

U.S. WORKERS SHOULD HAVE FIRST CLAIM ON AMERICAN JOBS

By Thomas R. Donahue, Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO

The AFL-CIO believes that reasoned consideration of our immigration policy requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account family-based admissions, and the need for admissions that further the interest in a diverse society.

It is in no sense anti-immigration, or anti-immigrant, to state that U.S. workers should have the first claim on U.S. jobs, and that U.S. wages and working conditions should not be undermined by workers from other lands. Such imported workers are all too readily exploitable -- especially when they are here as temporary workers -- since their continued access to this country is dependent upon the very employer who set those terms of employment. Recognizing the American workers' claim furthers fundamental fairness, our moral obligations to our fellow citizens and resident aliens, furthers social cohesion and contributes to our economic health.

We are told that this country now or in the near future faces labor shortages in parts of our economy. If true, that presents a real opportunity to achieve long overdue improvements in wages and working conditions and to facilitate the even longer overdue integration into the U.S. workforce of persons in our society who are now outside it, or inadequately inside it, and not by their choice: many in our inner cities, women, recent immigrants, persons with disabilities, older persons, and refugees. A sense that there is a "labor shortage" creates an opportunity to reach out to such individuals with education and training to permit them to take the jobs of the future. A rational immigration policy is one that provides an impetus to seizing this opportunity rather than allowing it to be lost in a short-sighted rush to import workers as a quick fix.

These considerations dictate that work-based admissions to this country must be limited to admissions based on a real need that cannot otherwise be met in the short term. Such a need must be demonstrated, not simply asserted.

Experience shows that this essential requirement will be met in fact as well as in theory only if Congress develops and enacts provisions that force the administration to follow congressional intent. It is no favor to anyone to leave the law so vague, so broad, or so lacking in standards that it provides no sure guidance and no curb on the greed of exploitative employers or the ingenuity of their lawyers.

Indeed, the day to day pressures to understand the rules that limit work-based admissions are so intense that a numerical limit on aliens who may be brought in to work is absolutely critical to a proper system that functions as Congress intended.