

Business of reform

America's employers finally speak out for sound immigration policy

Houston Chronicle

May 11, 2008

The failure to pass a comprehensive immigration reform package last year was a bad piece of business. It left more than 12 million illegal workers in limbo; continued a ludicrous visa system that leaves out low-skilled workers; and showed that a noisy minority could drown out the majority of Americans, who consistently backed the reform bill's main goals.

But there was one heartening revelation: Individual voters really can trump those behind-the-scenes lobbyists. It's now time for the majority of voter voices to be heard.

Employers across the country are finally coalescing to publicly support comprehensive immigration reform. The movement aims to inform and motivate the grass roots, where people's views of immigration too often are shaped by commentators such as Lou Dobbs. By speaking out, businesses also prove they're committed to working within the system: hiring legal workers, paying taxes and minimum wage, and treating all employees fairly.

Houston is at the movement's forefront, with good reason. Our economy depends on the estimated 10 percent of our work force, about 250,000 workers, who are undocumented immigrants. Forcing these workers to continue their lives as an exploited shadow-class keeps them from participating and contributing — and assimilating — as they ought to. It harms the whole community.

Plans to smoke these workers out of their jobs would hurt Houston even more. About three-fourths of undocumented workers pay Social Security taxes (but never claim the benefits). Using Social Security rolls to oust workers with account discrepancies — as a recent federal rule aims to do — could accidentally oust as many as 18 million legal workers whose accounts also contain misspellings and other errors.

But the greatest harm would be to the city's economy. "The consequences of removing one of 10 workers would ... take us down to our knees," Jeff Moseley, president of the Greater Houston Partnership, told the Chronicle.

So chilling is this prospect that the historically conservative Partnership is investing \$20 million (from private donors) in the nonprofit "Americans for Immigration Reform."

The strategy: Inspire previously silent employers to communicate with lawmakers. The goal: a national, comprehensive reform that ensures border security — as well as a way for responsible businesses to employ low-skilled foreign workers.

Right now, no way exists. The idea that there's a "line" for these workers to wait is, bluntly, a lie. Only 5,000 such visas are available annually. Yet every year as many as 500,000 workers and their families arrive without documents — and almost all of the adult males find jobs.

Businesses, trades and large corporations are finally speaking up about this reality. Many say they were caught off guard last year, when a hailstorm of constituent e-mails and letters capsized a promising immigration compromise in a few days. Employers were also fearful of attracting raids: Some 70 percent of agricultural workers and more than 30 percent of construction employees lack work papers.

Now the business community is organizing to speak out. In San Antonio, many businesses are linking with Mexican-Americans Thinking Together, Matt.org, a public relations and lobbying campaign that is spending at least \$25 million on grass-roots appeals to voters.

Nationally, the nonprofit ImmigrationWorksUSA is building a federation of about 20 state-based immigration-reform coalitions. The federation wants to strengthen these groups at the grass-roots level, encourage them to join local immigration law battles, and make their voices heard in Congress.

Even in Arizona, home to some of the country's most extreme immigration laws, a backlash has developed in the form of the nonprofit Employers for Immigration Reform. The group has a ready pool of supporters. The Arizona Legislature is trying to neutralize economic effects from its own harsh employer-sanction laws with a state-level guest-worker program. That, of course, was one of the features of comprehensive immigration reform.

Here's how one restaurant chain owner — who suspended new projects in Arizona — put it to The Washington Post: "If we become a risky or a more costly place of doing business than the other 49 states, which today we are, we will become a declining economy in perpetuity."

The workplace, the community and democracy all work best when participants state their interests and share their ideas. So far, American businesses have been too silent about their labor needs. It's overdue for them to contribute to an immigration policy based on economic health, not hype.