

Two States of Mind

There is probably no greater expanse between the two states of mind of Washington State and California State than their approaches to using the H-2A program.

While California is fighting the mere mention of the name, much less its adaptation in the state, (even though statistics are coming in now, showing increasingly that the farmers are using it more and more each month,) Washington State is putting an effort to bring in legal professional workers to work in its fields.

Here are two articles-one from each state-to point out the complete disassociation in attitudes about H-2A and use of legal, visa'ed migrant workers. First, from *The Sacramento Bee* comes this, from their reporter, Susan Ferriss. It begins:

"On July 15, more than 180 people departed from Colima, Mexico, bound for Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta farms for six months of work.

"The terms of their journey were so special – they were going legally – that Colima's state government threw a party to celebrate. The workers carried H-2A farm labor visas, sponsored by a Delta employer who promised wages of \$100 a day, 40 hours of work a week, free housing and low-cost meals.

"After a month, some workers said, it proved too good to be true.

"The housing was filthy, and meals were mostly beans. The workers had fronted \$600 to cover visas and travel costs, yet many were earning little or nothing because there wasn't enough work."¹

But, wait a moment! Do you think this reporter found out about this mistreatment by deep investigative probing into the matter, spurred on by her reporter's instinct and sensitive progressive heart for those less fortunate than her? Uh, that would be a no! She found out about it because the workers sued that employer and it made the news, which she divulges further into the article. So, there was redress for the matter. News bulletin here: There *always* is!

Then, of course, there is the ubiquitous commentary by some group opposed to the program at the end of the article, in order to give it some legitimacy and 'punch.' In this case it is:

"Jack King, national affairs manager of the California Farm Bureau, said employers want to use the H-2A program, but many businesses are ill-prepared to manage large influxes now.

"We're pretty new to this," he said.

"King said the industry, joined by labor unions, would rather see Congress pass AgJOBS, a proposal that would allow undocumented farmworkers to come forward and earn legal status if they stay in farm work for three to five more years."²

Yeah, I bet he would. Slave labor is always better than having to actually *pay* the hired help, isn't it? Fortunately that is now illegal, or there would be a lot more migrants living in "filthy housing" and "eating beans," as the foregoing reporter noted.

Now, to Washington state and their more reasoned approach to hiring.

This, from the Capital Press website: ***“State helps employers find H-2A workers.”***

“Washington state ag employers interested in using the federal H-2A guestworker program to obtain a legal work force have gained ground in their attempts to avoid hiring local workers in this country illegally.

“Beginning Jan. 1, the state's Employment Security Department will begin verifying the legality of local workers that it refers to ag employers who want to use the H-2A program.

“...until recently, there was a hitch in this procedure. Employment departments in some states, including Washington, weren't verifying the legal status of the workers before referring them to ag employers.

“That left the employers faced with running the risk of hiring workers who were in this country illegally and thereby missing out on the opportunity to use the H-2A program.”³

Initially, Washington State officials were opposed to the measure, as they did not have the money to complete the program as outlined. But, when the capital threatened to pull its federal funding...

“...Ignacio Marquez, director of the state employment department's Foreign Labor Certification program, said the department will fill out the I-9s for ag employers who want to use the H-2A program.”⁴

See what can happen when preparation meets opportunity?
I like to call it “Success!”

¹ Susan Ferriss, *“Guest worker program poorly run, critics charge,”* 10-4-08. Website at: <http://www.sacbee.com/341/story/1288107.html> (accessed 10-4-08)

² Ibid.

³ Cookson Beecher, *“State helps employers find H-2A workers,”* 10-2-08. Website at: <http://www.capitalpress.info/main.asp?SectionID=67&SubSectionID=618&ArticleID=45038&TM=13336.39> (accessed 10-4-08)

⁴ Ibid.