

Bad for business

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The perfect is often the enemy of the good. But the "grand bargain" immigration deal now being debated in the U.S. Senate demonstrates that unreasonable hysteria about immigration can be the same kind of enemy.

Simply, this deal is bad business.

It replaces employers' knowledge of their own needs with a so-called merit-based system that supposes the federal government is omniscient on this score.

Depending on which amendments are successful as the Senate debates the measure this week, it shorts companies workers they will need. And it demands verification of workers' legal status without needed guarantees that the electronic tool envisioned will be anywhere near up to the task. Yet this measure also proposes heftier penalties against employers.

On verification, the proposal, worked out last week between some senators and the White House, saddles business with the onerous task of ascertaining the legal residency status of not just new employees but existing ones.

But the electronic verification system that could handle the volume of inquiries exists only in the imaginings of federal technocrats. The error rate in the existing database ensures that U.S. citizens will be turned away from work. A new one would have to verify more than 146 million existing workers and 50 million to 60 million new workers each year.

This economy needs workers - skilled, semiskilled and unskilled. In the unskilled category, making guest workers truly temporary means constant and costly turnover for businesses.

Across the board, this measure substantially replaces employer sponsorship with a merit-based system that weighs education and other attributes. This essentially says that matching known jobs with willing workers is less desirable than simply bringing in immigrants with college educations who speak English. No matter that this person has no job waiting for him.

A previous proposal by Reps. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., and Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., is far more practical, though also imperfect. For the economy's sake, reconcile the measures. If not, don't be surprised if businesses are the ones to scuttle this attempt at immigration reform. Who could blame them?

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