



## 'Keep jobs here' bill reintroduced in the Legislature

Tuesday, February 03, 2004

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After the state Senate voted 40-0 last year to require workers on state contracts to be U.S. citizens or legal aliens, the bill seemed headed for easy approval in the Assembly.

The issue had picked up political steam after it was learned that cheap overseas laborers in India, using assumed American names and dialects, were hired as customer service representatives to run telephone call centers to assist welfare and food stamp clients in New Jersey. State Sen. Shirley Turner (D-Mercer) led a charge to end that practice and guided the bill through the Senate.

But the measure died in the Assembly State Government Committee, failing to even get a hearing. And the Legislature's lone Indian-American representative, who opposed the measure, said he got "hate mail" as a result.

Now, Turner and Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer) will have a second go at it. Both have reintroduced their legislation in the Senate and Assembly for consideration this year, joining legislators in seven other states who had followed Turner's lead.

Her bill has been amended from its original version to allow foreigners in the United States on work visas to be eligible for the employment pool for state contracts and for noncitizens to do work for specialized services that cannot be provided by American workers.

"It's more important now than it was before because of what we have seen happening in this economy," said Turner, who has appeared on national television shows and been featured in dozens of newspaper and magazine articles. "I'm not anti-trade. But I think this bill is about fair trade and favoring a pro-American economy."

Turner crafted the legislation in response to a move by eFunds Corp. of Scottsdale, Ariz., which in 2002 won a state contract to process electronic welfare and food stamp cards for 194,000 New Jersey residents. The company then moved its customer service center from Green Bay, Wis., to Bombay, India, where workers get \$2 or \$3 an hour -- far less than U.S. workers.

Officials at eFunds, which also moved call centers for a dozen other states to India, said they needed to remain competitive in an industry relying increasingly on cheaper overseas labor.

The issue caught the attention of state Human Services Commission Gwendolyn Harris, who negotiated a deal with eFunds to move the call center back to the United States, at a higher price. Some dozen workers now run the office in Camden. It also struck a chord with many New Jersey workers.

"There are a lot of people in their late 40s and early 50s who have worked in the industry a long time and lost their jobs to foreign labor," said computer programmer Boris Galinsky, 47, of Summit.

"Big business is going for cheap foreign labor," said Deborah Campano of Branchburg, who was laid off from her information technology job, took a \$30,000 pay cut to get another job and has since been laid off from that one, too. "It's time for people in this country to wake up to the fact our jobs are going overseas."

A key player in the issue is Assemblyman Alfred Steele (D-Passaic), who chairs the State Government Committee, and bottled up the bill in the last legislative session.

Steele, who did not respond to repeated requests for comment, said last year he would post the measure for consideration. Galinsky and members of the Programmers Guild, an association of workers in the information technology industry, met with Steele and got his support.

"We got such a warm reception. He assured us he backed the bill," Galinsky said. "Then he did a total turnaround and blocked it from being considered."

Industry officials have lobbied against the measure, calling it a mistake in an increasingly global economy. They contend such measures could foster anti-international trade sentiments, lead to trade wars and hurt the global economy.

Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula (D-Middlesex), who lobbied against the bill, said Steele made the right choice. He said the bill would make services provided to the state more expensive and could limit the state's flexibility in fiscal matters.

"But people blamed me for stopping it because I am of Indian origin, as if I would have a vested interest in it for that reason," Chivukula said.

Chivukula said the state should try to cut deals with firms that use foreign workers to get back some of the savings to be used to help finance state job training programs.

However, Turner and Gusciora said they will fight for the bill because they are concerned about the loss of domestic jobs to lower-paid workers in other countries.

"I resent as a taxpayer that our dollars will pay for a government service performed outside the country," Gusciora said. "New Jersey has no business farming out work that could be done by our own state's residents."

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