

## Two Secretaries Speak and California Listens

On the Homeland Security website recent speeches by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Department of Commerce Secretary Gutierrez were highlighted. While Chertoff hit the usual law enforcement highlights, Gutierrez really had the more interesting perspective on the migrant labor problems of late. Here are his opening remarks, which were right on:

**“Secretary Gutierrez:** Thank you. I would like to talk a little about the business environment and what is happening in the business community as it refers to immigration and the need for immigration reform. There's a lot of discussion about the burden of immigration but there is not enough conversation about the risk of not having enough immigrants, especially a risk to our economy and a risk to our competitive position as it relates to the rest of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

He followed these remarks with general statements about security, then launched into the agricultural worker program (H-2A) next. This is the remainder of his short presentation:

“In addition, we have proposed changes to the H-2A agricultural seasonal worker program. The changes will make the H-2A system more efficient and ensure an orderly and timely flow of legal, foreign workers. They will also protect the rights of all agricultural workers, American and foreign, and make no mistake we need both. We don't have enough domestic workers to meet the food needs of our country.

“The *New York Times* ran an article with the headline “Shortage of Labor to Cut Food Supply: Farmers Handicapped by Lack of Help Reduce Their Crop Acreage.” That headline and the article ran in 1920. Coincidentally that was amidst one of the worst anti-immigration waves that we have ever seen.

“Nearly a century later we face similar challenges, but this time, rather than reduce consumption we'll have to turn to foreign producers or move our farms overseas to feed our families. In fact, that is already happening. A survey by the U.S. Farm Group, Western Growers, indicated American companies now farm more than 45,000 acres of land in Mexico employing 11,000 people.

“At a time when we are looking to further secure our food supply to tighten our import safety and to continue to increase and contribute to world supply because of the prices of food, we should not encourage the outsourcing of American agriculture. And what Congress is doing by avoiding to pass comprehensive immigration reform is effectively encouraging the outsourcing of American agriculture.

“We know there are employers who have not been able to fill many jobs with American workers. We simply can't ignore the problem and hope that the issue will go away. A comprehensive solution remains the best and the most long term option. Without it, we're getting a piecemeal approach, which is something we talked about when we mentioned the fact that comprehensive reform had failed, we talked about the fact that we were going to get a piecemeal approach to a national issue.

"For example, in 2007 states enacted 240 immigration laws. That's up from 84 the year before. Immigration is being debated in every capital in the country. A total of 1,562 immigration bills were introduced last year. This patchwork of laws is untenable in the long term. So we will continue to look at ways to improve existing programs and address all aspects of immigration. Other major economies around the world have realized the need for immigration policy to help them grow their economies, and we are all competing for growth, and everyone is trying to grow their economies and most major economies have realized that they cannot grow without a comprehensive immigration policy.

"Our country has a long history of making immigration work. We have more experience than any other nation and it has been one of our greatest advantages, if you look back through our economic history we would not have accomplished what we have accomplished if it were not for the help and the work of immigrants.

"We can make immigration an advantage that will last for a century. The issue is not going to go away. Regardless of who is President and regardless of which party is in power, immigration will remain both a tough challenge but also a tremendous opportunity for our country if we get this right, if we approach it in a thoughtful way, and if we are decisive about confronting a problem that will not go away."<sup>2</sup>

And speaking of "making immigration work," as the Secretary proclaimed, *Capital Press*, on their website, impresses with the next article on an announcement about the H-2A program and a new movement to make *it* work.

"Another path to a stable, skilled and legal U.S. agriculture workforce was explored June 7 at a labor summit that hosted the president of Honduras and top government officials from El Salvador and Guatemala.

"Manuel Cunha Jr., president of Nisei Farmers League and organizer of the Western Labor Summit held in Fresno, said growers have no choice but to try and implement a guestworker program called H-2A because there is no federal immigration reform in sight and growers face the threat of heavy fines for hiring undocumented workers.

"It's a difficult and bureaucratic process," Cunha said, "but we have no choice but to try and implement it."

"Cunha, Central American leaders and local agriculture representatives met with the media following the summit.

"The H-2A program, which is part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, allows employers to bring in foreign nationals for temporary or seasonal agricultural work. Growers have rejected the program in the past because of bureaucratic red tape and the length of time it takes to process requests for workers. Changes were made by the Labor Department recently to address some of those issues.

"Cunha called the potential partnerships with the Central American countries to bring in workers from those countries an opportunity for farmers.

"We need labor, skilled, legal labor and these countries represented here today very much want to work with us," he said.

"Working within the program will ensure the safety of workers as they travel to the U.S. There will be housing and transportation provided during their stay, Cunha said, and they will return to their home countries.

"Honduran President Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales called the labor discussions the most positive step in recent times to address the needs for workers and for employers.

"We know there is a great shortage of farm labor in California," he said, speaking through a translator. "We really hope this meeting can contribute to finding a solution to the problem."

"Zelaya said the countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala could each send 30,000 to 50,000 trained, seasonal workers to U.S. farms annually if the details of the program can be worked out.

... "It will work for some, for some it won't," she said. "We have to look at what's available and this is a tool we have now - the only one."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Department of Commerce Secretary Gutierrez at the State of Immigration Address," on homepage of Homeland Security website at: [http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/pr\\_1213101513448.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/pr_1213101513448.shtm). (accessed 6-20-08)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cecilia Parsons, "Summit explores legal labor options," 6/13/2008. Website at: <http://www.capitalpress.info/main.asp?SectionID=67&SubSectionID=616&ArticleID=42226&TM=17623.02>. (accessed 6-20-08)