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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

American Jobs but Not the American Dream

By DAVID ABRAHAM

President Bush’s immigration reform proposal, unveiled on Wednesday, is a classic guest worker program on the European model. As such, it may be doomed from the start: Europe’s guest worker programs created as many problems as they solved, and to this day they remain unpopular.

Guest worker programs were widely used in Europe from the 1950’s through the 1970’s during a period of extreme labor shortages. Most of the several million Turks and Yugoslavs in Germany, for example, are there today because of Germany's substantial guest-worker program of that period. Lesser but substantial numbers of guest workers are also to be found among the Muslim populations of Central and Northern Europe.

Germany's guest worker program was ended more than two decades ago. Yet Germans still have not resolved the question of what to do with the millions of immigrants living in their midst. Although these immigrant workers get some benefits of citizenship — health care, for example, and unemployment insurance — they are not citizens. They are not allowed full membership in German society, yet neither are they forced to return home. It is virtually impossible to find anyone in Germany today who would favor re-establishment of its guest worker program.

The details of the program announced by President Bush have yet to be worked out. But its outlines are clear. At the invitation of employers, workers will be permitted to stay in the United States for a limited time without having to wait in its long immigration lines. They would also secure many of the benefits and protections of American-born workers.

The chief virtue of the program, as the president made clear, is that the guest workers would be allowed to move relatively freely between their country of citizenship — overwhelmingly Mexico — and the country in which they are "guests." Such movement could reduce the disturbing smuggling and illegal border crossings so common along America's frontiers.

But the drawbacks of guest worker programs far outweigh their advantages. To begin with, experience shows that guest workers are not good guests: they rarely want to leave. In Germany today there are more than two million people of Muslim Turkish origin, many of whose families came as guest workers four decades ago. Guest workers marry locals; they have children; they encourage their kin and friends to join them in the host country, legally or illegally.

After all, guest workers are not just labor, they are people. Where will these people live, and how will they be treated? Can we look forward to new urban ghettos or rural guest-worker "villages"? Fifty years after the civil rights movement, will we now have a new caste of subordinated foreign workers? Once the economic need for guest workers abates (assuming, in fact, that there is such a need) what happens to them?
It is true that America has more experience with assimilation than Europe. But that does not mean finding answers to these questions will be any less difficult.

And in some respects, the dangers of a guest worker program in the United States are graver than they were in Europe. Germany, the Benelux countries, Scandinavia and other European host countries had and still have very strong labor unions. Those strong unions were able to make certain that guest workers were not used by employers to depress wages. By contrast, American labor unions are weak to nonexistent in most segments of the labor market.

In addition, President Bush has clearly expressed his intention to put employers in charge: guest workers will be selected by employers and will be able to remain in the United States only so long as they stay with the employer who brought them. This is a sure recipe not only for the exploitation of these "guests" but also for the depression of American wages generally, especially among those who can least afford it — many of them immigrants.

The United States has always been a "welcoming country," as the president said, "open to the talents and dreams of the world." But this plan is an abandonment of America's ideals, not an expression of them. It values immigrants' talents over their dreams. Instead of hope, it offers them simply a job.

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