

AFL-CIO: GIVE ILLEGALS A BREAK IT BACKS AMNESTY AND NO SANCTIONS

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Body

The American labor movement Wednesday called for blanket **amnesty** for illegal immigrants and an end to most **sanctions** against employers who hire them.

In decades past, labor unions often saw immigrant workers as the enemy, accusing them of depressing wages and **breaking** strikes. But the executive council of the **AFL-CIO** adopted a more sympathetic approach Wednesday to illegal immigrants, contending that too often the nation's immigration rules had enabled employers to exploit them.

The new policy comes as business groups are pushing for similar legislative changes to help industry cope with a shortage of workers and as the high-tech industry is urging Congress to allow more skilled immigrants to come to the United States to work legally.

Wednesday's action came after California union officials urged **AFL-CIO** officials to **back** an **amnesty**, telling them that many illegal workers faced low wages and lives of misery because of the way immigration rules have enabled unscrupulous employers to exploit them.

Immigrants make up an ever-larger part of the nation's workforce, and labor leaders are stepping up efforts to unionize hundreds of thousands of immigrants who work at farms, hotels, construction, meat packing and many other industries. Labor leaders complain that unscrupulous employers often fight off unionization drives by threatening to fire employees who are illegal immigrants and support unions, and by calling immigration officials to deport them.

"The present system doesn't work and is used as a weapon against workers," said John Wilhelm, chairman of the labor federation's Committee on Immigration Policy and president of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union.

"The only reason a lot of employers want to hire a large number of illegal aliens is so they can exploit them."

The **AFL-CIO** said it would continue its opposition to the proliferation of guest-worker programs that has allowed a variety of corporations to bring skilled workers into the United States, particularly in the high-tech industry. Officials said they want fewer guest-worker programs and greater scrutiny of corporate claims that they cannot find appropriate workers in the United States.

Among these programs is the H1-B visa program, which grants temporary visas to foreign workers in specialized occupations, including computer programming. Under pressure from the high-tech industry, Congress raised the

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annual quota on H1-B visas to 115,000 in 1999 and 2000, up from 65,000. It's scheduled to fall to 107,500 in 2001 and 65,000 in 2002.

Although the **AFL-CIO** did not change its position on visa programs for skilled workers, immigration advocates said it was significant.

The labor federation's resolution calls for blanket **amnesty** for the estimated 6 million illegal immigrants in the United States. At the same time, the federation, which is holding its annual winter meeting in New Orleans, called on the federal government to maintain efforts to keep out illegal immigrants.

Just 15 years ago, the labor federation's support helped pass legislation creating **sanctions** for employers who hire illegal immigrants. At the time, labor unions said such **sanctions** were needed to keep illegal immigrants from flooding the labor market and undermining union wages. But union officials said Wednesday that a new policy was needed because employer **sanctions** have failed to stem the tide of immigration and because immigrants represent such a large part of the workforce in dozens of industries.

"It's a very dramatic change in policy that follows a very dramatic change in our world," Wilhelm said.

Many immigrants have had an ambivalent attitude toward the labor movement because some unions sought to keep out immigrant workers and because of labor's past support of employer **sanctions**. But with unions straining to organize more workers, labor officials have concluded that current immigration rules, with their threat of deportation, have made it hard to unionize industries that hire many illegal immigrants, like apparel, chicken-processing and hotels.

Labor leaders pointed to an incident involving a Holiday Inn Express in Minneapolis, which asked immigration officials to deport nine hotel maids after they had voted to unionize. The maids were arrested.

Labor officials see their new policy as a way to make immigrants warm up toward labor and to make it easier to unionize businesses with many illegal immigrants by making it harder for employers to intimidate them.

"We, the labor movement, have to put ourselves in a leadership position in immigrant rights," said Arturo Rodriguez, president of the United Farm Workers. "This is a way to help low-wage, immigrant workers."

Randy Johnson, vice president of labor policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, welcomed the labor federation's new policy. "It's certainly a departure from organized labor's traditional position, which was an increased number of immigrant workers is bad for domestic workers," he said. "I think this is an area where the business community and organized labor can work together."

But at least one key member of Congress on immigration issues, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, chairman of the Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on immigration, called labor's announcement a cynical ploy.

"What a betrayal of American workers," Smith said.

"Apparently, union bosses are so distraught about declining enrollments they will stoop to exploiting illegal workers."

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