

FLAWED OPPOSITION TO A FOREIGN-WORKER PLAN

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Body

To the Editor:

Your May 11 news story "**Plan** Would Let Mexicans Work as U.S. Guests" tried for balanced treatment of the White House proposal for a temporary **foreign worker** (T.F.W.) program by citing some opinions from outside the Administration. Unfortunately, those opinions, which were almost all in **opposition** to such a program, were neither well-informed nor fully representative.

o begin with, the "bracero" program, which operated from 1942 to 1964, was far from having "stimulated illegal immigration." Official records show that illegal entrants fell well below 100,000 a year from 1956 to 1964 but after the end of the bracero program rose continuously, to reach over one million by 1977.

City College Professor Edwin P Reubens letter responds to May 11 article on temporary **foreign worker** program to accommodate Mexican labor

It is true that many braceros were abused, and sometimes cheated, by their farm employers, and that they were not adequately defended by Federal and local authorities. Yet they kept coming because their earnings far outran the jobs and pay rates available in Mexico. As for the alleged adverse effect on the wages and working conditions of American agricultural workers, the records of the U.S. Department of Agriculture show a markedly rising trend of their wages right through the bracero period and beyond.

The interpretation of the Western European experience, as cited in your dispatch, is similarly incomplete. It is true that when recession set in after 1973 repatriation was slow - but it was not zero. Furthermore, it was largely the presence of wives, children and other dependents that intensified the reluctance to leave.

However, a U.S. program for temporary workers only, excluding their dependents, should induce homeward flows. Conversely, the European programs entailed few complaints about abuse of guest workers, except for poor housing and cultural isolation in some countries. Our own small H-2 visa program works with few abuses or overstays.

The assertion that temporary **foreign workers** in the U.S. would become a "sub-class" and "subject to exploitation" ignores the realities of both the present illegal aliens and the alternatives they have left in their homelands.

Exploitation in fact takes advantage of the undocumented status and furtive life of illegals here; legal **foreign worker** status would rescue them from abuse. Furthermore, the **foreign workers** do not see "exploitation" in wages that are at the U.S. legal minimum, or even illegally below it, when their earnings generally amount to as much in an hour here as in a whole day back home - if they could only find a job there.

The most confused **opposition** to a temporary **foreign worker** program is the assertion that "it makes no sense to bring additional workers to the U.S. when there are 8 million unemployed already." This argument ignores the structural segmentation of the U.S. labor market. In particular, the low-level jobs - low in skills, in pay, in status, in interest and in working conditions but mostly urban jobs nowadays, rather than farming - are hard to fill with

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Americans. U.S. workers are variously able to withhold their labor from such work, and in effect are leaving vacancies which **foreign workers** fill.

This adjustment in the labor market does not undermine prevailing labor standards or American employment - although it may prevent wage increases and might therefore be said to help fight inflation and imports.

A temporary **foreign worker** program carefully designed to meet the indicated realities deserves a judicious hearing in this country. EDWIN P. REUBENS Professor of Economics The City College New York, May 13, 1981

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