

In Search Of Amnesty; Call To legalize Workers Gives Mexicans Hope; But AFL-CIO Proposal Is Causing Confusion Among Laborers Aspiring To U.S.

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TALA, Mexico -- In the state of Jalisco, the AFL-CIO's call for legalization of undocumented workers sent a clear message: Come now to the United States. "Amnista!" local papers announced in mid-February when the giant U.S. labor organization made its proclamation.

It didn't matter that the labor union's proposal might not become law for years, if at all. If amnesty was possible, they wanted to be in the United States when it came.

Questions on the topic are taxing government offices across Mexico, said Jose Angel Pescador Osuna, Mexico's undersecretary of population and migrant services.

Residents of Tala, the bustling center of a sugar cane region northwest of Guadalajara, say a northward movement has begun. "If they didn't go in the last one or two years, now they're planning to go for sure," said Jose Manuel Barrena, 26, who was relaxing in the main plaza.

The area has sent generations of workers to the United States.

Some gained amnesty under 1986 U.S. immigration reforms. Others take part in an illegal back-and-forth commute. Locals say there are few in this region who don't have family or friends who have made the trek north, if they haven't themselves.

On a recent Sunday, cars bearing license plates from Oregon, Indiana, Nebraska, Illinois, Virginia and California lined Tala streets, proof of separate lives on the other side of the border.

To Tala-area residents, the AFL-CIO announcement sent a signal that amnesty again was possible.

Barrena, like others, was confused about the proposal. He believed President Clinton already had instituted some sort of program. And he thought it was available only to farm workers.

After a visit to California, he planned to seek agricultural work in Bakersfield rather than return to his packing job in a Seattle-area aviation parts factory.

"I have to go back to the fields to win amnesty. That's how my father earned it," he said. "After they give me amnesty, I'm going back to Seattle."

Building the ranks

An estimated 6 million people, mostly Mexicans, work in the United States without legal authorization. Given the reaction here, that number will swell on the prospect of another amnesty.

Labor leaders say they didn't intend for this to happen.

"Our statement doesn't say: If you can get here you will be legalized. It speaks to people who already are here," said David Smith, the AFL-CIO's director of public policy.

Eliseo Medina, a California union leader who helped initiate the policy change, said the goal is to boost membership by bringing union support to the labor force's least powerful segment.

"Immigrants have been viewed as competition for jobs," said Medina, the Los Angeles-based executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union. "That's changed. Now, most unions feel that migrants are revitalizing the labor movement."

Smith considers it unlikely that Congress will enact an amnesty measure this year. But Medina believes there's a chance the labor organization -- joined by big business, religious and community groups -- will persuade lawmakers while the economy's good and politicians are seeking votes in upcoming elections.

"The bottom line is we are committed to this issue. And, ultimately, we are going to succeed," said Medina, who a few years ago ran San Diego's SEIU Local 2028.

An amnesty program, if enacted, would be the fourth the United States has offered since the mid-1930s.

The last one, part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, created a population boom in California and other regions where undocumented workers settled. Most of the 3 million who qualified were men. They soon brought wives, children and other family members, legally or illegally.

Friction between established residents and immigrant newcomers developed when California's economy slipped into recession and U.S. agents failed to stop the flow of undocumented immigrants into the country.

The churning resentments resulted in the 1994 passage of Proposition 187 in California and the 1996 U.S. immigration law in Congress. Both measures denied services to migrants. (Proposition 187 was later ruled unconstitutional.)

Good issue in good times

Amnesty is a difficult issue, says Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California San Diego.

"To the extent that legalization would make workers less vulnerable to exploitation by employers, landlords, contractors and anyone else that takes advantage of undocumented, it's a positive social policy," he said.

"To the extent it reinforces migration patterns and causes some people to come who wouldn't ordinarily, it's negative."

Migration experts say the AFL-CIO is naive to believe its amnesty policy position wouldn't increase illegal migration.

"It's the psychology of the closing door," Cornelius said. "The notion that you'd better get up here -- the sooner the better -- to qualify."

