

Bush vows crackdown on immigrant workers

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In a transparent bid to placate its right-wing and xenophobic political base, the Bush administration vowed Tuesday to launch a crackdown against undocumented immigrant workers in the United States.

Bush and two of his cabinet secretaries spoke in terms of hunting down and punishing the estimated 11 million immigrants who are working in the country without legal residence.

Bush spoke at a signing ceremony for a \$31 billion appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was allocated \$7.5 billion. This includes money to hire an additional 1,000 US Border Patrol agents as well as \$90 million to build more prisons, allowing the agency to hold over 20,000 detainees. Other money has been provided for extending fences and other barriers along what has become an increasingly militarized border with Mexico.

While the funding for immigration control amounted to little more than a quarter of the DHS total, Bush devoted at least three-quarters of his speech to the issue, indicating the political importance that the administration sees in appearing tough on undocumented workers.

“We’ve got to stop people from coming here in the first place,” the president said to applause. “Secondly, we must improve our ability to find and apprehend illegal immigrants who have made it across the border. If somebody is here illegally, we’ve got to do everything we can to find them. And thirdly, we’ve got to work to ensure that those who are caught are returned to their home countries as soon as possible.”

His remarks echoed those given by two cabinet secretaries earlier in the day. Testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff vowed that his department would put an end to the “catch and release” practice that applies to the bulk of non-Mexican immigrants detained while crossing the border.

Because of a lack of detention facilities, in many cases these immigrants are given court dates for deportation

hearings, but then fail to appear. Mexican immigrants are immediately forced back across the border.

“We need more brute enforcement,” Chertoff declared. He pledged that the administration’s policy would be one of “return every single illegal entrant—no exceptions.”

In their remarks Tuesday, Bush, Chertoff and Labor Secretary Elaine Chao also promoted the administration’s proposed guest worker program, while taking pains to make clear that it would not represent an amnesty for the undocumented—something that is anathema to the Republican right. The proposal amounts to the resurrection of the infamous “bracero” schemes of an earlier epoch, reducing the participants to super-exploited labor without any rights.

Testifying at the Senate hearing, Chao said that undocumented immigrants already in the US would have to pay a fee to enter the program and obtain a temporary visa good for three years. They would be able to renew for a second three-year period, after which they would be forced out of the country. Those applying would also need an American employer willing to sponsor them and attest that no US citizens will take the job.

Stressing the punitive aspects of the proposal, Chao told the Senate panel, “At a minimum, those who come forward will not be offered an automatic pass to citizenship and should be expected to pay a substantial fine or penalty to take part in the temporary program.”

The guest worker proposal was put forward by the Bush administration in January 2004 with the aim of wooing Latino voters in the presidential election and providing American capitalism with a steady and regulated flow of cheap labor.

While the so-called “social conservatives” of the Republican right are clamoring for a manhunt for undocumented immigrants and mass deportations, representatives of agribusiness and other sections of the US corporate ruling elite are warning Bush that they cannot function without these low-wage workers.

In an attempt to balance between these two constituencies, the administration has rendered its guest

worker proposal virtually unworkable. The requirement that workers leave the country after six years means that applying to enter the program amounts to a form of voluntary delayed deportation. The demand for entrance fees for the program will also prove an insurmountable hurdle for many immigrants working for sub-minimum wages.

The US Chamber of Commerce expressed disagreement with the punitive measures, calling for legislation that would allow guest workers to gain legal resident status. Such a concession was needed, the chamber said, to “address potential worker shortfalls by providing a structured mechanism for employees to fill jobs when American workers are unavailable.”

Senators Edward Kennedy (Democrat-Massachusetts) and John McCain (Republican-Arizona) have proposed a more lenient guest worker program that would allow participants to apply for US citizenship after 11 years.

The administration’s promise to get tough on immigrants appeared to do little to placate the Republican right. A number of Republican Senators made it clear that they do not intend to act on the guest worker program in the foreseeable future.

Replying to Chertoff’s testimony, Senator Charles Grassley (Republican-Iowa) declared that the time was not ripe for “implementing a guest worker program in this country.” Grassley continued, “I say that because our Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents drive by day-labor centers knowing that illegal aliens loiter on the street corner in search of illegal work—but do nothing.”

These remarks echo the position taken by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (Republican-Tennessee). Last week, in an interview with the *Washington Times*, Frist said that a crackdown on the border and against undocumented workers living in the US had to take precedence over the proposed guest worker program.

A spokesman for new House Majority Leader Roy Blunt (Republican-Missouri) said that his “focus with respect to the immigration question is securing the border and enforcing the immigration laws we have on the books.”

Meanwhile, right-wing Republicans in the House are backing a draconian piece of legislation introduced by Rep. J.D. Hayworth of Arizona. The bill calls for deploying the US military on the border, ending automatic citizenship for babies born on US soil, authorizing state and local police to enforce immigration law and introducing a national ID card.

The bill also calls for a drastic increase in fines against

employers who hire undocumented immigrants, together with redoubled enforcement. Under the Bush administration, action against employers has virtually ceased, with the number of cases declining from 417 in 1999 to 162 in 2003, and with only a handful over the past year.

Anti-immigrant politics is by no means a monopoly of the Republican Party. New Mexico’s Governor Bill Richardson and Arizona’s Governor Janet Napolitano, both Democrats, recently declared a “state of emergency” on their respective borders with Mexico. Also, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, considered a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, has staked out a position to the right of the Bush administration on immigration, declaring herself “adamantly against illegal immigrants” and voicing support for a national identification card.

In the midst of the increasingly acrimonious immigration debate within the US political establishment, the US Border Patrol announced that a record number of people died over the past year attempting to cross the nearly 2,000-mile US-Mexican border.

The agency said that at least 464 had died in the past fiscal year, which ended on September 30, marking a 43 percent increase over the previous year. The figure underestimates the number of fatalities, as the Border Patrol does not include bodies recovered by other law enforcement agencies or immigrants whose bodies end up on the Mexican side of the border.

Much of the rise in the death toll can be attributed to the government’s crackdown. Fortification of sections of the border and intensified surveillance have pushed migrants to more dangerous crossing points in the Arizona deserts, where many have died from the heat.



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