

August 25, 2006

Steve White

Importing low-wage workers costs this state thousands

WEST Virginia is facing a crisis costing us thousands of jobs and millions of dollars.

But no one in government appears to even recognize the problem, let alone try to deal with it.

The crisis? Companies importing people, often illegally, to take jobs in our communities. I'm not talking about doctors or a family restaurant. I'm concerned about major industry sectors like construction and lumber mills that have traditionally provided bread-winning employment for local workers.

Giving away jobs in West Virginia is just plain bad policy for many reasons. Most outrageous is the fact that some of the companies hiring imports are getting state tax credits to reward them for job creation.

That's right. We give tax credits to companies who in turn import workers, many of whom may be illegally in this country.

And it gets worse. The imported workers are being given jobs held by local workers because the imported workers will work for less. A whole lot less.

Tax credits going to companies who import low-wage workers, perhaps illegally in this country, who are given jobs currently held by local workers. It's a sad state of affairs.

I have to say "perhaps illegally in this country" because no one responsible for checking their legal status will do so.

The federal agency with authority to check is called ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But ICE can't, or won't, do the job.

We've called dozens of times. We hear excuses and indifference but get no action. ICE agents have told me they are forbidden by "Washington" to go onto a construction job site.

And it gets worse. When local law enforcement officials apprehend people illegally in this country and contact ICE for instructions they are often told to release the offenders and at times berated for taking any action at all.

Working families in West Virginia cannot afford to let this activity continue. We can't afford to give companies tax breaks for giving away jobs. And we can't afford to pay government agencies to do nothing.

It's costing our state thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in lost tax revenues.

I focus on ICE but I could just as well point out Social Security, or our state Tax Department, or unemployment, or other agencies responsible for enforcement of basic employment and corporate laws.

Here are some suggestions to correct the problems:

First, we need government agencies to enforce the laws of the land.

Second, it is too easy for employers to hire illegal workers. With a fake ID, employers are relieved of any responsibility. We need to require employers to verify IDs are real and match the individuals hired.

Third, we must stop giving tax credits to companies that displace local workers with low-wage imports. It's a free country and companies can hire whomever they wish, but taxpayers should not subsidize putting themselves out of a job.

Fourth, if federal agencies like ICE won't do their jobs, state agencies must be allowed to step up and take over.

Fifth, state and local governments can and should work together to make sure there is a level playing field of enforcement for all laws. If a company is caught not paying income taxes, then unemployment and workers' compensation should be informed and a team enforcement effort should follow.

The organization I work for, the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, is concerned about the problem and upset about the lack of enforcement by government. We put together a 30-minute TV show about the issue and have aired it at various locations in the state.

Why must construction workers spend their hard earned funds to try and convince government to act? I don't know. But we hope others will join us in demanding some reasonable steps be taken.

White is director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation. "West Virginia's Underground Economy" airs on WCHS TV 8 at 7 p.m. Saturday and at 12:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 27.