

# GOP and labor agree for once

July 24, 2007, By Edward Peeks For The Charleston Gazette

Much ado is made about the problem of undocumented workers — but relatively little about their employers and the role they play.

Surely, Wal-Mart is big enough to be seen and heard as a violator of federal and state laws when West Coast stores are caught employing undocumented workers to clean stores. For that, Wal-Mart is fined.

But it would seem that countless other violators are either too small to be seen or too big for the law to crack down on. Add to the dilemma agents and suppliers of undocumented workers who go untouched in the traffic, mostly from Mexico.

The West Virginia Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, an arm of the state AFL-CIO, has made an investigative video called “West Virginia’s Underground Economy.”

It shows employment agencies, for example, in sections of the state that reportedly provide employers with undocumented workers for everything from restaurants to sawmills to construction.

Similar reports sizzle in the hot debate across the country, but solid facts are hard to find on the size of the problem, though not on its nature in the Mountain State and others.

The state Division of Labor estimates that \$14 million is lost annually in taxes from the employment of undocumented workers who are mainly paid under the table. The loss includes income tax and workers’ comp fees.

In cases reported across the country, employers get away with hiring immigrants at the lowest wage and for the least of fringe benefits.

On one hand, the issue of cheap labor proved toxic to the latest try in Congress to pass an immigration bill. On the other hand, the whammy was “amnesty,” or legal ways for the undocumented to earn the right to become naturalized citizens.

Opposition to amnesty roared from senators of the Republican South. Apparently, they feared more Democrats than Republicans would emerge among new citizens, making the South a Democratic stronghold again, to the chagrin of present rulers of the roost.

Organized labor worked with the opposition for labor’s own stand against cheap wages and the exploitation of immigrants. Together labor and the no-amnesty forces, indeed, made a strange case of political bedfellows.

But such is the power of the immigration issue in a nation built on the labor of slaves and immigrants. The “guest worker” call disturbs unions but pleases employers.

West Virginia’s law holds employers accountable for hiring undocumented immigrants. It’s a misdemeanor with penalties for a third conviction up to \$10,000 in fines, a year in jail and loss of business license.

The law, like similar laws of late, should be tougher and violations should be punishable as a felony with stiffer penalties, in the judgment of some immigration watchers.

They see the magic of employment dangled before the eyes of eager immigrants as more powerful than anything wielded by Harry Potter in fairyland. They insist on a stop to it as a major cause of the growing problem.

Peeks is a former business/labor editor of the Gazette.