

Exploitation and political cynicism

Bush unveils “bracero” program for immigrant workers

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In a gesture steeped in political cynicism, President Bush Wednesday advanced a vague proposal for granting a limited and temporary legal status to as many as 12 million undocumented immigrants in the US. Bush touted the plan as a more “humane” approach than the current system, but the US president’s proposal is heavily weighted in the interests of the corporations and employers. If implemented, it would create a legal framework for maintaining a tier of second-class and super-exploited labor in America.

Speaking at the White House, Bush mouthed rhetoric about the “American dream” and bringing “abused and exploited” workers out of “the shadows.” Immigrant advocates, however, denounced the plan as a system of indentured servitude that could pave the way for intensified repression and mass deportations.

Excluded from the plan is any new mechanism for undocumented workers currently in the US to secure permanent-resident status and citizenship. Bush explicitly declared himself in opposition to any “amnesty, placing undocumented workers on the automatic path to citizenship.”

Instead, the plan would create a new category of “temporary workers” with limited rights and dependent upon the mercy of their employers and the government.

The announcement was widely seen as a cheap election-year ploy, aimed at winning support from the country’s Hispanic population, which Republican strategists increasingly see as key in a number of states—including California, Texas and Florida. The proposal was extremely short on details and made no reference to other existing pieces of draft immigration legislation already before Congress.

Under the scheme put forward by Bush, both undocumented immigrants already in the US and workers seeking to enter the US from abroad would be permitted to apply for temporary worker status, allowing them to remain in the country for up to three years with the possibility of at

least one extension, so long as they are employed.

Undocumented workers residing in the US would have to prove that they are working, pass a security check and pay a fee. Those applying from abroad would be eligible only to the extent that they were hired for jobs that the government would somehow determine were not wanted by American workers. These jobs would be listed by the US Labor Department and filled with the aid of labor contractors.

Claims by the administration and sections of the media that the proposal is a means of protecting immigrant workers against abuse are largely specious. It would in fact grant no new rights in the workplace. Current law already supposedly grants undocumented immigrants the rights to the minimum wage, workers’ compensation, health and safety standards, overtime and unionization.

There is no reason to believe that employers would face any more rigorous enforcement of these regulations after the program was implemented than they do now. In fact, the plan would make these workers even more dependent upon their employers, who would in effect sponsor them.

“We’re going to be creating, under this type of legislation, a large number of basically indentured servants,” Susan F. Martin, a Georgetown University immigration expert who headed the US Commission on Immigration Reform in the 1990s, told the *Washington Post*. Bush’s plan, she added, is “as troubling an immigration proposal as I’ve seen in the past 25 years.”

Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, an Hispanic immigrant rights group, called Bush’s proposal “a warmed over version of the Bracero Program,” a scheme initiated during World War II, which brought millions of Mexican farm laborers into the US on temporary contracts to be brutally exploited in the fields. The Bush plan, he added, “appears to offer the business community full access to the immigrant workers it needs, while providing very little to the workers themselves.”

After the three-year temporary status and whatever

extension is granted expire, workers would be subject to deportation. While they could apply for green cards, the wait for such documents is interminable—8 to 15 years for most Mexicans.

While Bush claimed his administration would increase the number of green cards—which grant non-citizens a permanent right to live and work in the US—issued each year, he gave no indication by what amount.

Currently, the US government maintains a ceiling of 140,000 on the number of new green cards issued annually. There are up to 100 times as many undocumented immigrants already in the US, and millions more are seeking to apply from overseas. In the latest green card lottery that ended last week, some 10 million people applied for 110,000 slots.

Given that being deported after a number of years is the ultimate result of the proposed program, it is highly questionable whether large numbers of undocumented immigrants would come forward to participate in any case. They would also have to submit to interrogations and biometric imaging.

The most enthusiastic support for the proposed plan came from big business groups, which welcomed it as a means of regularizing and legalizing the ongoing super-exploitation of immigrant labor. To the extent that the proposal implies an “amnesty” it is for employers like Wal-Mart, which saw raids and arrests last year of some 245 allegedly undocumented workers who were employed cleaning its stores. The main effect would be to legalize the exploitation of cheap immigrant labor.

“The economy can’t expand unless we have workers to fill available jobs,” said Randy Johnson, vice president of the US Chamber of Commerce. “Today’s announcement provides a good opportunity to move forward and enact sensible and comprehensive immigration reform.”

Some sections of Bush’s own Republican Party opposed the scheme as insufficiently draconian in its treatment of the undocumented. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Republican-Texas), for example, voiced “reservations about allowing illegal immigrants into a US guest-worker program that seems to reward illegal behavior.”

Rep. Elton Gallegly, a Republican from California and a member of the committee that drafts immigration bills, said that Bush’s proposal “amounts to the forgiveness of a criminal act, no different under the law than printing hundred-dollar bills in your garage.”

Other members of the Republican Congressional majority indicated that the proposal would be given little priority and was unlikely to be enacted in any form in the foreseeable future. Indeed, Congress only recently let a much more narrowly focused immigration reform bill—covering only

agricultural worker—die in committee.

There is little if any likelihood that Bush will expend any political capital to see that his proposal does not suffer the same fate. While posturing as a friend of the immigrant to curry favor with the Hispanic electorate, he will be working at the same time to mobilize his ultra-right-wing base, which is characterized by fanatical hostility to foreign-born workers.

The announcement was timed just days before Bush is to attend a hemispheric summit in Monterrey, Mexico. The Mexican government of President Vicente Fox has voiced sharp criticism over the Bush administration’s neglect of the immigration issue in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the turn toward war abroad and police-state crackdowns against immigrants at home.

While Bush began his presidency with bilateral talks with Fox on proposals to regularize the status of Mexican immigrants—who account for as much as 70 percent of the undocumented in the US—these negotiations were abruptly terminated. The US president made it clear Wednesday that his was a unilateral proposal, not one negotiated with Mexico.

While there was little sign of popular enthusiasm for Bush’s proposal in Mexico or among Mexican immigrants in the US, the Fox government treated it as a positive development. This, despite the fact that the main issue it had pressed in its talks with Washington in the spring and summer of 2001—creating a mechanism for undocumented workers to earn permanent resident status—was excluded from the Bush plan.

For the Mexican ruling elite, the key question is not the democratic rights of impoverished immigrant workers north of the border, but rather the steady flow of remittances that these workers send back to Mexico, which now constitute the country’s second-largest source of foreign income. The temporary worker scheme is seen by the Fox government as a means of securing this source of revenue.



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