Wilson's back-door laborers

Don Villarejo is executive director of the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis.

By Don Villarejo

CALIFORNIA'S immigration overload is often attributed to an open door at the Mexican border, but our current policy debate is more a result of back-door politics.

While politicians in Sacramento complain about an influx of immigrants, a major California industry – agriculture – is more reliant on foreign-born workers than at any other time in this century. More than 92 percent of California's current farm-labor force of nearly 1 million people is foreign-born.

Only such workers will tolerate the poor wages and working conditions that prevail in California agriculture. Indeed, cheap and compliant labor is prized by the $18 billion industry, which uses its political and economic clout to maintain the status quo.

BUT THIS strategy also cultivates a population that worries state politicians and bureaucrats. They complain that workers who are poor, uneducated – and in some cases, undocumented – put unreasonable strains on our social system.

So California greets immigrants with a contradictory message: We want foreign-born labor for jobs we refuse to do ourselves, but we deny any responsibility for the costs associated with maintaining that labor force.

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For more than a generation, California and other states have reaped the benefits of cheap labor, thanks to unprecedented levels of immigration from Mexico and Central America. Driven by economic decline and civil war, millions of political and economic refugees have fled north seeking simply to survive. Many entered without permission.

In an effort to turn the tide, U.S. policy makers enacted the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986. An important component of the law was an amnesty offer for unauthorized workers who had continuously lived and worked here since 1981.

Agribusiness leaders and immigration reform advocates recognized that much of the farm labor force was undocumented, so they struck a compromise: Any worker who could show farm employment for at least 90 days between May 1985 and May 1986 could apply for a Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) visa – and receive permanent residency status under the immigration act.

In the U.S. Senate, then-Sen. Pete Wilson advocated support for the SAW provision, assuring doubters that no more than 365,000 workers would qualify according to expert estimates. To the astonishment of nearly everyone, some 1.3 million workers applied for SAW visas. At this writing, more than 1 million have been approved. Sen. Wilson's guess became Gov. Wilson's embarrassment.

Meanwhile, the political message to Mexicans and other migrants was clear. Their best chance at gaining legal U.S. residency required a history of unauthorized work here. The United States was the place to be.

So immigrants without prospects or passports continue to arrive. In agriculture, their annual earnings amount to just $6,000 on average for about 30 weeks of work in the field. Health insurance and other benefits are rarely provided. The work itself is demanding and often performed under the most difficult and hazardous conditions.

IT IS hardly surprising that children of farm workers do not wish to follow in their parents' footsteps. A random survey of Mexican farm worker children born in the United States and living in the San Joaquin Valley showed that less than one in 30 would even consider doing hired farm work. They want a better life.

But that requires access to health care, education and social services – and ignites political rhetoric from the governor and others who blame immigrants for the government's budget woes. Again, the political message contradicts itself: Immigrants are unwelcome at the front door, but they might gain entry at the back.

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