and wants immigrants who enter the country to do so as permanent residents, not temporary workers.

Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of SEIU, which broke from the AFL-CIO in 2005 over strategic differences, said his union recognizes "the reality of the marketplace and the economy." A guest-worker program could give immigrant workers the right to unionize and eventually petition for citizenship, he said.

Immigration reform, which congressional leaders and President Bush have called a priority, has wide implications throughout the U.S. labor movement. Last year, the Senate proposed a guest-worker program that would have made immigrants temporary residents and employers responsible for requesting their green cards.

Unions universally opposed that proposal and are trying to shape a plan to their liking, but their divided voices could dilute their message.

Immigrants are the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. workforce and organizing them has been a priority for unions as they shift from a message of "protect American jobs."

"It's a sea change from the early 1990s when immigrant labor was viewed by many as the enemy of organized labor," said Harley Shaiken, director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. "Now labor recognizes the reality of 12 million undocumented people in this country and the complexity of how to regularize that."

When thousands of immigrants marched on the National Mall last year, many of the organizers were union leaders. The spokesman for the Washington region's immigrant coalition was also the leader of a SEIU local. AFL-CIO leaders also stood with immigrant activists at marches, and last year they formed an alliance with a national group of day-laborer centers.

For some, guest-worker programs awaken memories of the government-sanctioned -- and flawed -- Bracero Program that operated from 1942 to 1964. It locked immigrants, mostly Mexican men, into English-language contracts that they could not understand and made them beholden to farm bosses. At the end of their contracts, under which they picked sugar beets, cotton and other crops for long hours and low pay, the immigrants were deported.

Ana Avendaño, the AFL-CIO's associate general counsel, called today's guest-worker programs, which tie immigrant workers' visas to their U.S. employers, "modern-day Bracero Programs."

"The bells and whistles they are currently adding to the temporary workers programs are bound to fail, they have been proven to fail," she said.

Medina said the SEIU advocates a guest-worker program with visas that would let workers change jobs, join unions and petition for permanent residency.

"Workers that come here would have full protections of our labor rights, including the right to organize, and they would have an independent method of enforcing those rights," Medina said.

SEIU's support of a revamped guest-worker program reflects a desire to create politically tenable immigration reform. Bush has said that his support of immigration reform hangs on the inclusion of a temporary-worker provision.

"Immigrants really want something. There's such desperation for some resolution of this mess," said Ruth Milkman, a professor of industrial sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles.

But SEIU's temporary-worker proposal is nothing like the president's plan to connect "willing employers with willing workers" or the guest-worker provisions floated in Congress, which would not give workers the right to independently petition for permanent residency.

Finding middle ground could be tough. Broad support is needed to change immigration laws, said proponents of increased immigration, who have been pushing to rewrite the laws for years.

"As the process goes along, I think there's a framework for the labor movement to come together," Medina said. "It won't be an easy process, but it can happen."