

Muzzled Oxen

By David Chandler

"It is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' ...the plowman should plow and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop." (I Cor. 9:9-10; cf. Deut. 25:4)

The immigration debate in California has been framed in false terms that defy history and economic reality while twisting the moral issues beyond recognition. The truth is we have massive illegal immigration for one simple reason: our economy has evolved a permanent dependency on cheap, exploitable labor in the agricultural, low-end manufacturing and service sectors.

In a humane society the need for manpower would lead to liberalized immigration laws to include anyone who would come in and work productively. Such a labor pool, however, would inevitably demand a living wage and benefits commensurate with their status as human beings and contributing members of society. By artificially restricting legal immigration while allowing employers to seduce desperate people to cross the border at their own peril we have created a shadowland. A voiceless underclass of fearful people can be silently exploited, or at a whim they can be scapegoated as lawbreakers by virtue of their very presence whenever it is politically expedient to do so.

Pete Wilson has acknowledged that illegal immigrants fill a labor vacuum. He has suggested that as we expel the "illegals" we fill the vacuum with "guest workers." This morally bankrupt plan would amount to herding muzzled oxen into our fields to harvest our crops only to be dumped back over the border when their work is done. Apart from their subhuman wages we would have assurance that they would reap no benefit from the society supported by their labor.

Living as "illegals" is living in economic slavery: it is not healthy for the people entrapped in that status, and it is not healthy for our society. If we cannot meet our own labor needs we should allow ample numbers of willing workers to enter as whole persons with full entitlement to live among us, to benefit from the protection of our labor laws, to share the wealth they help create, and to work toward full citizenship. The process should start with a general amnesty for those who have been drawn in already, and the focus of enforcement should be turned from the exploited to the exploiters.