

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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January 11, 2006

The Honorable Arlen Specter
United States Senate
711 Hart Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Specter:

The AFL-CIO is deeply concerned about our nation's broken immigration system, but we are equally troubled by the regressive measure that the House of Representatives recently adopted in response to that crisis. As you begin to tackle immigration reform, we urge you to work toward a system that protects and guarantees the rights of all workers, both native-and foreign-born, and that guarantees the safety of our nation, without comprising our fundamental civil rights and civil liberties.

The AFL-CIO strongly opposed the Border and Immigration Enforcement Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437) because that bill offers no realistic solution to the current crisis. The measure does little to remove the economic incentives that unscrupulous employers have to hire and exploit immigrant workers. At the same time, it punishes immigrants – and those who provide humanitarian and other assistance to immigrants – in ways that will drive the current undocumented population further underground. Moreover, H.R. 4437 fails to realistically address the presence of 10-12 million undocumented immigrants who are contributing to our economy and our communities, and who are often the parents of children who are American citizens. (A copy of our statement in opposition to H.R. 4437 is attached).

In our view, immigration reform must, at a minimum, incorporate the following fundamental principles:

- The current population of undocumented workers who have paid taxes and made positive contributions to their communities must have a path to legalization.

- Enforcement of workplace standards must be a priority. Lax enforcement of labor and employment laws gives unscrupulous employers an incentive to exploit immigrant workers and penalizes employers who abide by the law.
- Guestworker programs must be viewed with great skepticism, and only adopted as a last resort; massive expansion of those programs must be rejected.

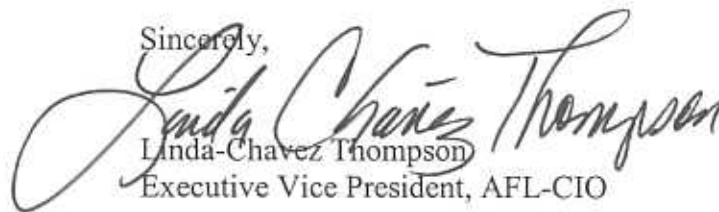
The abuses suffered by workers in the Bracero program, which ran from 1942 to 1964, are well documented and indisputable, as are the problems suffered by their modern day counterparts in H-1B and H-2B dependent industries. Workers around the country are witnessing the transformation of formerly well-paying, permanent jobs into temporary jobs with little or no benefits, which employers are staffing with foreign workers who have no real enforceable rights.

The massive expansion of guest worker programs represents a radical departure from our long-held vision of a democratic society. To legitimize a system that forces our communities to simply be “hosts” for “guests” who are only here to lend their labor, and who have no reason to invest in that community, and who will never have a real voice in their workplace or community defies everything our nation stands for.

We recognize that some industries may face labor shortages in the coming years as the baby boomer generation retires. But there are better solutions available than the massive expansion of temporary worker programs. If employers can demonstrate a real need for foreign workers, those workers should be welcomed into our labor markets with the same rights as any U.S. worker, and with no ties to a particular employer. In other words, those issues should be addressed through increases in the permanent labor classifications, not in the increase of temporary worker programs.

We look forward to working with you toward a real solution to the very serious problems with our current immigration laws.

Sincerely,



Linda-Chavez Thompson
Executive Vice President, AFL-CIO