

Trump gives employers more temporary visas to exploit immigrant workers

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently announced it would be increasing the number of H-2B visas by 15,000 for the remainder of the fiscal year. The H-2B Temporary Non-Agricultural Workers Program allows US employers to hire foreign workers and subject them to the most grueling tasks with little pay and no benefits.

The H-2 visa program is a “guest worker” program that allows a worker to enter the US and work for a temporary time-period. The program is divided into two groups, H-2A agricultural and H-2B non-agricultural.

Specifically, an H-2B visa is a temporary work visa for foreign workers typically reserved for seasonal, non-agricultural work. Workers are hired in places such as seafood-processing plants, logging companies, and resorts, and many end up as cooks, waiters and waitresses, gardeners, cleaners, and housekeepers. A CNN analysis published in April reported that Trump businesses sponsored 1,024 H-2B visas since 2000.

Trump’s decision to increase the H-2B visas underscores the cynical character of his “Buy American, Hire American” economic nationalism, which has been backed by the trade unions. Far from defending the interests of workers, it has always been a ploy to divide the working class and scape-goat immigrant workers for the relentless attack on jobs and living standards by Corporate America. When it comes to the needs of big business for highly exploited seasonal labor, however, the Trump administration delivers.

Under current law visas are capped at 66,000 a year, equally split between two halves of the fiscal year. The cap has already been reached this year, but new petitions for the newly allocated visas will run through September. The 45 percent increase is to offset the

growing demand by employers for seasonal workers. According to the Department of Labor employers have already made more than 120,000 visas requests. Maine businesses alone requested 2,877 H-2B visas this year, but only 700 have been approved.

For a business to hire from abroad it must prove it will suffer “irreparable harm” and that there are “not enough US workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available to do the temporary work,” as stated by US Citizenship and Immigration Services. In practice employers are supposed to demonstrate that they exhausted all opportunities before they can begin hiring foreign workers.

In reality, companies go to extraordinary lengths not to hire workers already in the United States so they can take advantage and abuse immigrant workers under the H-2 program.

The H-2A program provides financial incentive for companies to take full advantage of the program. Agricultural workers, under the H-2A program, are exempt from payroll and unemployment tax. USAFARMLABOR, a labor broker, a little over a year ago stated on its site, “Our workers actually save you money each month in comparison with US workers.”

Under the program non-agricultural employers do not have to provide housing, but if the company so chooses to it can charge workers rent. In cities such as Miami, Dallas, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where tourism is a large part of the economy, a worker’s rent may be higher than his or her monthly pay.

Many live at their job site, making them available to work at any given moment. Their visa prohibits them from taking any other job, leaving them at the mercy of their employers. Withholding overtime pay or charging additional fees is rampant and workers are threatened with abuse or deportation if they complain.

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There is strong bipartisan support for the H-2B program, from the tourism industry in Miami, logging in Alaska and Washington, and ski resorts in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Colorado.

The increase in the H-2B visa program was approved as part of the budget deal in May to avoid a government shutdown. The deal gave Homeland Security chief, retired United States Marine Corps General John F. Kelly, the power to increase the number of foreign workers after consulting with the secretary of labor.

Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas has been critical of the increase of the H-2B program. "A lot of the arguments for this kind of program boil down to this: No American worker will do that job," Cotton said. "That is a lie. There is no job that Americans will no do."

While arguing that corporations should be able to subject American workers to the same super-exploitation as immigrant workers laboring under the threat of deportation, Cotton's real concern is that the state's agri-businesses are being short-changed by the increase in non-agricultural visas. Arkansas is one of the largest requestors of H-2A workers, more so than California, a much bigger state.



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