



# SOLIDARITY

*In The Sunshine*

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLORIDA AFL-CIO

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## Solidarity and the Immigration Debate

### Immigrant Workers By the Numbers

- In 2004, about 13% of the U.S. population was foreign born; over 40% of those were naturalized citizens.
- The majority of immigrant workers are in the U.S. legally. Six out of ten came to the United States to join immediate family members.
- Without immigrant labor, the US would lose \$1 trillion in output of goods and services. In 1997, taxes paid by immigrant workers provided the federal government with \$50 billion in surplus revenue. By 2022, immigrant workers will have contributed \$500 billion to the Social Security system.
- In March of 2005, the undocumented immigrant population was estimated at 11 million. Approximately 700,000 to 800,000 undocumented workers arrive in the U.S. every year, with 485,000 coming from Mexico.
- The five states with the largest immigrant populations are California, New York, Florida, Texas and Arizona.

**N**ow that the dust has settled from the contentious first round of Congressional debate on immigration reform, we thought it important to step back and remind everyone of labor's positions on the issue and more importantly the reasons why we have taken those positions. The immigration issue is a contentious one, and inflames the passions of those on all sides. So much so that in recent months millions of Americans have felt compelled to take to the streets in some of the largest public actions seen in a generation. These strong feelings run just as deep in the House of Labor, with all sides represented. This is understandable. As the United State's economy continues its transformation in the age of unbridled corporate globalization, we are losing good jobs in the critical sectors that built and sustained our once vibrant middle class – the same economic group that made this country the most dominant on the planet. These changes are painful and have impacted families across the nation, leaving our increasingly frustrated workforce looking for a reason for their loss of good fortune. Unfortunately and erroneously, immigrant workers (legal and illegal alike) have become the targets of that frustration. In the following article we will examine the AFL-CIO's position on immigration reform and the rationale for that stance. The goal here is to provide our members with some background on the issue and to make sure that everyone in our movement understands where we stand and why.

The five states with the largest immigrant populations are California, New York, Florida, Texas and Arizona.

Our nation's immigration system is broken and has become a perfect blueprint for the exploitation of all workers, both native and foreign born. It is a system that not only allows for illegal immigration to happen, but actually *encourages* it at the expense of all workers and their families.

The AFL-CIO has adopted several principles for immigration reform; principles that when enacted will solve the immigration crisis not by punishing immigrant workers, whose presence is merely a symptom of the disease, but by actually addressing the disease itself.

It is easy for all of us to point a finger at illegal immigrant workers and say "there...there is the problem." That view is the root of all of the punitive solutions such as mass deportations, increased police and military presence at the border and the denial of basic social services

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to undocumented workers. This view ignores the real problem. The real culprits here are the big corporations, who have created the conditions that force people to come to this country, allow businesses to profit from illegal labor and keep the federal government from enforcing even the most basic workplace standards.

The AFL-CIO has adopted the following principles that put the blame where it belongs and addresses the immigration problem at its many sources.

- **Stop the expansion of and roll-back NAFTA-like free trade agreements** – The influx of illegal workers to this country is growing thanks to NAFTA and other “free” trade agreements. For example, NAFTA has allowed big agribusiness to force millions of farmers off their land in Central and South America and allow corporations to pay slave wages at the industry jobs created. These people are forced to come to the U.S. because they have nowhere else to go.
- **Provide a path for illegal workers to obtain legal status** – The current system has created a secret underclass of workers, driving down wages while driving up profits. This hurts everyone in the labor marketplace. How can an illegal construction worker demand a fair wage when they have no legal status and can simply be deported? This lowers everyone’s wages. These workers pay millions in taxes (sales taxes, property taxes from rent etc.) that help our schools and other services.
- **Enforce workplace standards for everyone** – As long as businesses can get away with breaking employment and job safety laws for one group, they will continue to do it for every group. If workplace standards and workers’ rights, like the right to join a union, are enforced for the millions of illegal workers, it will make it easier for everyone’s rights to be protected.
- **Strictly enforce penalties for companies using illegal workers** – U.S. employers are reaping windfall profits on the backs of illegal immigrants, guaranteeing that native workers will never get those jobs. There are laws on the books, but the business friendly administrations have refused to enforce them. Consider this example: Last year Wal-Mart was caught locking in illegal workers to clean their stores. Wal-Mart got a slap on the wrist and then worked out an agreement where the federal government would notify them ahead of time before they came to inspect their workplaces for illegal workers. The Washington Post reported this month that work-site enforcement was scaled back 95% from 1999 to 2003. The number of employers prosecuted for hiring illegal workers dropped from 182 in 1999 to 4 in 2003 and fines declined from \$3.6 million to \$212,000.
- **Reform the current guest worker programs** – The current guest worker programs create a system of indentured servitude and has transformed millions of good paying, permanent jobs into sub-standard temporary jobs. The massive expansion being contemplated in Congress will only exacerbate this problem.

We realize that the immigration issue is a passionate one for many of our members. We understand the frustration of watching our family members and neighbors lose their jobs, only to have them replaced by immigrant labor. It is only natural to blame and resent the workers filling those jobs. However, the responsibility does not lie with the immigrant workers; it lies with a corrupt system that creates this indentured class.

We can not blame the workers trying to provide for their families, we must blame the corrupt businesses manipulating the system to inflate their already bloated profits. In many ways we are all victims of that system. An immigrant worker may get the job, but that job now only pays a fraction of what it once did and carries none of the benefits and protections.

The immigration system must be reformed, but in order to reform it, we must understand the real nature of the problem and must realize that all workers are being victimized, immigrant and native born alike. Only then, by standing together, can we begin to put our country back on track.

