

"Guests" Who Never Leave

Historically, there are just two problems with guest worker programs that have been implemented in the United States. They have traditionally been brought here to fill labor shortages that didn't exist, and they have rarely gone home when they were supposed to.

Today, there is no evidence of any endemic shortages of labor in any sector of our economy, and given all the incentives being offered for people to remain here permanently, there is even less reason than before to expect that guest workers will ever go home.

The labor shortages that exist in America, in almost all cases, are self-induced. When employers have trouble finding workers, it is almost always because the wages and working conditions are unattractive, not because there are insufficient people to do the jobs. Guest worker programs have become a mechanism for employers to avoid making jobs more attractive to American workers.

What differentiates the new guest worker proposals currently being considered by Congress from those of the past is that they have dropped all pretense that these workers will be here temporarily. Most of the "guest worker" bills now under consideration include provisions for the guest workers to become permanent residents. Because these guest worker programs are open-ended, employers know they never have to improve wages and working conditions to retain workers, because once the current crop of guest workers achieves permanent resident status and move on, they can simply bring in the next group of guest workers to take their place.

Historically, the government has done a poor job policing guest worker programs to ensure that American workers are not bypassed in favor of foreign guest workers. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence that this is precisely what has happened and continues to happen in every guest worker program. Like previous guest worker programs, the proposals before Congress rely on the self-serving attestations of employers to establish the need for guest workers and their good-faith declarations that they are paying guest workers the prevailing wage.

In addition to the overt guest worker proposals, increasingly, such programs are becoming a feature of international trade agreements. Recently approved trade pacts, and several that are still on the table, include open-ended agreements that the partner nations will not only be allowed to send goods to this country freely, but workers as well.

The common features in every one of the guest worker bills before Congress are that they provide very few protections for American workers, and those that do exist are virtually impossible to enforce, and that there is little if any chance that the guests will ever leave.

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