

Below is a letter that was sent to President Bush and every member of the U.S. Congress about the "guest worker" issue.

February 13, 2001

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Bush:

The beginning of the 107th Congress and the new Presidential term has been marked by discussions of immigration policy and suggestions that the United States expand or create new temporary foreign worker visa programs. This letter, on behalf of the organizations listed below, focuses on migrant farmworkers, one of the occupational groups that would be affected most by such proposals.

As this debate proceeds, all parties should be open to new ideas and recognize that progress occurs through compromise. Any compromises will need to address the United States-Mexico relationship, labor-management relations, and various cultural, regional and human rights issues. It is equally important, however, that immigration policy proposals regarding migrant farmworkers must be based on fundamental fairness.

The ultimate standard for the discussion regarding farmworkers must be faithfulness to our nation's highest values. Our democratic traditions demand that when we as a nation benefit from the labor of workers, those workers be given an opportunity to enjoy the political freedoms on which this country was founded. Our economic system's commitment to freedom of opportunity also must be upheld. Individuals who contribute to our economy, as farmworkers do, must not be relegated to a vulnerable status in which they cannot effectively negotiate with employers for reasonable wages and working conditions. In addition, we must not subject farmworkers to an economic or legal status which makes them unable, or too fearful of being fired or denied a visa for the next season, to challenge illegal employment practices. And our immigration laws must reflect our nation's commitment to strengthening families.

Fundamental fairness also requires that any debate about farmworkers focus on labor standards. The economic reality for most farmworkers, especially those who migrate for their employment, is that they live in poverty. They frequently experience low wages, hazardous conditions, lack of access to health care, inadequate labor law coverage, and high rates of employer noncompliance with labor laws. We should not tolerate such conditions for any workers in this country, whether they work in agriculture or computer programming, whether they are born in the United States or in another country. Moreover, the agricultural industry should respond to its difficulties in retaining employees by improving wages and working conditions and modernizing employment practices.

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One promising initiative in this debate is the negotiated agreement between industry representatives and the leadership of farmworker unions. This compromise on immigration policy offers the opportunity to move the debate forward in a constructive and positive way.

Other recent proposals, such as one by Senator Gramm, which focus on creating new guestworker programs or revising and expanding the H-2A and H-2B temporary foreign worker programs, however, have not met the standard of fundamental fairness. These proposals are fundamentally based on a restrictive, non-immigrant status that denies participating workers the democratic and economic freedoms historically associated with this country. They also encourage the separation and break-up of families. Any proposal that lacks a pathway to a true immigration status will suffer from these deficiencies. In addition, some guestworker proposals fail to propose methods to improve labor standards and labor law enforcement. Indeed, some proposals in recent years would further weaken the H-2A program's modest labor standards and therefore cannot meet the standard of fundamental fairness.

We hope that our comments are helpful as the discussion on migration policy develops. We appreciate your consideration of our views on these important matters.

Sincerely,

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs

Church and Labor Concerns Institute for Mission in the USA

Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO

Farmworker Justice Fund

League of United Latin American Citizens

National Council of La Raza

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Minister for Labor Relations and Economic Development United Church of Christ

National Center for Farmworker Health

National Consumers League

National Employment Law Project

National Farm Worker Ministry

National Immigration Law Center

Service Employees International Union, (SEIU) AFL-CIO

Union of American Hebrew Congregations

United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO

United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), AFL-CIO

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE)

CALIFORNIA:

Aguila Inc

Asian Law Alliance

California Institute for Rural Studies

California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation

Center for Third World Organizing

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

Employment Law Center

Friends Committee on Legislation of California

Immaculate Heart Community, Justice and Peace Commission

Immigration Legal Resource Center

La Conexion, Inc.

La Raza Centro Legal

Lutheran Family Services in the Carolina

Orange County Interfaith Committee To Aid Farm Workers

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Rural Economic Alternative Program American Friends Service Committee

Triangle Friends of United Farmworkers

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DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA:

Presbyterian Church Washington Office

Center for Community Change

Carlos Rosario International

FLORIDA:

Big Cypress Housing Corporation

Everglades Community Association

Everglades Hammock, Inc.

Everglades Main Street Village, Inc

Farmworker Self-Help, Inc.

Florida Impact

Guadalupe Social Services

Sarasota/Manatee Farm Worker Supporters

Immokalee Mainstreet Associates, Ltd.

Indios, Inc.

Little Manatee Housing Corporation

Religious Leaders Concerned, Inc.

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Palm Beach Branch

IDAHO:

Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network

ILLINOIS:

Asian Human Services, Inc.

Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights

Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Mexico Solidarity Network Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights

Religious Brothers Conference (National Association of Religious Brothers)

MAINE:

Maine Rural Workers Coalition

MARYLAND:

Conference of Major Superiors of Men

The Public Justice Center

Young Christian Workers

MASSACHUSETTS:

Centro Campesino, Inc.

Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota

Immigrant Workers Resource Center

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition

MICHIGAN:

Michigan Migrant Legal Assistance Project, Inc.

Migrant Health Promotion

MINNESOTA:

Resource Center of the America

NEBRASKA:

Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, Inc.

NEW YORK:

Agricultural Missions, Inc.

Cornell Organization for Labor Action

Farmworker Legal Services of New York, Inc.

Justice for Farmworkers

National Employment Law Project

New York Immigration Coalition

Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, UFCW

Westchester Hispanic Coalition

Worker's Rights Education Project

NORTH CAROLINA:

El Centro Hispano

Episcopal Hispanic Ministry

Faith Action

High Country Amigos

Immigrants Legal Assistance Project NC Justice and Community Development Center

North Carolina Council of Churches Farmworker Ministry Committee

North Carolina Farm Workers Project

Student Action with Farmworkers

SONG, Southerners on New Ground

OHIO:

Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc.

InterReligious Task Force on Central America Justice and Witness Ministries

Migrant Farmworker Connection

Pudding House Writers Innovation Center

The Unitarian Universalist Poets Cooperative/National

OREGON:

Arc-en-Ciel

Oregon Farm Worker Ministry

Oregon Law Center

Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste

Unete Almovimiento de Conciencia Popular

Worker's Rights Education Project

TEXAS:

ACLU of Texas

Border Agricultural Workers Project

El Movimiento Verde del Valle

Greater Dallas Foundation

Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law of Texas

National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.

Nuestra Clinica del Valle

Texas Appleseed

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WASHINGTON:

Center for a Changing Workforce

Concilio for the Spanish Speaking of King County

El Centro de la Raza

Minority Executive Directors Coalition of King County

Northwest Educational Opportunities Center

South Puget Sound Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

Washington State Migrant Council

WISCONSIN:

Hill Connections

Latinos United for Change and Advancement

Wisconsin Coalition for a Just General Amnesty