

CONGRESS MUST FACE REALITY - IMMIGRANTS WANT EQUALITY

By David Bacon

OAKLAND, CA (4/6/06) - Senators will pat themselves on the back this week, for agreeing to their most pro-corporate, anti-immigrant bill in decades. Tens of thousands of people may be forced to leave the US as a result. Millions more would have to become braceros - guest workers on temporary visas - just to continue to labor in the jobs they've had for years.

More workplace enforcement will result in firing thousands of others, creating a climate fear that will make defending workplace rights and joining unions riskier than ever. And a border like an armed camp will continue costing the lives of hundreds of humble farmers and workers every year, crossing towards a shattered dream of a better life.

No wonder people have been in the streets for weeks, with even bigger demonstrations and marches yet to come. These are ordinary people, not activists, come out of working-class homes all over the country. A million in Los Angeles. Half a million in Chicago. Tens of thousands crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. Hunger strikers in San Francisco. Demonstrations in states where the immigrant community has been virtually invisible until now, like North Carolina, Tennessee. Border towns like Tucson. Cities from Santa Rosa to Omaha.

Everywhere, immigrants and people who support them are condemning the draconian measures passed by the House of Representatives in December, especially the provision that would make undocumented people federal felons.

But the demonstrations have a positive demand as well, one that shames especially the Senate's slight-of-hand, where second-class guest worker programs are called 'a path to legalization,' and the only way families can gain legal status for their undocumented members is to spend a decade or more working as braceros. Contrary to Senate proposals for deportations and bracero visas, people carry signs demanding amnesty. These myriad marchers - families with children and grandparents in tow - have a simple alternative.

Equality.

Many unions support them. Among the most outspoken are the Teamsters in Orange County, heart of the anti-immigrant offensive, where the mayor of Costa Mesa told his police department to begin picking up immigrants who lack visas. Teamsters Local 952 says people need real legal status, not a guest worker program. A recently passed resolution condemns both Congressional proposals, because they "do nothing to remove the economic incentives that unscrupulous employers have to hire and exploit immigrant workers, and fail to really address the fact that we have 11 million undocumented workers in this country contributing to our communities."

The union "opposes any form of employer sanctions because they have historically resulted in 'employee sanctions' in the form of firings of workers for union organizing and discrimination practices on the job," and "opposes guest worker legislative proposals because such modern day 'bracero programs,' create an indentured servitude status for workers."

The AFL-CIO says the same, pointing out that if there are jobs for 400,000 braceros a year (the goal of the Senate reform bill), those immigrants should be given 400,000 green cards, or residence visas, instead, which would guarantee them equal status in their workplaces and communities. The Senate bill, the AFL-CIO says, "tears at the heart of true reform and will drive millions of hard-working immigrants further into the shadows of American society." Instead, "we should recognize immigrant workers as full members of society -- as permanent residents with full rights and full mobility that employers may not exploit."

When Senator John McCain, co-sponsor of the Senate's main guest worker plan, tried to

defend it to a building trades union audience in his home state this week, he was booed. He told the construction workers that even at \$50 an hour they wouldn't be willing to pick lettuce, implying that only Mexicans were willing to do farm labor. For some in the audience, McCain's remarks recalled former California Senator George Murphy, who infamously declared in the 1960s that only Mexicans would perform stoop labor because "they're built so close to the ground." Needless to say, McCain didn't actually include in his bill any wage guarantee for guestworkers, much less \$50/hour (about 5 times what lettuce cutters make today.)

A concerted effort by some lobbyists is underway in Washington, however, to convince legislators that guest worker status, while unpleasant, is something immigrants themselves are prepared to accept. But outside the beltway their proposal is meeting a rising tide of rejection. In New York City, Desis Rising Up & Moving and 20 other grassroots groups formed Immigrant Communities In Action, and condemned both House and Senate bills for not halting the wave of detentions and deportations visited on Muslim communities since 9/11.

Another coalition, which includes the National Mobilization Against Sweatshops, the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, also rejects guestworker programs. Like the Teamsters, these groups say Congress should abolish employer sanctions instead, since they're often used to retaliate against undocumented workers who demand labor rights.

The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights criticizes both the Senate and House bills because they hold "no promise of fairness in immigration policy and would undermine the rights, economic health and safety of all immigrants and their children. Congress needs to go back to the drawing board to come up with genuine, positive and fair proposals."

Are there any such proposals before Congress?

Yes, although beltway advocates have tried to smother the most progressive of those alternatives with silence. A year ago Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and Congressional Black Caucus members introduced HR 2092, which would give permanent residence visas to undocumented people already here, and outlaw discrimination based on migrant status. Jackson Lee believes Federal policy should not pit migrants against native-born, as do guestworker programs. Her legislation would instead fund job training and creation in communities with high unemployment, so that both immigrants and non-immigrants can find work.

In the House's mad December rush to pass the Sensenbrenner bill, criminalizing the undocumented instead of legalizing them, Jackson Lee's bill couldn't even get a hearing. The Congresswoman is the ranking Democrat on the House Immigration Subcommittee. In the Senate her proposal received no more consideration, from either Democrats or Republicans. Yet her bill is the only real effort to find common ground between immigrants and the working communities of citizens and long time residents that they seek to join.

In their predictable beltway logic, guestworker advocates are counseling the huge demonstrations to feature US flags, and carry signs saying, "We are America." But covering a corporate labor scheme with patriotic rhetoric won't convince marchers to support it. Immigrants do want to be part of US society, and do want to work, but they're not likely to start holding signs saying, "I want to be a guestworker," or chanting "Braceros si! Migra no!"

Hundreds of thousands of people are saying no to Washington's repressive bills, but Congress and its coterie of beltway lobbyists clearly aren't listening. It's time for Washington to face reality. A huge outpouring of people is demanding real equality. They won't be satisfied with second-class status.