

Register Guard
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By Peter DeFazio

America has a proud heritage as a beacon for the dispossessed and oppressed around the world, who come here for a shot at achieving their dreams.

However, a nation that does not control its own borders is not secure. We need to know who is coming into our country, and we must keep out people who are not authorized to enter. With 500,000 or more individuals entering illegally every year, the status quo is not acceptable.

Prior efforts by Congress to control immigration, including the reforms enacted in 1986 and 1996, failed for lack of meaningful employer sanctions. As a result, undocumented workers have been used and abused, driving down wages, benefits, and working conditions for all workers. The border security legislation I voted for, H.R. 4437, addresses this issue by requiring employers to verify a job applicant's eligibility for lawful employment with immigration and Social Security officials, rather than a cursory look at documents that can be easily forged. In addition, the bill doubles the fines for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers to a minimum of \$5,000 for a first offense and up to \$40,000 for subsequent offenses.

H.R. 4437 also improves border security by deploying increased personnel and requiring enhanced technology. The bill would end the "catch and release" program, in which illegal immigrants caught at the border from countries other than Mexico (Mexicans caught at the border are already immediately deported) are released into the U.S. once they promise to return for a court date. Not surprisingly, over 75 percent never show up and remain in the country illegally.

Critics of the border security bill argue its security provisions are too tough. They reject legislation based on strong enforcement and security, arguing that all that is necessary is a guest worker program and amnesty. I admit that H.R. 4437 is not a finished legislative product, and I did not support every provision in it. But, it has kick-started a long overdue debate in Congress on immigration.

I am not convinced there is a labor shortage that requires the importation of 550,000 or more guest workers every year, as envisioned by the McCain-Kennedy immigration reform bill, which also allows family members to come along, doubling or tripling the number of new arrivals. To the extent there may be shortages in particular industries, employers could increase wages and

improve working conditions to attract legal workers. Only after improving wages and working conditions and proving that no Americans are available for the job should an employer be able to recruit guest workers.

I am concerned that guest worker proposals will continue to erode the wages and working conditions of tens of millions of Americans and legal immigrants. The Commission on Immigration Reform created in 1995 by President Bill Clinton, reported, "Guest worker programs have depressed wages" and reduced employment opportunities for "unskilled American workers, including recent immigrants," who can be easily "displaced by newly entering guest workers." Other studies, including research by the National Research Council and the liberal Economic Policy Institute, show immigrants under guest worker programs are paid 15-33 percent less than American citizens, even in highly skilled jobs, driving down wages for all workers.

All workers deserve the protection of labor laws. In fact, existing guest worker programs already nominally provide such protections, but they are not enforced. After years of half-hearted efforts, the lack of enforcement has reached crisis proportions under the current administration. I don't believe that will magically change under a new guest worker program.

I do not support amnesty proposals that treat every immigrant the same, irrespective of how long they've been here or what they've contributed to their communities. It makes no sense to treat someone who just entered illegally last week the same as someone who has been in the country for a decade or more, gainfully employed and paying taxes, with children who are American citizens.

Currently, more than four million immigrants around the world are waiting for their paperwork to be processed so they can enter the U.S. legally. It will be years (in the case of Mexico and the Philippines, often ten years or more) before they can enter the country under current quotas. Blanket amnesty for the 11 million already here illegally could delay or prevent the legal immigration of those who are complying with the law. I cannot support legislation that would hurt families following the rules established for legal immigration.

I honestly don't have a complete solution to this problem. But, I do know that just implementing a new guest worker program and blanket amnesty will not solve the problem of illegal immigration; nor will a solution that focuses solely on border security; though increased border security and interior enforcement, including employer sanctions, should be the foundation of any

comprehensive solution.