

Democrats and Republicans Join Hands Over Immigration

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Even the most optimistic Obama supporter should cringe in response to the White House's recent "bi-partisan immigration talks." What could Democrats and Republicans possibly have in common over immigration? Quite a lot it turns out.

An enormous sell-out is being prepared for the U.S. immigrant population and Latinos especially — who came out in record numbers in many swing states to vote for Obama last year. Attached to these votes are huge expectations.

Obama has, again, shifted another campaign promise far to the right — pro-immigration reform has turned into its opposite. And like all of his other betrayals, Obama is attempting to sell this one to the public as a "compromise." But immigration, like health care, peace, the environment, etc., has very little room for backroom deals and finding a "middle ground" with an increasingly hysterical right wing.

The basis for a Democrat/Republican compromise on immigration started with a "concession" from the Democrats. Democratic Senator Charles Schumer is now shaping immigration policy for the party, a move that has greatly appeased Republicans, since the formal head, Ted Kennedy, was seen as being too liberal.

The New York Times noted, "[Schumer] is likely to be tougher on stemming illegal immigration, and less prone to support civil liberties for illegal immigrants..." (June 26, 2009)

In a recent speech, Schumer outlined the "principles" that united the two-party system around immigration. The New York Times explained:

"The speech was notably tough-sounding, but the principles were solid. Illegal immigration is wrong. The borders and workplace need tighter enforcement. Illegal immigrants must be required to register, learn English and pay taxes — or face deportation. But they should also be allowed to seek citizenship. The path back to a lawful system is through legalization and an improved, well-managed immigration flow." (June 26, 2009)

Apologists for the Democrats will undoubtedly focus on the last two sentences, but even these have dire implications. What, for example, is a "well-managed immigration flow?"

And this is where the Republicans offer counsel: "border security" will be immensely strengthened to keep out "undesirable" (mainly Latino) immigrants, while others will be

allowed in the country, legally, through “guest worker” programs.

The big corporations within the Republican Party — much like the big corporations inside the Democratic Party — are always desperate for the cheapest possible labor. Recruiting immigrants to work for them as “guest workers” means that immigrants are allowed in the country on a short-term basis, as long as they are totally compliant and do not seek higher wages or unionization. Protesting dangerous working conditions in this case equals deportation; fundamental worker rights are withheld.

The big labor confederations — the A.F.L-C.I.O and Change To Win — have shamelessly agreed to the above “general principles” of the Democrat/Republican immigration policy. However, they correctly came out against the guest worker program... but for the wrong reasons.

While mentioning the exploitative nature of guest worker programs, many unions also focus on the fact that these programs — by denying guest workers the right to unionize — lower the wages of workers in the U.S. Some subtly blame immigrants for it. Many unions oppose *any* increase in immigration. This nationalistic argument is at work in nearly every sentence of the far right-wing’s tirades against immigration. It deserves a deafening rebuttal, not creatively disguised racism.

Yes, it’s true that the intentions of guest worker programs are to get the cheapest possible labor for corporations. And, yes, it is true that this, in turn, has the effect of lowering the wages of U.S. born workers. The unforgivable error that some unions commit — which applies with equal weight to many self-professed “progressives” — is that the blame is “shared” between corporations and immigrants: both are seen as being equally culpable in the ‘immigration crisis’ and the attack on the U.S. working-class.

Immigrants, however, are victims of larger socio-economic forces. These forces prevent immigrants from being able to meet the most basic needs in their home country, such as feeding their families. On the other hand, the mega-employers and their pet politicians in the U.S. are in fact controlling these economic forces, to the detriment of native and foreign workers alike.

It is no coincidence that the corporate-inspired free-trade agreements — NAFTA and CAFTA — caused a sea of immigration to the U.S., while likewise helping to off-shore U.S. manufacturing in search of slave wages — both of these phenomena only benefit large corporations and the super wealthy that own them.

The Democrats have conceded the immigration issue to the Republicans because they benefit equally from it. Not only do both groups require exploitative “guest worker programs” for their corporate donors, but also benefit immensely from the scapegoating effect. For example, the Democrats are now beginning to be correctly viewed by most Americans as “tools of Wall Street”, especially after the bank bailouts. Better that the resulting rage be directed towards society’s most vulnerable people.

This is why it is especially sad that labor unions and some national immigrant right’s organizations have opportunistically fallen behind the Democrats/Republicans “immigration reform,” the inevitable result of which will be further border militarization and consequent deaths along the border, while increasing immigrant scapegoating and consequent hate crimes. Workplace intimidation will also increase.

If the emerging reform becomes law, it will be a springboard for the extreme right, like the Minutemen, who will benefit from the bill's scapegoating essence, while also incorrectly denouncing the Republicans and Democrats for granting "amnesty."

The honest "left," therefore, must do the opposite. Promoting "amnesty for all" is the only consistent, progressive argument around immigration — all others fall victim to the evils of scapegoating and "border security." The foundation for an "equality for all" argument lies not only in the fact that immigrants are workers too, but in recognition that the immigration issue is used as a central wedge to divide and conquer all working people, thus allowing a tiny financial elite to dominate the country in the pursuit of endless wars and corporate bailouts.

U.S. immigration policy must return to its roots — most eloquently explained by the inscription at the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless,
tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

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