

Searching the Earth for cheap labor

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

It may not be easy, but we are asked to feel sorry for some well-heeled concessionaires at Yosemite National Park. Seems they've found themselves washing dishes, making beds and doing other chores they had formerly foisted onto willing toilers from other lands.

Some of them say this is the government's fault. But it also raises sensitive questions at the very time Congress is embroiled in debate over an immigration reform bill.

Principal embarrassment of the moment is felt by executives of a company called Delaware North. This continent-spanning operator holds contracts to sell services at outlets ranging from huge national parks like Yosemite to San Diego's historic Old Town concession and the hot dog stands at national stadiums. Relying heavily on the use of low-paid foreign labor in its major operations, Delaware North has long utilized a temporary visa system that the Labor Department designates H-2B. Workers are brought in for 10-month stays from as far off as Peru, Poland, South Korea and South Africa.

Catch the chatter around a Yosemite kitchen in normal times, and I'd guess you might imagine yourself aboard a tramp freighter under Liberian registry. The foreign influx is said to have worked to the concessionaire's advantage over the past seven years. But a terror-conscious Department of Homeland Security has so slowed the screening of applicant workers that many of this summer's temporary help are still cooling their heels at points halfway around the world. At least 50 eager emigrants were reported awaiting interviews at the end of May in our Ukraine embassy. Meanwhile such idyllic spots as Yosemite are stuck with only half the workforce needed for such tasks as cleaning toilets and mopping up.

Which leads inevitably to a now familiar employer lament.

"American kids, up to their mid-20s, don't want to wash pots and clean kitchens," says Joe Levesque, whom Delaware North designates its vice president for human resources. "So we have to turn to these international workers," he told reporters.

So they have to import labor from around the world? But what is so special about the daily chores required in our national parks?

Like fellow company officials suddenly pressed into menial labor, Levesque doubtless was learning anew why such tasks are not high on the list of job preferences among young people - especially when compensated at multiple levels below executive pay. Let's see any of the big boys try getting by for a single week on the legal minimum.

Although Delaware North's 10-month tempos presumably are represented by the Service Employees International Union, the details of their hire faintly suggest the indentured servitude of colonial times. The foreign workers have meals and stipulated housing charges deducted from their paychecks. Such accounting procedures are deemed essential if the concessionaire is to rack up normal profit margins from its annual \$110 million gross at Yosemite - said to be the richest commercial contract among all our national parks.

Delaware North may see itself as a model employer, disdaining the use of undocumented immigrants in favor of applicants legally admitted under government supervision. I'll allow that's in the company's favor. But while this earns plaudits in some circles, I see no reason why the U.S. Labor Department should make itself the hiring hall for Delaware North, for Xanterra Parks & Resorts or any of a half-dozen other concessionaires who do a handsome business with the National Park Service.

Meanwhile, an assertion that young Americans aren't interested in menial work seems subject to challenge. We surely should not let it influence government policy. To me, this looks more like a matter to be resolved in the marketplace. Who's to say a prospect of better wages would not prompt a surprising surge of interest among citizen workers? Our embassies and consulates could then be saved much unnecessary paperwork, and those concession biggies relieved of the indignity they have suffered while dirtying their hands up there in the shadow of Half Dome.

Work on Texas oil rigs can get pretty dirty too. A certain unpleasantness attaches to trash trucks and the oversight of landfills. Any of us can think of dozens of similar job openings regularly filled without resort to overseas recruitment. What's so special about the grime of Yosemite's kitchens and restrooms?

Or perhaps a larger question is this: Are Yosemite, Glacier National Park and the Grand Canyon the national treasures we always have thought them to be - or are they to become piggy banks for cost-cutting privateers?

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