

No shortcuts

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

After all the hot air, hostile rhetoric and hand-wringing over illegal immigration, could it be that the solution to this vexing issue can be found in the self-serve aisle?

Will illegal immigrants "self-deport" if jobs are no longer available because employers are hit with harsh fines and other penalties?

We are skeptical of the simplistic notion that illegal immigrants will simply pack up and return to their home countries if it becomes difficult for them to find work. After all, what do these people have to go home to but the same things that repelled them in the first place - poverty, social inequity, government corruption. Immigrants have never been known as the sort of people who throw in the towel at the first sign of adversity. That might go double for illegal immigrants, who may have had to endure even more hardship to get here. And even with periodic crackdowns, won't there always be jobs available, even those that operate under the table?

Having said that, what is happening in Arizona is very significant and worthy of further examination. That state holds the dubious distinction of having the most illegal immigrants as a percentage of the population of any state in the country. And that's because, throughout the 1990s, Arizona was one of the most welcoming in the country as far as illegal immigrants were concerned. Employers hired illegal immigrants to work on farms and construction sites, in hotels and restaurants and all the rest.

Now Arizona voters have set out to make their state more inhospitable to the undocumented by approving a tough employer-sanctions law. Businesses that are found to have knowingly hired illegal workers face penalties, ranging from probation to suspension of their business licenses. A second violation could mean that their license is permanently revoked. Combine that crackdown on employers with aggressive enforcement by police and sheriff deputies at the local level and you can see why economists, immigration lawyers and others agree that some illegal immigrants are packing up and leaving Arizona. Some are going to other states, and others are headed home to Mexico.

So should we chalk that up as vindication for the crowd that touts "attrition by enforcement" as a quick and easy solution to the illegal immigration problem? Not so fast. While some younger and more mobile workers might be voting with their feet, others who are older and have families and deep roots in Arizona may just as likely stay put and take their chances. Besides, leaving the country is one thing, but fleeing to neighboring states doesn't solve anything. It just moves the pieces on the chessboard. Adios Arizona; hola Colorado, Utah or Iowa. There are no shortcuts. Putting an end to illegal immigration requires a comprehensive approach that combines border and workplace enforcement, tamper-proof identification cards, new and expanded avenues for legal immigrants, guest workers and other initiatives. Putting all that together is the job of the federal government. It's not the sort of responsibility that can be pawned off on the very people some Americans want to evict from the country.

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