

Congress considers a new Guest Worker program

Migrant workers, minimum wage

by Suzanne Pharr

There is a time-honored tradition in this country of relying on various kinds of immigration to supply labor:

- forced immigration to provide free labor (African slaves for agricultural work)
- voluntary immigration to provide low-paid labor (Chinese for railroad construction, Irish for mine work)
- temporary immigration to provide low-paid labor (Mexicans for the agricultural and poultry industries)



Farmworkers
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In addition, imprisoned laborers perform chain gang road work and, more recently, produce goods and services for corporations. In every case, poor people with few options (either because of economic conditions or violence) are imprisoned through control by individuals or corporations, whose coffers they fill through their labor.

This country's commitment to human rights is shown by its treatment of these exploited workers, treatment which includes unsafe working conditions, forced labor, restriction of mobility, sub-human housing, no health care, disregard for families, and physical and verbal abuse. The U.S. cannot successfully posture as the champion of human rights abroad when it willfully carries on a government-sanctioned agenda of human rights violations at home. To legitimize this abuse, the government collaborates with corporate America.

The U.S. now has in place a "Guestworker program" which permits large employers to

bring workers over from other countries, while limiting their access to the outside world. The current program is used primarily by Eastern agricultural companies in sugarcane, apples, and tobacco. At the instigation of Western growers, Congress is currently considering an expansion of this program, under which workers will have even fewer rights. In both versions, workers are contracted to firms through the U.S. Department of Labor. Their status is similar to that of indentured servants in the 1700s, except that these laborers do not have the option of working toward freedom and citizenship. Instead, when they are used up or no longer needed, they are returned to their countries. The argument for these bills is the supposed lack of U.S. workers to fill the needs of corporations.

Stop for a minute and put these things together:

- 1) welfare is being dismantled, placing tens of thousands of people into the low-waged job market;
- 2) Manpower, Inc., a national "temp" agency, is now the single largest employer in the U.S.;
- 3) a national campaign by successful ballot initiatives by the right, is attempting to prevent "illegal" migration and to limit new immigrants;
- 4) the INS constantly raids immigrant worker communities and deports workers;
- 5) in every major city, workers are lined up on streets and in worker centers hoping to be chosen for day work, no matter how menial or physically taxing or dangerous it may be.

Isn't there something wrong with this picture? There is no dwindling labor supply. Government surveys consistently support this truth.

So what's going on here? Ramon Ramirez, president of PCUN (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) asserts that the reauthorization of the Guest Worker program is, for the farmworker community, the equivalent of a Oregon's Ballot Measure 9 (which

in 1992 attempted to deny civil rights to lesbians and gay men.)

This program would be similar to Ballot Measure 9 in at least two ways:

First, just as gay men and lesbians would have been separated out under that Measure, this program would deny these temp workers basic human and civil rights, separating them from everyone else, giving no consideration to their humanity. The program would also remove protections guaranteed under the Constitution to all people within U.S. borders from guest workers alone.

Second, as Ballot Measure 9 employed homophobia to try to persuade people to vote for a measure that would have harmed people of color, women, and poor people in addition to gay men and lesbians, the Guest Worker program uses racism and classism to lead people to accept a policy that would harm every worker in the U.S.

How does this work? Ballot Measure 9, while calling for the denial of civil rights to lesbians and gay men, actually redefined civil rights to mean "special rights;" it promoted the idea that only "deserving minorities" should receive these "special rights" based on good behavior, and it called for a popular vote to determine who was deserving and who was not. This initiative paved the way for the attack against affirmative action and for the heightened general attack against taxes that funded services and benefits for women, immigrants, and poor people. Oregon's Ballot Measure 9 and Colorado's Amendment 2 (also aimed at gay men and lesbians) were key to breaking down the assumption that as members of society, we all are responsible for the well-being of our neighbors.

While appearing to concern the human rights of people primarily from Mexico or Asia, all workers in the U.S. will feel the impact of this program. It was designed not only to provide cheap labor to greedy corporations, but to undermine U.S. workers in several ways:

1) It pits worker against worker, leading low-paid U.S. citizens to resent "temp" workers, thus fostering racist violence. Workers

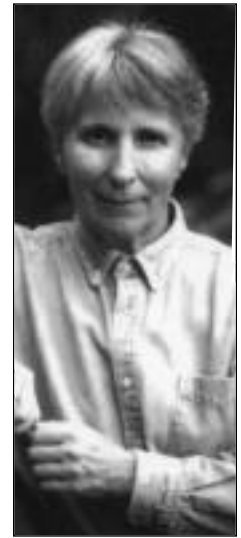
uniting through recognition of their mutual exploitation then becomes virtually impossible.

- 2) It undercuts union organizing of low-skilled, low-paid workers because "temps" live under fear of deportation, and U.S. workers live in fear that their jobs will be given to "temps."
- 3) It is part of an effort by corporations to eliminate workers' rights to bargain, to organize, and to demand a living wage and safe working conditions.
- 4) It will help hold down the pay scale for everyone. It also encourages the increased use of temporary workers who are not only paid little but given no benefits.
- 5) The program uses the racism persistent in this society to lead many to think that the Guest Worker Program is not important because it affects only poor people of color who are not U.S. citizens. Consequently we might be led to act against our own humanity, as well as against our own best interest.

The Guest Worker Program, along with initiatives such as Ballot Measure 9, remind us once again the truth of the time-honored statement of solidarity: "An injury to one is an injury to all."

What we can do to stand in solidarity with workers:

- Call members of your Congressional delegation and urge them to oppose the bills, H.R. 3410 and S. 1563.
- Call the INS and tell them that the raids against immigrant workers are not what you want your tax dollars used for.
- Know your rights and help others know theirs. Organize to defend them wherever they are challenged



Suzanne Pharr is an author and organizer with over 20 years experience. She founded the Women's Project in Arkansas and has presented workshops on social and economic justice issues to grassroots groups, schools and churches throughout the country. Her two books: Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism and In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation are both available from the Western States Center (see Catalyst insert).