Susan Martin, director of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration, warns that legalizing another huge group of undocumented immigrants could result in too many people competing for too few jobs paying the lowest wages.

We're now experiencing good times, she noted, and politicians aren't being pressured to reduce unauthorized migration.

"But when there's a change in the economy, the backlash -- if we haven't dealt with better ways to manage migration flows -- could be greater than it was in California," she said.

Mexican immigration experts expect consequences, as well.

Cities in Jalisco and other states have generated so many new jobs in the past five years there are barely enough people to fill them. To get the workers they need, "Mexico's largest cities are now drawing workers from 30, 40 miles around," said Agustn Escobar, an immigration research director at the Guadalajara institute CIESAS Occidente.

The problem is that wages in Mexico are an eighth of what they are in the United States -- so people continue to cross the border.

Mexico is working to stem the flow of undocumented immigrants north, said federal migration official Pescador.

"We have found some solutions, but they won't be sufficient to control U.S.-Mexican migration in the 21st century," he said. "But amnesty has never solved the migration problem either."

A compelling argument

The AFL-CIO's turnaround on immigration policy is fraught with irony.

For almost a decade, as it lost members and power, the organization used its resources to fight a shift of U.S. manufacturing to Mexico.

Now, by advocating amnesty, it is drawing Mexicans to work on the U.S. side of the border.

Foreign-born members helped build the U.S. union movement. American Federation of Labor founder Samuel Gompers was an immigrant from England.

But organized labor took an anti-immigrant stance from its beginning, declaring in the late 1880s that Chinese workers undermined salaries and should be banned or deported.

Policies against new immigrants continued through the 1955 merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

"It manifested itself in their opposition to NAFTA," said Stanley Aronowitz, a City University of New York professor who has written histories of U.S. labor. "What's changed is they're coming to terms with the changing nature of the work force in a multiethnic, global society."

The revolutionary turnabout started five years ago in California, when John J. Sweeney took over as AFL-CIO president and vowed to boost the union's dwindling membership by focusing on recruitment.

Latino organizers, several of them former migrants from Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, attracted large numbers of new members, mostly immigrants and many working without proper documents.

When Medina succeeded in bringing a force of 74,000 home-care workers into the service employees union, people around the nation took notice. None had

gotten such a membership boost, and the boost came mostly from recently arrived Mexican, Armenian and other minority women.

On a committee considering policy more favorable to migrant workers, Medina had little difficulty persuading other members to recommend sweeping changes.

"We were aware that this kind of issue would have opposition, but we felt it was the right kind of thing to do," he said. "Our job is to organize workers so together they have the strength to gain adequate wages and the rights they deserve."

Statistics also made a compelling argument.

Thanks to recruitment of minority and immigrant workers last year, California local unions added 132,000 members, bringing the state's total of union-represented workers to 2.1 million.

Elsewhere in the country, membership remained flat.

When the AFL-CIO executive board met in New Orleans this February, the leaders unanimously adopted the committee's suggestions: repeal of sanctions against employers who hire illegals, new legislation to penalize employers using labor and immigration laws against workers, and a blanket amnesty.

Weeks later in Tala, Jose' Manuel Barrena was anticipating the changes amnesty would make in his life.

"It's good because we can go and come back, and go and come again. Now it's too hard. We have to pay the coyotes. It used to cost \$300. Now it's \$1,500," he said.

After he gains legal status, he said, he plans to bring his wife, Maria, and their 3-year-old daughter, Karla. He said they'll probably spend half the year in the United States, half in Mexico.

After a moment, he amended his comments.

"I'd prefer Karla go to school (in the United States)," Barrena said. "Maybe we'll just come back for Easter, Christmas and New Year's.

"With amnesty, at least we have the choice."

Crossing the border

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act legalized the largest number of undocumented immigrants of any U.S. amnesty program. Since then, people have continued to enter the United States illegally. Most come from Mexico.

[] Legalizations under the 1986 act: 2.7 million

[] Number of undocumented immigrants in the United States: 6 million

[] Mexicans illegally entering the United States each year: 300,000