



graphic: Matt Wuerker

Corporate Coyotes

Legal “guest worker” visas are snatched up by corporate coyotes who charge and exploit the immigrants under cover of the law.

Five hundred welders and pipefitters from India and United Arab Emirates are suing US corporation Signal International, an oil-rig repair and construction company. The workers were brought to Mississippi and Texas, on guest-worker visas, to repair damage from hurricanes Rita and Katrina. The workers’ suit claims the company promised to help them obtain permanent resident status. Many of these foreign workers gave up life savings, paying up to \$20,000 in fees based on this belief. The workers also claim they were housed in unhygienic, crowded “bunkhouses” that made them ill. Of course, the corporation denies the charges claiming the workers were treated fairly, legally and were paid “in excess” of prevailing rates.

This is not the only complaint involving foreign workers brought here under false pretenses and subsequently exploited by their employers. Hispanic hotel workers, farm laborers and construction workers – many cleaning up after Katrina – cite low pay and harsh working conditions. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, immigrants brought in under the guest worker program are “systematically exploited and abused,” all over the country.

The US government has turned up the heat on small-time smugglers, called “coyotes,” who put safety aside and charge exorbitant rates to workers trying to get into the country illegally. And to the workers they say “wait your turn to come in legally.” But these legal “guest-worker” visas are snatched up by corporate coyotes who charge and exploit the immigrants under cover of the law.

And are there really not enough US pipefitters and welders willing to take jobs that pay “in excess” of their normal rates? These are good blue-collar jobs that could support a middle class family. Maybe we could train some workers whose jobs were lost to free trade.

And are there really no US computer programmers who would like to work for Microsoft? Bill

“Coyote” Gates says there are not, at least not enough good ones, and he went before Congress to complain. He and the other corporate managers want to bring in more “guest workers” on the H-1B visas. Gates says most of the highly educated graduates from US schools are foreign citizens. And US corporations like Microsoft, Google and Sun get fewer of these visas every year because more and more go to foreign corporations who bring in their own foreign workforce. Currently, 65,000 H-1B visas are issued plus another 20,000 to foreign students who graduate with advanced degrees from US universities. Gates would like to double the number of visas. Lamar Smith (R-Texas), would triple it, raising the visa cap to 195,000 in 2008 and 2009.

Why are more than 60% of the places in US university graduate programs in science and math filled by foreign students? Could it be we don’t spend enough to educate US high school and undergrad students in these subjects?

US Senator Grassley (R-Iowa) responded to Gates in a letter. “Reforms are needed so that US businesses – both large and small -- can find, recruit and hire the workers they need.” Grassley goes on to say, “I’m concerned that some companies are more concerned about their bottom line than about the dire need to better educate and train American students and workers. The solution is not, in my opinion, importing more foreign workers. Rather, we must strengthen educational opportunities for America’s students and workers, as you noted. Such an investment will help reduce the trend in which 60% of students in US STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] doctoral programs are foreign born.”

Jan Edwards is the creator of the “Tapestry of the Commons” which is online at www.thealliancefordemocracy.org. She is a member of the Redwood Coast Chapter of the AFD.

