

Why We Oppose “Guest Worker” Programs

Undocumented immigrant workers provide a vast and steady source of cheap, largely unorganized labor, making it easier for employers to maximize profits by keeping wages low. These workers have few, if any, labor or legal rights, and are therefore at the mercy of their employers. They receive second-class treatment, poverty wages, and benefits are non-existent. They work in some of the most difficult and dangerous jobs, and the threat of deportation is constantly hanging over their heads if they dare complain or attempt to organize a union to fight for their rights.

One of the proposed “solutions” to undocumented immigration is an expanded guest worker program. Advocates of this program claim that by formalizing undocumented workers’ status through the issuing of temporary work visas, they will at the very least have *some* basic protections. But the reality is that these protections are extremely limited and are virtually unenforceable. The experience of past guest worker programs shows that these protections aren’t worth the paper they are printed on.

Take for example, the *bracero* program, in which 4 million Mexicans worked in the US as “guest workers” between 1942 and 1964. Despite having legal protections, they received rock bottom wages, lived and worked in inhuman conditions, and were liable to be deported the moment they spoke up for their rights. But not only that: as a way to encourage them to return home once their contract was up, they had 10% of their wages withheld and were told they could collect the 10% when they went home. But when they did go home, the 10% had disappeared. The fact is, whenever a group of workers has second-class status (e.g. part-time workers), they also have second-class rights, and those few rights are enforced in a second-class way.

The new guest worker program being proposed by Congress would allow for a limited number of visas, and these would be issued almost exclusively for low-wage jobs without benefits. In most cases, workers would be compelled to remain with their original employer or contractor in a condition little different from indentured servitude. Under this set up, “guest” workers would be entirely at the mercy of their “hosts”. Any efforts to organize in order to improve wages and conditions would inevitably be met with threats of firing, cancelled visas, and deportation. After all - as the employers often threaten us - “there are plenty of others that would love to have this job if you don’t want it.” This brings us right back to square one.



Temporary, second-class workers are used by employers to raise profits and to weaken and divide the labor movement. Similarly, the proposed guest worker program would be used to set one group of workers against another, competing with each other over steadily declining wages and deteriorating conditions for all.

The only real and lasting solution is a united struggle for equal and improved wages, conditions, benefits, and protections for *all* workers: immigrant and non-immigrant, union and non-union alike. Through our mass organization and mobilization we stopped the Sensenbrenner bill. We can do it again despite those “allies” who would sell out millions of workers for a few scraps. There is no need to settle for the “lesser evil” guest worker program.

The WIL opposes all repressive “enforcement” measures and the militarization of the border. We call for an end to deportations and stand for the full and unconditional legalization of all undocumented workers. We demand full and equal rights for all people who perform work in this country. But in order to achieve this, we must build a mass movement, independent of both the Democratic and Republican parties. We must work to organize action committees in our workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools, so as to mobilize the vast majority of those who work for a living to attain these goals. The labor movement must be at the forefront of this struggle.

Contact the Workers International League for more information: wil@socialistappeal.org

