

Immigrants important for filling jobs in Atlanta

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

December 21, 2000, Thursday,, Home Edition

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Section: Business; Pg. 4E

Length: 409 words

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Body

Drendafil Pilici, 24, left Kosovo 15 months ago and now cleans rooms at the Renaissance Atlanta Hotel for \$ 7.40 an hour.

It's far more than she made working longer hours in a Kosovo clothing store. "I like it here," said Pilici in broken English. "Here, it's good."

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Pilici is among a growing number of immigrants from Kosovo, Ethiopia, Mexico, Vietnam, Colombia, Brazil and Russia who are becoming an important source of labor for Atlanta hotels and restaurants. Forty-five percent of the 503-room Renaissance hotel's 285 workers are immigrants.

With unemployment rates at 30-year lows, hotels and restaurants have found it difficult to fill low-skilled, lower-paying service jobs.

In response to the labor crunch, a coalition of service industries and trade associations plans to ask Congress next year to pass legislation to increase visas and ease permanent residency restrictions for low-skilled and semiskilled foreign workers.

The Essential Workers Immigration Coalition represents members of the hotel, restaurant, construction, retail, amusement park and health care industries.

The group hopes that recent legislation increasing the number of visas for high-tech workers will strengthen its position. In October, Congress approved a bill increasing the number of visas for skilled foreign workers to 195,000 through 2003, up from 115,000 last fiscal year.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates 15.7 million immigrant workers were in the United States last year, up 17 percent over the past three years.

In the hospitality industry, the labor shortage has been fairly severe, and the industry is growing, said Christina Howard, a legislative representative for the National Restaurant Association, which says a tenth of its workers are immigrants. "This growth cannot be sustained unless we look at immigration reform."

The proposal has its critics. Dan Stein, director of the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform, blasts the coalition's aims as an "unethical ploy" by U.S. businesses. "If you look at this agenda, you will find that it has more to do with holding down wages for everybody in a given labor market," he said.

That's not true, said Gerry Fernandez, president of the Multicultural Foodservice and Hospitality Alliance, which promotes diversity in the hospitality industry.

"The reality is, people don't want those jobs," he said. "We still need people to work in restaurants."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); HOSPITALITY SECTOR PERFORMANCE (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); LABOR SECTOR PERFORMANCE (89%); BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (88%); LABOR SHORTAGES (77%); EMPLOYMENT VISAS (77%); SERVICE WORKERS (75%); UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (74%); INDUSTRY SECTOR PERFORMANCE (73%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (73%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (70%); TECHNICIANS & TECHNOLOGICAL WORKERS (70%); STATISTICS (70%); APPROVALS (68%)

Company: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%); BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%); BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%); BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%)

Organization: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%); BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (54%)

Industry: HOTELS & MOTELS (91%); RESTAURANTS (90%); RESTAURANTS & FOOD SERVICE INDUSTRY (89%); HOSPITALITY SECTOR PERFORMANCE (89%); LODGING (89%); RESTAURANTS & FOOD SERVICE (75%); AMUSEMENT & THEME PARKS (73%); TRAVEL, HOSPITALITY & TOURISM (73%); CLOTHING & ACCESSORIES STORES (72%); RETAIL CONSTRUCTION (72%); HEALTH CARE (52%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (93%); KOSOVO (90%); BRAZIL (79%)

Load-Date: December 21, 2000