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Boosting *only* illegal labor

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How badly have interest-group politics distorted Obama administration economic policy? Well, the Labor Department is now zealously protecting the workplace rights of illegal aliens even as it shuts down avenues for people to come to

America and work legally.

You see, Labor Secretary Hilda Solis has to serve both the liberals' ideological fixation on illegals and labor unions' hostility to any competition.

So there she was at a signing ceremony last Monday, declaring, "No matter how you got here or how long you plan to stay, you have certain rights. You have the right to be safe and in a healthy workplace and the right to a legal wage... [This is part of] our shared commitment to protect the labor rights of migrant workers."

Questioned later about whether she meant to include illegal workers, she was adamant. "I protect all workers here in this country," she told a Daily Caller reporter. "I have a vested interest in protecting all workers that work here in the US -- period."

The terrible irony about Solis' support for workers here illegally is her department's distaste for legal workers. Almost Solis' first act on becoming labor secretary in 2009 was to stop the streamlining of the visa-application process for temporary agricultural workers (visa category H2-A). Farmers who depend on seasonal migrant workers were livid: Solis' change has (quite predictably) skyrocketed the cost -- in both time and money -- of getting an already-limited number of legal migrant workers.

More recently, she's moved against the other category of temporary visas, those for non-agricultural workers (H2-B), affecting such industries as hospitality, landscaping and seafood. The Labor Department has long mandated what employers can pay temporary workers -- but its new rules for how to calculate the "prevailing wage" will force wages up dramatically. In some industries, the rules mandate increases as high as 50 percent and even 70 percent.

Business will suffer. Robert White, who employs 20 H2-B workers at Frog Island Seafood Co. in Barco, NC, says the wage increase "would devastate us... We're barely surviving on what we pay them now."

Meanwhile, the American Nursery Landscape Association says landscapers using H2-B visas should "expect to pay increases of 40 to 70 percent." The ANLA adds that this increase "poses an extreme hardship on program users, who are already locked into contracts and cannot easily absorb, or pass on, these bureaucratically driven wage increases."

Behind the tougher prevailing-wage rules, of course, are labor unions -- which constantly seek to drive up the cost of non-union labor. By use of political pressure, they often get governments to set the "prevailing" wage above what union workers actually get.

"When was the last time you heard about a government program that was both effective and popular?" asks Tamar Jacoby, president of Immigration Works USA. But that's just what the H2-B program was, effective and popular. Now, Jacoby laments, "Instead of strengthening the legal programs, [the Labor Department] is making things harder."

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