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Second-Class Citizenship

By [Juan Gonzalez](#) | 2.6.04

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In his State of the Union address, President Bush asked Congress to reform U.S. immigration laws "to reflect our values and benefit our economy." But what he calls a new guest worker program, which matches "willing foreign workers with willing employers when no Americans can be found to fill the job," is a scam Latinos know all too well.

Welcome to Wal-Mart's Bracero Program.

During the early 20th Century, U.S. companies routinely recruited hundreds of thousands of Mexicans for industrial jobs in the West and the Midwest. Whenever the economy soured, the migrants were rounded up and deported by the trainload. Then came the World War II "Bracero Program," a scheme to recruit Mexicans for U.S. agribusiness, which led to such terrible abuses that Lyndon Johnson mercifully ended it in 1964.

Remember when the feds accused Wal-Mart last year of illegally employing hundreds of undocumented workers as janitors? Under Bush's plan, corporations like Wal-Mart won't have to resort to clandestine exploitation. They'll hire all the immigrants they want at super-low wages—and it will be legal. Should a guest worker dare demand better treatment, the corporations can simply revoke his certification, triggering immediate deportation proceedings.

It's no secret that Hispanics comprise a huge share of the 8 million undocumented workers in this country, or that Bush needs a bigger share of the Latino vote to assure reelection. And he will spend from now until November seeking to persuade Latino voters how hard he worked to solve the immigration problem.

But Bush's bracero program would only create a new permanent American underclass—one with fewer rights than legal residents. Forget the hype about matching "willing workers" and "willing employees" for jobs Americans don't want. Bush knows, as does the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which immediately endorsed the plan, that the best way to get an American worker to refuse a job is to offer a wage so miserable only a desperate immigrant would take it. • ■

Juan Gonzalez is a columnist for New York's *Daily News* and *In These Times*. The winner of a 1998 George Polk journalism award, he is the author of *Roll Down Your Window: Stories of a Forgotten America* and *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*.

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READER COMMENTS

First let me say:

"the best way to get an American worker to refuse a job is to offer a wage so miserable only a desperate immigrant would take it" is patently untrue. It is the combination of physical labor with a low wage that makes Americans decline jobs.

And why would the immigrant workers take it? Could it be that this 'miserable wage' is twice what they can make in their homeland? That the immigrant worker is much better able to support his family with the alleged 'miserable wage'? that the immigrant worker is not qualified to take a higher paying job and this is by far the best wage they can get?

Why doesn't In These Times hire undocumented Mexican field workers as editors at the magazine? Is it racism?

Posted by: Nus on 2.6.04 | 11:34 am from Philadelphia

If somebody doesn't want the job then they shouldn't take it. Pretty simple. It's called the free market.

Yet again another article from In These Times that just whines about problems and offers no alternative whatsoever. No thoughtful analysis on a different program to replace this one. Personally I like it so I'm not offering anything else.

We don't reward illegal activity by making them citizens, they get the opportunity to earn more money than they could in their homeland, and jobs are filled that need to be filled.

"Recruiting"? Give me a break, Immigrants want to come here so bad they literally risk their lives to get here.

Posted by: Ty on 2.6.04 | 11:53 am from Chicago, IL

I know for a fact that Bush's "new" guest worker program isn't new at all. There is already a guest worker program that is in place, some of you may not know this, but Bush isn't changing anything for the better. With the current guest worker program (gwp), people had to pay \$\$ in order to get their jobs, with Bush's program, they will have to do the same thing! This is an outrage, no one should have to pay money in order to get a job, especially when they'll be making so little money. Things like this shouldn't be allowed to happen in America, or anywhere really. What ever happened to "the land of the free and the home of the brave"? While it may be brave to pay for a job, there is no freedom. Another thing, isn't America also about equality? Smoeone please explain to me how putting people from other countries into these crappy positions is equal. Right now I just don't see it, i really don't. Anyone who is in favor of the "new" guest worker program should be ashamed of themselves, and if it is enacted, America should be ashamed of what the have done. This guest worker program is nothing to be proud of, and it should have never have been thought of by anyone who is truly American!

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Posted by: Julie Perry on 2.6.04 | 12:23 pm from New England

The guest worker program sounds like more corporate welfare to me. Paying peanuts for hard work is unfair no matter which side of the border it happens on. Greed is the problem. In Washington DC, Wall Street or Mexico City, trickle down economics is wrong. It doesn't work and it never will.

Posted by: Tom Atkinson on 2.6.04 | 1:11 pm from Seattle

This is a great idea if and only if one is attempting to create a "servant" class to cater to the capricious whims of the "upper class" But Bush is an "ethical" person who would not be doing anything like, would he? Sure he would, in a heart beat. After all is he not the one who stated "I just don't understand how poor people think." Decrease workers right and depress wages, that is the Bush policy. He could care less about anything else but support the "investor" class and this move is part and parcel of what they want.

Posted by: **Jack Dalton** on 2.6.04 | 1:24 pm from Portland, Or.

RICH WANT CHEAP LABOR

The rich think American workers are overpaid. But notice that highly-paid professions--such as doctors--have successfully lobbied for protectionism. It is a matter of money and power.

And Americans will take menial jobs if paid enough. They already do.

Posted by: Mike on 2.6.04 | 2:17 pm from USA

WE DON'T LIVE IN A FREE MARKET!!! That is an awful excuse for exploitation.

Posted by: Ash Roughani on 2.6.04 | 4:07 pm from Sacramento, CA

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