

# Labor Joins the Charade

by James O.  
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The American labor movement, in a complete reversal of policy, is urging a blanket amnesty for all illegal immigrants. The call was made by the AFL-CIO's executive council at a meeting in New Orleans.

It's a good thing the AFL-CIO wasn't meeting in California. Consider the absurdity of the proposal:

The nation will spend nearly \$5 billion this year on the Immigration and Naturalization Service to stop illegal immigration. In addition, we are adding \$90 million to the Border Patrol budget to hire another 430 agents, bringing to nearly 8,500 the number of agents on the borders, a figure that has doubled in five years.

The AFL-CIO would have us reward the people who have slipped by the INS and the Border Patrol. Result: We would have 4 million to 5 million undocumented workers with union cards but no green cards.

This is a radical turnabout for labor, which, unlike Congress and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce,

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has long and consistently opposed illegal immigration. For labor, undocumented workers have taken jobs from legal workers, depressed wages, weakened the union movement and created a black market work force.

Labor is right about that. In California, undocumented farm workers have badly weakened the United Farm Workers, for example, which three decades ago had 80,000 members under contracts. Today, even as the state has proclaimed Cesar Chavez Day (March 31) an official holiday, the UFW is but a shadow of what it once was.

The AFL-CIO turnaround is easily explained. With millions of undocumented workers present and showing no signs of going home, let's organize them, says the union.

The potential for organizing undocumented immigrants, bringing their wages and benefits up to AFL-CIO standards, is considerable. In a recent study for RAND, immigration analysts Georges Vernez and Kevin McCarthy reported that earnings for legal immigrants were 50 percent less than for U.S.-born workers, with the difference widening. Undocumented workers earn even less.

Labor now has joined Congress and industry in the great immigration charade.

Congress denies the INS the power to inspect field sites, making it impossible to find illegal farm workers. Further, because

Congress has never passed a workers' ID law, without which illegal workers can't be identified, the INS last year abandoned industry work-site inspections. The policy of employers' sanctions has been dropped.

Immigration policy today is driven by economics, not by law or social values. We should have great sympathy for the INS, striving to do its job even as Congress, business and now big labor wink at each other. Even the venerable Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan supports immigration (which depresses wages and holds down inflation), and, like the others, doesn't worry whether it is legal or illegal.

The argument for open borders and free immigration made by people like House Majority Leader Dick Armey (and indirectly by Greenspan), has become unofficial policy. They argue that expansion is served by downward pressure on wages exerted by new immigrants, legal or illegal.

So why complain? Can Congress, business, Greenspan, Armey and now the AFL-CIO all be wrong? New workers, they argue, depress wages, increase profits, fight inflation and pay taxes.

This is a hard subject. The Mexican workers in California who trim hedges, mow lawns and pick strawberries do good work, legal or illegal. They are as good people as the rest of us.

My objection is to the hypocrisy of our policy. We wink at the laws today, then turn against the

immigrants at the first sign of recession. Proposition 187 was a disgrace because it was California's attempt legally and institutionally to discriminate against people we had willingly hired. No wonder the courts threw it out.

Congress deceives the nation. It pretends we have a tough immigration policy, when real policy is made with little winks and nods. When voter outrage gets too high, as during the 1991 recession, Congress fatuously provides more money to the INS, but never provides the tools — such as workers' ID cards — with which illegal immigration might be stopped.

Economics should not be the only determinant of immigration policy.

If economics alone determined

community policy, all cities would look like Houston, with no zoning, or Los Angeles, where zoning came too late.

If economics alone determined industrial policy, we would have no anti-pollution laws, no clean air and water laws, no endangered species laws; anthracite coal would still belch into the skies, cars would still get 10 miles to the gallon and tobacco companies would still buy our politicians.

So why allow economics alone to set immigration policy? Immigration should take into account communities, resources, pollution, population, poverty, infrastructure, schools, transportation. It should consider both the long and short terms. It should bear in mind that while new workers are useful in a boom, they

are the first to lose jobs in a downturn.

The downturn will come. The current boom already defies the Phillips Curve and Milton Friedman's natural rate of unemployment, which both show full employment leading to inflation, killing expansion. We have been at full employment for more than a year.

So let's not be too hard on the AFL-CIO. It held out longer than anyone else for sensible policy and only threw in the towel when it realized the game was rigged.

I wonder what song the union will sing when the recession comes, as it will, and the new members with no green cards are on the street. As the song says — will you still mind? ○