

Building Understanding Creating Change

Defending the Rights of Immigrant Workers

What Union Members Should Know About . . .

The AFL-CIO Policy on Immigration

The AFL-CIO proudly stands on the side of immigrant workers. Immigrant workers are an extremely important part of our nation's economy, our nation's union movement and our nation's communities. In many ways, the new AFL-CIO immigration policy signals a return of the union movement to its historical roots. It is increasingly clear that if the United States is to have an immigration system that really works, it must be simultaneously orderly, responsible and fair. The policies of both the AFL-CIO and our country must reflect those goals.

The United States is a nation of laws. This means the federal government has the sovereign authority and constitutional responsibility to set and enforce limits on immigration. It also means our government has the obligation to enact and enforce laws in ways that respect due process and civil liberties, safeguard public health and safety and protect the rights and opportunities of workers.

The current system is broken

Unfortunately, the current system of immigration enforcement, while failing to stop the flow of undocumented people into the United States, is causing workplace discrimination against immigrants and minorities, particularly undocumented workers. The current system leaves unpunished unscrupulous employers who exploit undocumented workers and retaliate against them when they join with other workers to assert their rights, thus denying labor rights for all workers.

This system of workplace immigration enforcement in the United States, with its emphasis on the I-9

system, is broken, targets workers instead of the egregious employers who exploit them and needs to be fixed.

Labor's principles

We believe the following principles should form our national immigration policy. Specifically:

- Undocumented workers and their families make enormous contributions to their communities and workplaces and should be provided permanent legal status through a new legalization program;
- Employer sanctions and the I-9 system should be replaced with a system that targets and criminalizes employers who recruit undocumented workers from abroad for economic gain;
- Immigrant workers should have full workplace rights, including the right to organize and protections for whistle-blowers;
- Government safety net benefits are important for all workers, and those unfairly taken away by Congress in 1996 should be restored.
- Labor and business together should design mechanisms to meet legitimate needs for new workers without compromising the rights and opportunities of workers already here; and
- Guest worker programs should be reformed but not expanded.

The AFL-CIO supports a broad legalization program that makes no distinction based on country of origin and that allows undocumented workers and their families who have been working hard, paying taxes and contributing to their communities the

opportunity to adjust to permanent legal resident status. We should recognize that one of the reasons for undocumented immigration is that our current legal immigration system for family members and for workers is in shamefully bad shape. A broad legalization program providing permanent residence status, rather than a large new guest worker program, should be the focus of our efforts.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions will work vigilantly with our coalition partners representing the immigrant, ethnic, faith and civil rights communities to ensure that comprehensive legislation providing

for legalization and the enforcement of workplace rights for all workers is introduced in Congress and ultimately signed into law.

History has proven that mistreatment of one group in a workplace ultimately will lead to the mistreatment of all workers. We must be mindful of and learn from the history of oppression that many U.S. workers have faced, in particular the long struggle of African American workers. All workers must understand the difference that unions make for workers, whether it is a living wage, better benefits or a safer work environment.