The labor movement in this country succeeded because in its infancy the decision was made to include all workers regardless of race, ethnicity and national origin. Long before the civil rights movement, ours embraced diversity realizing that strength was rooted in solidarity – nothing else mattered. Now, in this critical time, we must remember where we came from.

# LABOR UNIONS RELEASE COMPREHENSIVE NEW REPORT DETAILING FLORIDA'S HEALTH CARE CRISIS

## THREE MILLION WITHOUT HEALTH INSURANCE

**Jacksonville** – Union workers with the North Florida Central Labor Council, held a press conference today where they released a new report that provides incontrovertible proof that Florida's health care system is in a state of crisis. The report, compiled by the Research Institute on Social and Economic Studies of the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University, catalogues the segments of the state's population with no health insurance, the job sectors with the highest rate of uninsured workers and discusses the growing problem of private employers shifting health care costs for their employees to state funded programs like Medicaid.

The North Florida CLC, represents about 45,000 workers from Jacksonville and the surrounding areas including health care workers, teachers, building trades and service sector workers. Andy Bell, President of the CLC said, "This report proves what Florida's labor movement has been saying for the past eight years; that the job growth we have seen in this state is insufficient and has not yielded the type of jobs that are needed to sustain our families and our economy." On paper, Florida's rate of job growth has been one of the highest in the region, but many economists have argued that those numbers do not address the quality of those jobs; most have been in the service and tourism sectors and do not provide adequate health care coverage. Brother Bell said, "We keep hearing about how great Florida's economy is at creating new jobs, yet we keep seeing more and more workers with no health care. That can't continue, it is unsustainable. If everyone in Florida got a job at McDonald's, our unemployment rate would be zero, but would we have a healthy economy?"

Mary Williams, a Patient Care Associate in Jacksonville spoke about the problems she and her fellow workers are having in keeping their own health coverage. She said, "The health care we are forced to carry by our employer is very expensive and the costs keep going up. That is less money we have each month to make ends meet and provide for our families. It is shameful that the people working to provide quality health care for Floridians can't afford to provide health care for their own families."

State Representative Audrey Gibson also spoke about the growing problem of big private employers shifting their health care costs to the state's Medicaid system - the same corporations that receive generous tax breaks and other incentives to expand their businesses in the state. The Fair Share Health Care Act, which would require companies with over 10,000 employees to provide basic health care coverage for their workers or pay the state to help defray the Medicaid costs of those workers was filed in both the House and Senate but was never placed on the agenda. She said, "I believe that the issue of health care is a matter of public safety, and to that extent the state has an obligation to its citizens to make sure they have proper health care coverage, particularly when we use taxpayer dollars for corporate incentives." Other supporters of the Fair Share legislation have argued that the current system is a form of "double dipping", with profitable companies taking taxpayer money for development only to turn around and place the burden of their health care costs on the taxpayers through programs like Medicaid and KidCare.

"This is a critical issue facing the people of Florida and so far, very few of our elected officials have really stepped up to plate to address it," Andy Bell said. "Union members all over the state will be working hard this year to make sure Florida's health care crisis is given adequate attention in the upcoming elections and that we elect leaders like Representative Gibson who are willing to do the hard work to do something about it."

*The South Florida AFL-CIO also released the report at a press conference which garnered great press coverage and a positive editorial in the Miami Herald!*



## North Florida AFL-CIO & North Florida Building Trades 2006 Labor School

The North Florida AFL-CIO & North Florida Building Trades Council have joined together to present a one-of-a kind educational opportunity for all AFL-CIO union members. Labor School 2006 is a chance to involve both union leaders and potential activists members in a comprehensive two day seminar designed to help every Union increase its membership involvement and effectiveness.

The theme of the seminar is "The Relevance of the Union Labor Movement, Past, Present and Future". In a letter send out state-wide the sponsors write, "It is our hope and goal to use this format to introduce a new generation of union activists to the rich heritage of all those who have fought to establish the current level of work place wages, benefits, and working conditions, and the necessary and never ending effort to maintain and improve those standards which so many American workers take for granted. It is also our goal to reacquaint current union leaders with one another and in so doing, take full advantage of the current restructuring of our State Federation and area Central Labor Councils."

**Labor School 2006** will be held **August 11 - 13, 2006** in Jacksonville Florida. This event is filling up fast so a quick registration is needed! For information on room rates and registration forms please contact the North Florida CLC at (904) 403-4811 or call Rich at the Florida AFL-CIO at (850) 224-6926 or at [rtemplin@flaflcio.org](mailto:rtemplin@flaflcio.org).

## Once Again – Students in Florida Shine in the Union Plus Scholarships!

Each year, Union Privilege awards members of union households the Union Plus Scholarship to help make their dreams of a higher education a reality. This year, 5,800 applications were received and 108 scholarships were awarded totaling \$150,000. As always, Florida's students did exceptionally well, and three were awarded scholarships. In a press statement announcing the winners, Leslie Tolf president of Union Privilege said, "This is a way for working families to benefit twice, first they get the special protections and savings with our credit card and home mortgage programs, then they have access to this program

which, since 1992 has awarded more than \$2.2 million in scholarships to over 1,500 union families. "The Bush administration keeps slashing programs that help working families realize their dreams of higher education as a path to a better life," AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said. "The money goes to tax cuts for the very rich, while even at state universities tuition costs have skyrocketed over 25% since 2001. While we fight to restore the American dream for all of working America, Union Plus Scholarships provide crucial help to many women and men in the labor movement seeking to realize their dreams."

### Congratulations to Florida's Scholarship Winners!

- **Clyde F. Babylon – AWIU Local 53, Panama City Beach**
- **Tiger E. Curran – Parents Chris and T.K Curran, members of AEA Local 26126, Sarasota**
- **Andrew T. Rogers – Mother Diane Wolk-Rogers, member of AFT 1975, Coral Springs**



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