

Reagan's Mexican immigration plan runs into political difficulties

by Timothy Rush

On July 30, the Reagan administration announced a long-awaited package of proposals for reform of immigration and refugee policy. Its most important recommendations were:

- 1) sanctions on employers who hire undocumented workers;
- 2) an "experimental temporary worker program," under which 50,000 Mexican workers would be admitted to the U.S. labor market yearly for the next two years;
- 3) an amnesty program for illegals currently in the country. Current illegals would be given "renewable-term temporary resident" status for a 10-year period, and then be eligible for permanent resident alien status.

But the politically most significant aspect of Reagan's new immigration proposal is what was *not* included in it. Lacking, for instance, is the "close the border" tone that the Global 2000 crowd of Malthusians had advocated; and absent is a key provision—that of a special national "identity card"—which these zero growthers viewed as essential to a crackdown and enforcement of the other provisions.

Instead of adopting the rhetoric of "scarce resources" and the need to "take care of those already in the United States first," as the Carter administration's "Hesburgh Commission" had urged, Reagan's policy declared; "We shall continue America's tradition as a land which welcomes peoples from other countries." The declared purpose of the program: "preserve our tradition of accepting foreigners to our shores, but to accept them in a controlled and orderly fashion."

On the controversial issue of what "identifier" to use to separate legal from illegal work applicants, the administration said that just about any two pieces of identification would do, to be checked by employers. The administration's stance was thus a step back from either the "improved Social Security card" formula approved by most on the Hesburgh Commission, or the even more drastic "data bank" idea of former Labor Secretary Ray Marshall which would set up the entire American labor force for blacklisting by computer.

A stronger ID is viewed by the Malthusians as essen-

tial to any program which moves toward their ultimate goal: full regimentation of the *domestic* labor force in a "postindustrial," zero-growth world. As George Ball, Lehman Brothers investment banker and Trilateral Commission influential, put it recently, "Control over our own population cannot be separated from control over immigrants. Overpopulation is a form of pollution. . . . We are going to have to establish a rigid worker identification card system for all Americans. This will mean what some people would call a totalitarian regime. Americans will have to accept new limitations on what they are used to regarding as their freedom."

But not a positive program

While thus a show of rearguard resistance to the Malthusians, the Reagan program does not itself represent a competent or positive alternative.

In terms of specific features, the guest-worker program is grossly inadequate, as Texas Gov. William Clements has pointed out. Over 20 times the 50,000 Mexicans stipulated are the minimum number coming across the border each year looking for work. Either a guest-worker program helps "legalize" that flow, or it has little reason to exist.

The "amnesty" features are equally problematic. Not only does the administration propose that illegals who turn themselves in wait a full 10 years before gaining normal immigrant status, but also its program would forbid such workers to bring in their families, or receive any unemployment, health, or retirement benefits, despite paying all taxes and Social Security deductions during that decade. Some observers detect a Stockmanite smell to this, a scam to bolster flagging Social Security funding.

More fundamentally, the administration blundered by severing immigration policy from economic policy. In a climate of economic contraction—such as that created by Volcker's high interest-rate policy—virtually *any* immigration policy will quickly degenerate into a restrictive, policing apparatus. Under conditions of an economic revival in the United States and continued

growth in Mexico, however, a policy of accommodating a substantial flow of Mexican and other foreign workers becomes a national priority.

Some of the criticism that has hit the Reagan program is of a basically friendly nature, and seems aimed at improving the package as it heads into several months of congressional hearings. Governor William Clements of Texas, for instance, bitterly assailed the small size of the guest-worker program in comments to the G.I. Forum, a Hispanic veterans organization. Clements had worked closely with Reagan on immigration policy throughout the 1980 presidential campaign, and is a leading spokesman for the guest-worker idea.

A very different quality of criticism has emerged from the Malthusian camp, which is now adding immigration to the accumulating list of other anti-Reagan "causes" being programmed for mass social protest and urban riots.

The *New York Times* headed this adversary style of criticism in an Aug. 2 editorial. The *Times* fulminated: "The package is so disappointing one wonders what took so long. . . . Key features are seriously flawed, almost ludicrously in the matter of regulating immigrant labor. Congress will not find it helpful in drafting legislation. And it displays an administration so irresolute that it raises doubts about whether whatever Congress enacts will be fairly and vigorously enforced."

At the same time, a major influx of street-level opposition from Hispanic radicals and human rights organizations was sent into Washington in the form of special conferences, marches, and press briefings. As documented in the accompanying investigative report, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark is once again the "case officer" handling an effort to maneuver minorities into antigovernment rioting.

Overseeing the operation from the top is a new "Citizens' Committee for Immigration Reform," whose list of "co-chairpersons" reads like a who's who of Eastern Establishment zero-growthers. Most prominent are: Father Theodore Hesburgh, who fills out his income as president of Notre Dame by serving on the board of directors of Chase Manhattan bank, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Rockefeller Foundation; Benjamin Civiletti; Elliott Richardson; and the *New York Times's* Cyrus Vance.

The Citizens' Committee has already mailed out a detailed summary of the differences between the Reagan program and the Hesburgh program (Hesburgh's commission, which finished up work in May of this year, called for a worker ID, shot down any guest-worker program, and oriented immigration criteria toward population control.) The committee urged re-instatement of the full Hesburgh agenda.

Though the gamut of "Global 2000" population control groups have been working intensively on Con-

gress through the media and direct lobbying efforts, it is widely recognized that the backbone of American constituency pressure for a restrictive immigration policy comes from organized labor.

For years the AFL-CIO has maintained that illegal immigrant labor is stealing jobs away from American workers, and increasingly, not just stoop labor or dishwashing jobs, but also skilled jobs. The AFL-CIO representative on the Hesburgh Commission, Jack Otero, was one of the strongest voices for an ID card system and against guest workers on the panel. In an Aug. 5 resolution of the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in Chicago, the labor confederation called the Reagan program "a basis for action" on the undocumented workers problem, but insisted upon ID cards, and the elimination of the guest-worker program, while offering that the amnesty program be liberalized.

The Mexican response

Mexico-U.S. relations are inextricably involved in immigration policy, since the bulk of undocumented immigration comes from Mexico. It was lack of consultations with Mexico in 1977 which helped doom Carter's ill-fated immigration program of that year. The Reagan administration has sought to avoid that mistake. Attorney General William French Smith briefed Mexican President José López Portillo and his top ministers at the Reagan-López Portillo summit in early June, and the administration stressed in its July 30 announcement that immigration policy must reflect "a special relationship with our closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico."

However it does not look as if the administration's consultations are working. Though López Portillo himself has not said anything and is not likely to, to avoid the charge of interfering in U.S. domestic affairs and to maintain a friendly personal relationship with Reagan, Mexico's top labor leader is speaking out forcefully, and his word has the de facto weight of an official response.

Fidel Velásquez, head of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM), returned from meetings with the AFL-CIO the first week of August highly critical of the Reagan program. His unhappiness took form in a document released Aug. 17 by Mexico's largest labor umbrella group, the Congreso del Trabajo; Velásquez had taken over as president of the Congreso just three days before.

The Congreso document insists that the Reagan program is part of broader pressures to force Mexico away from "nationalist and sovereign" policies. It calls the Reagan program an effort to turn "millions of Mexicans into the largest strategic manpower reserve of modern history," subjected to intensified conditions of exploitation to "aid profits and revive the U.S. economy" at Mexican workers' expense.