

Union Cards for Illegals?

by Georgie Anne Geyer

A most unusual meeting was held recently in Chicago that bodes serious changes for American society.

The national leadership of organized labor — those same AFL-CIO officials who had always regarded illegal or “undocumented” laborers as a prime enemy — are now calling for: (1) new laws to grant amnesty and permanent residency to illegal aliens, and (2) new laws that would criminalize “employer exploitation of such undocu-mented workers.”

The unions had undergone an epiphany ever since an initial meeting in February when their executive council declared that, in these changes, “we are on the side of working people everywhere” — whether they came to the United States on slave ships, through Ellis Island or, today, across the Mexican border.

This was designed to be a humanitarian decision, one that would set the stage for granting the same protections and, indeed, the special rights and privileges of American labor to illegal aliens.

There were no apologies about supporting a blanket amnesty to

men and women who have deliberately broken U.S. laws by entering the country and working here illegally. Indeed, at least so far as I could see, there was no discussion at all of the historic importance of citizenship, which uniquely links Americans together.

What is really happening is that, as they lose members across the country, and as they see their power threatened by globalization and by the breakup of national industries, the unions are moving to import a new proletariat, and they are not alone. Both the big “globalized” corporations, which look upon defenders of the nation-state as quaint antiquarians and the American administration, are allied with the unions.

Only a few years ago, in the beginning of the 1990s, Congress and even the Immigration and Naturalization Service took some minimal acts to control illegal immigration in ways that would address U.S. national interests. Employer sanctions were imposed and, for a while, imperfectly carried through — against, for instance, employers who knowingly employed illegal aliens.

Today, all of those attempts are a thing of the past: Administration policies now are focused not on how to control our borders, but on stepping up efforts on every level to protect illegals from “discrimination.” In this new politically correct immigration thinking, questions of discrimination clearly have overridden all those old

questions of law and citizenship.

Make no mistake about it: There are terrible employer abuses of illegal aliens, and they should be addressed. But they should be addressed at the border, where such minor historical gestures of respect between nations as requiring visas and telling the truth should be enforced. They should be addressed by the law, by the courts and by Congress, and in serious discussions of what type of new citizens this country wants and how many we can absorb.

Instead, what the unions are doing now is turning the entire process on its head. They are saying that, because illegal workers are sometimes discrimi-nated against, they should be organized and protected by American unions. But the real problem is that it is precisely because they are here illegally that they are being used and abused.

When you listen carefully, the unions are also expressing other attitudes. At the Chicago meeting, for instance, Linda Chavez-Thompson, AFL-CIO executive vice president, warned that if immigrant workers suddenly disappeared, they would leave behind 5 million to 6 million of the “hottest, stinkiest, dirtiest, lowest-paying jobs there are — jobs that most American workers would not want anyway.”

Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), warns that this kind of attitude represents

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“the shift in power within the labor movement away from trade unionism toward unionized government bureau-crats and teachers, all of whom benefit from having a larger ‘clientele’ of poor immigrants.”

Guest-worker programs have been proposed — programs that would bring necessary workers here in an orderly and supervised fashion and that could at least begin to solve the problem — but the unions have remained adamantly against them. “Guest workers cannot be unionized,” Mr. Stein summed up.

There are at least two great dangers to what is happening: First, on the micro level, take the example of a recent report of the U.S.

Commission on Civic Rights, hardly a conservative group. Flying in the face of all the liberal politically correct thinking about immigration, the commission warned of a “darker side to the immigration story.” It painted a picture of a New York City riddled with ethnic tension and strife, where much of the city’s foreign population is poor, frustrated and angry. This is occurring across the country under the surface of all those superficially rosy pictures of immigrant success.

Second, on the macro level, it should not seem too much to ask of Americans — whether the big corporations, the big unions or the average citizens — that they at least pause occasionally to address national concerns. With actions

such as these of the AFL-CIO, we are sinking ever deeper into becoming a people whose demands on the nation bear no resemblance whatsoever to their commitment to this society. This severs even further the old civic circle in the nation, which binds loyalty to responsibility, responsibility to representation, representation to privilege.

The greatest danger to the United States has never been that we would be defeated from outside; the greatest danger has always been a wantonness that arises at times of too-confident prosperity, that we can do everything without cost, and that the rules of human history and common sense don’t apply to us. Don’t they really? •