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Amnesty Prospects

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The Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, the biggest labor federation in America, has recently announced that it is in favor of a blanket amnesty for undocumented aliens and an end to employer sanctions.

Meeting in New Orleans more than a week ago, the federation also voted to hold town hall meetings to drum up support to their pro-immigrant position. The town meetings are intended to document the exploitation of illegal aliens by unscrupulous employers.

This surprise development is certainly welcome news to the immigrant community. Some six million illegal aliens, including tens of thousands of Filipinos, are expected to benefit from an amnesty legislation.

The announcement is a reversal of organized labor's previous anti-amnesty stand. It should be recalled that the labor movement had always feared competition from alien workers. When the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, popularly known as the Amnesty law, was enacted, a provision was included at the insistence of the AFL-CIO, making it illegal for employers to hire undocumented aliens.

It is believed that this shift in policy has been due to the difficulties experienced by the organization in its membership drive. Recently, it has turned to the immigrant communities for recruits. But it could not organize undocumented aliens and at the same time insist on the enforcement of the law that bars unauthorized employment.

With labor as advocate, prospects for an amnesty law in the near future are becoming brighter. Big businesses have always been for alien legalization because they need more workers. Randy Jackson, a Vice President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, who greeted the decision of the AFL-CIO, said that he looked forward to working together with labor on the issue.

Currently, there is a shortage of qualified workers especially in the areas of technology. This imbalance in the labor market has been underscored by no less than Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve Chairman, who fears that it could have serious implications for inflationary pressures. Greenspan came out in favor of a more open immigration policy in his recent remarks before the House Banking Committee.

Still, some obstacles remain before the Congress and the President can compromise on an amnesty measure. Rep. Lamar Smith, Chair of the House Sub-Committee on Immigration, is very much opposed to any form of amnesty. He calls it a "betrayal of American workers." There are also vocal critics of a liberal immigration policy like Dan Stein, Executive Director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform.