

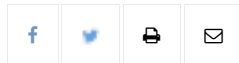


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UPI ARCHIVES SEPT. 14, 2001

Study: Immigrant amnesty hurts unions

By JOANN KELLY, for United Press International



WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 -- The increasing support by the American labor union movement for the amnesty for illegal aliens and an end to the ban on hiring them will backfire and cost the unions not only membership but also their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of all workers, according to a recent study.

Increased immigration will heighten competition for low-skilled jobs, alienate native-born workers from unions, and make unions unable to apply pressure to employers, according to "American Unions and U.S. Immigration Policy," recently released by the Center for Immigration Studies.

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affecting our low-skilled workers think the unions have made a terrible mistake in putting the interests of immigrant workers first," said the author of the report, Vernon M. Briggs Jr., a professor at the Cornell University School of Labor and Industrial Relations.

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The Center for Immigration Studies -- which describes itself as non-partisan and the only think tank devoted exclusively to research and policy analysis of the economic, social, demographic, fiscal, and other impacts of immigration on the United States -- opposes increased immigration.

Briggs's report has found little support among other think tanks. It comes at a time when the U.S. Congress is taking testimony on immigration law reform and President Bush has proposed the eventual legalization of millions of undocumented Mexican migrants.

"My evaluation is that this (report) is simply a political statement trying to take on the unions or others based on a flawed analysis of research" said Demetrious Papademetriou, co-director of the liberal-leaning Migration Policy Institute, formerly a branch of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Papademetriou argued the decision by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations to embrace the immigration agenda could just as likely yield two outcomes other than Briggs' prediction: the unions could actually enhance their numbers, and a system of earned legalization could empower unions because they would no longer lose their wages to illegal immigrants.

Mark Wilson, a research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, also characterized the labor movement's support of immigration reform as a smart move, specifically because of the decline in union membership.

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"In the long run, it presents a real opportunity for unions to organize and collectively bargain," said Wilson, who specializes in workplace policy issues.

In February 2000, the executive council of the AFL-CIO announced it would support expanded immigration, lenient enforcement of immigration laws, and the legislative agenda of immigrants and may formally adopt that position in December at its convention.

Briggs paints this new political strategy as a break with the history of the labor movement, which he describes as a centuries-long stance against immigrants. Much of his report is devoted to highlighting the often-adversarial relationship between unions and immigrants throughout history. Briggs notes that, with the exception of two periods involving special circumstances, an increase in immigration into the country has been met with a decrease in union membership.

He argues that former union leaders correctly perceived immigrants as a threat to native-born workers. He notes unions before the 1990s heavily lobbied for legislation to restrict immigration, such as the creation of the Asiatic Barred Zone in 1917, which banned almost all immigration from Asian countries to counteract the influx of Chinese and Japanese workers.

"Until now, unions have always been the most steadfast supporters of enforceable immigration policy," Briggs said. "The real issue is whether immigration is congruent with economic policy or not. We absolutely do not need more unskilled workers."

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The unions are guaranteeing just that by their current support of less stringent immigration law, he argues. The shift towards supporting immigrants began when the AFL-CIO did not take a stance on the Immigration Act of 1990, which raised immigration levels, and then in 1995 opposed proposed immigration restrictions, according to his report.

But Wilson says that Briggs' historical analysis omits times when unions did champion immigrant rights; he noted that the CIO, before merging with the AFL, was sympathetic to that cause.

"There's always been a tug-of-war in the union movement over immigration," Wilson said. "The classic trade unions viewed them as a threat but on the flip-side, the CIO embraced immigrants in the early 1900s."

The mainstream historical stance of unions against increased immigration is backed by research as well as precedent, Briggs claims in his report. For example, he quotes a study by economists Harry Mills and Royal Montgomery as saying that restrictive immigration legislation in the United States after World War I may have been morally questionable, but certainly contributed to an increase in wages for workers.

Briggs also cites, among others, a 1997 National Research Council report which found that the educational levels of immigrants arriving in America after 1965 (when less restrictive legislation was passed) have steadily declined.

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As a result, mass immigration is "disproportionately increasing the segment of the nation's labor supply that has the lowest human capital endowments," Briggs writes. That, in turn, he concludes, has undermined the ability of unions to organize workers and pressure employers into economic gains for those who are organized, contributing to a decrease in union membership.

Other factors such as employer practices and globalization have played a much more important role in the decline in union membership, said Cathy Ruckelshaus, litigation director for the National Employment Law Project. She also claimed that unions have recently been improving their ability to draw members of the migrant population into the fold.

"There have been some success stories, they're figuring out how to organize them through the united food and commercial workers, and the hotel and restaurants unions," Ruckelshaus said. "It's just a process of education and looking around and seeing what's happening."

Steven Moore, a senior fellow in economics at the libertarian Cato Institute, took issue with Briggs' claim that increased immigration has had a negative economic impact in the country.

"I don't know whether it's good for unions or not, but the real issue is whether it's good for American workers," Moore said. "There's no indication that immigration costs jobs. In recent years we've seen a reduction in unemployment and higher wages even as we let more immigrants in our borders."



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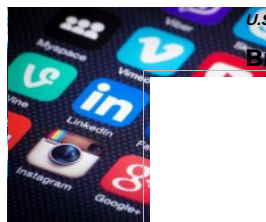


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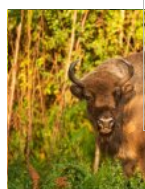
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