

Gingrich plan on immigration hardly humane

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Some right-wing critics of Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich have it all wrong when they claim that his immigration plan is "amnesty" -- the code word for a path to citizenship.

Others, however, have pegged it right. The Gingrich plan would be closer to indentured servitude or semi-serfdom.

Dan Stein, president of the anti-immigration Federation for American Immigration Reform, described the Gingrich plan as a "modern-day form of slavery." The plan, he said, is an "effort to create a stratified labor force that provides wealthy employers with a way to get employees at below-market rates."

Pro-immigration groups agree. Mary Giovagnoli, director of the Immigration Policy Center, says that the Gingrich plan "virtually guarantees that we create second-class status for workers and their families -- lawful, but with no real rights."

That some are calling the Gingrich plan "humane" shows just how far this country has shifted on immigration.

The core of the Gingrich plan is privatization and expansion of the nation's guest worker program. A new path to citizenship is not part of the Gingrich plan at all.

Certainly, Gingrich has identified a real problem that cries out for solution: Current visa quotas are much lower than demand for workers.

Legal visas are limited to 66,000 a year for unskilled nonagricultural workers (H-2B); to 65,000 for high-skilled workers (H-1B) That's a joke. The U.S. government issued only 150,000 visas for farmworkers (H-1A) in 2009, a small fraction of the estimated 1.5 million foreign farmworkers in the United States.

But rather than fix that system, the Gingrich plan is to throw open the floodgates for employers to hire, on an unlimited basis, workers from other countries.

The U.S. government would have no role in the process -- except to license private employment companies who would set up "noncitizen worker" offices in Mexico and other countries. These would be authorized to do background checks and issue "red cards" that would replace all existing U.S. work visas.

The government no longer would limit the number of foreign workers.

Gingrich got the idea from the Kriebel Foundation's "Red Card Solution." Workers would be required to stay on the job for which the red card was issued -- hence the allegations of "indentured servitude."

To change jobs, workers would have to get a new red card from an employment agency. Foreign workers with red cards would not be on a path to citizenship or to permanent resident status (green card). We would have whole groups of people living, working and establishing lives in this country without any of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

As for illegal workers already in the United States, Gingrich also would allow some of these folks to get noncitizen permits -- no path to citizenship.

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Those who have been here for 25 years would be assessed by local committees, based on having family and community ties and a job that allows them to get by without Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other public programs. They would have to prove that they could independently pay for private health insurance.

In short, the Gingrich plan would add workers but not people who become part of America. They would work, then presumably disappear when no longer wanted.

That's the Gingrich plan. If that's what's passing for "humane" these days, we are all in trouble.

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