

## Durso: Immigration reform requires temperence

by John R. Durso

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Next year when the smoke clears from the health care debate, everyone will be talking about immigration reform. The shouting matches that passed for discussion in the health care campaign will surely reappear when the spotlight shifts to immigration. In the ongoing health care debate, the opponents tried to make us think about death panels, creeping socialism and a takeover of our health care system by the government. We know it is really a fight between insurance industry profits and the public's demand for quality, access and cost controls.

Immigration will raise similar kinds of passions, most likely directed at the status of people who came into the country without authorization. There ought to be agreement, however, about the immigration system in general; it is broken and it needs to be fixed. The last attempt by Congress to correct it – the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 – was a failure by any measure. Since its passage, the number of unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States has increased dramatically, and now totals 12 million. Every year, 500,000 new immigrants – the majority without authorization status – are absorbed into the U.S. labor force. There is no doubt that a broken immigration system feeds resentment and racial disharmony, especially at a time of unusually high unemployment.

We can work to control our borders by removing the economic incentives to exploit immigrant workers, which are currently driving [illegal migration](#). If we put workers' rights at the forefront of the discussion, we believe that is a solution American workers and the public will support.

First, we need to think more clearly about the number of [foreign workers](#) entering the United States. It should be based on actual [labor market](#) demand, researched and determined by an independent commission. Second, there must be an effective verification process to determine who is in the country legally. One approach being suggested is to have a federal agency give workers a secure identifier with biometric data and a unique work authorization number for each new job. Verification should be taken out of the hands of employers, but employers who refuse to use the new system would face tough penalties. Also, there must be better control of our borders. Understanding that 45 percent of unauthorized immigrants are here because they overstayed their visas, not because they crossed the border illegally, suggests that border control will have to go hand in hand with a better verification process.

Third, reform must include adjustment of status for the undocumented population here. The [AFL-CIO](#) has pointed out that rounding up and deporting the 12 million immigrants who are in the country unlawfully makes a good sound bite, but it is not a realistic solution. This group of workers should be given adequate incentives to come out of the shadows to adjust their status and gain rights, particularly workplace rights. Otherwise, there will continue to be a large pool of unauthorized workers whom employers can exploit to drive down wages to the detriment of all workers and employers who play by the rules.

Finally, the United States must improve the administration of the temporary worker programs, not adopt a new "indentured" or "guest worker" initiative. It is not good policy for a democracy to continue to admit large numbers of workers with limited civil and employment rights. Nevertheless, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce will fight tooth and nail for an expanded program without specific worker rights.

These are remedies. Just like health care, we can't achieve them without a fight. It is another fight that pits working families against entrenched corporate interests. For our nation, it is a fight worth having.

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