



Rubio Aide: Some American Workers 'Can't Cut It' -- True or False?

By: Jordan Fabian – June 17, 2013

Some American workers "can't cut it."

That's what an unnamed aide to Sen. Marco Rubio told the New Yorker's Ryan Lizza, explaining the Florida Republican's desire to bring more immigrant workers into the U.S. economy.

For obvious reasons, the quote has already ruffled the feathers of many participants in the immigration debate. Conservative voices like Erick Erickson have accused Rubio of not sticking up for out-of-work Americans at a time when the unemployment rate is 7.6 percent. Labor unions likely won't love that quote either.

Rubio's team walked back the aide's assertion that American workers aren't "star performers." Spokesman Alex Conant told the Daily Caller that his office "strongly objected" to the inclusion of that quote in the piece because Rubio believes "American workers can compete against anyone in the world."

Politics aside, are low-skilled immigrant workers being brought in to take the jobs of Americans who "can't cut it"?

Not quite.

There will likely be some displacement of U.S. workers as a result of the immigration bill if job creation remains stagnant. But the notion of a mass of immigrants taking the jobs of Americans is a myth. On the whole, the evidence indicates that more immigration could benefit both immigrant and native-born American workers.

First of all, Rubio's unnamed aide reportedly uttered his bombshell quote amid a debate about how many immigrant construction workers would be allowed to legally work in the U.S. But the number of visas granted for construction workers in the Gang of Eight bill is actually quite small, at 15,000 per year. Any displacement of American or immigrant workers in that industry is likely to be limited.

The bill does provide a visa program for immigrant workers considered "low-skilled" who work in retail, janitorial and hospitality trades. This program would begin at 20,000 visas per year and could grow to 200,000 visas per year. But even with that many foreign workers coming in, studies show that higher levels of immigration can help the economy.

Erza Klein points to a Hamilton Project study that shows immigration creates a positive average wage increase for American workers. While there's some disagreement on the scale of the impact on low-wage workers, Klein also notes that native-born workers cannot drop their wage demands below the legal minimum level. Undocumented immigrants are often paid less than that, and oftentimes off the books.

With a new, legal flow of immigrant workers, low-wage American workers could compete over pay on a playing field that's more level.

In fact, a 2006 study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, cited by the Cato Institute, shows that immigration between 1990 and 2004 did not result in a negative impact for more than 90 percent of U.S. workers with a high-school degree. Instead, their wages went up during that period.

All that said, there was also some truth to what Rubio's aide reportedly said. One of the reasons that immigrants don't depress the wage levels of American workers, or displace them on a large scale, is because they do different types of jobs than Americans.

Even with the high levels of unemployment over the last few years, some industries report they cannot get native-born Americans to work in jobs that are predominantly filled by immigrants. According to the Associated Press, many of hotels offer \$10.50 per hour for entry-level housekeeping jobs with the opportunity for promotions.

Shawn McBurney, senior vice president of government affairs at the American Hotel and Lodging Association, spoke about the issue to the AP in April:

"We want to hire Americans, we do everything we can to hire Americans, but if no more Americans are available we would like access to those foreign-born workers."

But that's not necessarily a bad thing for the economy as a whole. Lower-skilled U.S. workers tend to gravitate toward jobs, such as cashiers bank tellers, that require different skills like communication, the New York Times noted last October. That means that if and when the economy does create more jobs, there could be more to go around for everyone.