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Conference looks to the future of the farm labor market

By Don Villarejo

IN THE WAKE OF NOVEMBER'S widespread Republican victories, the Inter-American Institute on Migration and Labor brought together three dozen researchers, policy advocates, service providers, and various government officials to discuss the prospect of major policy shifts for the farm labor market. Hosted by Institute co-founders Luis Torres and Monica Heppel, the conference was held on December 13 at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace in Washington, D.C.

The tone of the meeting was somewhat somber, set, perhaps, by a feature story in the previous day's *Florida Sun-Sentinel* headlined "Legal aid may get death sentence." Those with firsthand experience in Washington predicted that the new Congress will not be receptive to the plight of immigrant workers in the United States, and will likely seek to exclude many—if not most—immigrants from various needs-based government programs.

Maria Echaveste, administrator of the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor (DoL), began the discussion with an overview of her department's enforcement activities in the agricultural sector. She stressed that her agency has very limited resources, employing just 800 field enforcement personnel who must cover all industries in every state. Most of the DoL's work is complaint-driven, responding to allegations of violations of federal labor law, but Echaveste expressed support for



PHOTO/DON VILLAREJO

Mike Hancock, executive director of the Farmworker Justice Fund, was just one of three dozen researchers, policy advocates, service providers, and government officials who gathered in Washington, D.C. to discuss the current farm labor market.

proactive programs that focus on particular industries, such as California's Targeted Industries Partnership Program (TIPP). Targeted efforts can bring a much larger strike force to investigate a particular industry by involving a coalition of local and federal agencies, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Perhaps the most controversial topic of the day was the proposal being advanced by California Gov. Pete Wilson for a new "guest worker" program for foreign-born agricultural workers. Wilson and his supporters believe that the overwhelming victory of California's

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LETTERS

Rural California Report welcomes letters from its readers. If you have a comment, criticism or suggestion, we would like your feedback. Address correspondence to: The California Institute for Rural Studies; RCR/Letters to the Editor; PO Box 2143; Davis, CA 95617.

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Prop. 187, a measure to severely restrict the access of undocumented immigrants and their family members to public education, health care, and government services, has created a political climate which is favorable to a national program to control unauthorized immigration.

Veteran farm labor activists still recall the era of the Bracero program, initiated in the early years of World War II to bring thousands of Mexicans into the United States on a temporary basis to do farm work. The program continued until 1964 when the U.S. Congress, under pressure from the American labor movement, finally voted to end it. Under this program, individual workers had little recourse in the event of mistreatment and even could be deported in retaliation for objecting to employment conditions.

The Farmworker Justice Fund prepared a useful summary of the original Bracero program's terms as compared with the less restrictive terms proposed by then-Sen. Pete Wilson and then-Congressmember Leon Panetta in 1986. Though never enacted, the Wilson-Panetta plan might serve as a model for any new program proposed in the current Congress.

As an introduction to this topic, six different researchers—David Griffith (East Carolina University), Monica Heppel (Mount Vernon College), Phillip Martin (University of California, Davis), Juan-Vicente Palerm (University of California, Riverside), David Runsten and Don Villarejo (California Institute for Rural Studies)—reported on the most recent data for the farm worker population. Most significant was the National Agricultural Workers Survey's finding that 88 percent of today's first-time farm workers are new immigrants from Mexico or Central America. This implies that not only are most new farm workers immigrants, but that the overwhelming majority are also unauthorized to work in the United States.

Juan-Vicente Palerm pointed out that the hysteria around the passage of Prop. 187 in California was fueled by the fact that so many immigrant Mexican farm workers are undocumented; his research

places the fraction of those who are unauthorized as high as 50 percent. Palerm suggested that a "guest worker" program that provided such workers with some form of legal residence status and accompanying protections would help to defuse today's highly polarized political climate.

Others at the meeting expressed fears that such a program would be fraught with dangers, and could actually jeopardize the rights of workers and their freedom to pursue employment opportunities in the United States.

Some specific suggestions emerged concerning a possible structure for a new guest worker program. These included: the right of guest workers to attain permanent legal residence status after a certain number of years of work; the need for a neutral party, such as a government agency, to administer the program instead of allowing farm operators to run it; provisions for the rights of individual workers to pursue legal remedies in U.S. courts; and a requirement for employers to provide housing and other basic services as is now the case under the H-2A temporary guest worker program.

The afternoon session included a lengthy discussion with Miguel Ruiz-Cabañas, minister of Social and Border Affairs of the Mexican Embassy. The Mexican government maintains more consular level offices in the United States than does any other nation, and Ruiz-Cabañas was especially pointed in emphasizing his government's concern for Mexican nationals living and working in the United States. He expressed a strong desire to cooperate with U.S. officials and private organizations to assure the basic human rights of Mexican immigrant workers and their families. According to Ruiz-Cabañas, the newly elected leadership of Mexico has made this one of its top foreign-policy objectives. ♦

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