

DAILY NEWS

Don't H-1B visa holders matter? Biden is mistreating foreign workers, and nobody seems to care

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“If you’re vaccinated, the most important thing you can do right now is go live your best life & make up for lost time.” So tweeted former Biden White House COVID-19 adviser Andy Slavitt recently.

Unfortunately, that’s difficult for hundreds of thousands of U.S. nonimmigrant visa holders from India, the U.K. and elsewhere. Biden’s ongoing COVID-19 travel restrictions mean many of those with H-1B and other visas are stranded abroad not knowing when they will be allowed back into to the U.S., with others here fearful of leaving America to visit family overseas due to the risk of not getting back in.

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Since last spring, the U.S. international border has generally prohibited entry from the Schengen EU travel zone, the U.K., Iran and China. India, South Africa and Brazil have since been added to the list. Other countries have not been, even as the virus has spread across the world.

U.S. nationals, permanent residents (and permanent visa applicants), their spouses, dependents, children and certain student visa holders are exempt. Yet most of those holding long-term American work visas such as the H-1B are still largely shut out. As a result, many U.S. taxpayers with residences here are unable to reenter the country.

Indian H-1B holders who traveled back to care for or bury family members during the outbreak there found themselves then stuck in a country with an overrun health-care system, separated from their American loved ones. Fathers have missed the birth of their children in the U.S., parents have been separated from young kids and spouses, and friends have missed weddings and funerals on American soil after years of building their lives in the U.S.

As perniciously, the rules hang like a cloud over those nonimmigrant visa holders currently in the U.S. who haven’t traveled. One of the authors of this piece has not seen family in the U.K. since December 2019 despite being vaccinated since January 2021 and is reluctant to travel back lest the rules endure.

The Biden administration, though, has given no indication as to when this will change, despite 66% of British adults having been double vaccine dosed. Even travel to non-banned countries is fraught with uncertainty: What if they are added to the countries with restrictions, and re-entry for nonimmigrant visa holders is similarly denied?

The economic toll is severe for both the immigrants and the United States. The travel bans are keeping immigrants from performing skilled jobs at wages in the 90th percentile of U.S. workers. Some companies are moving operations offshore, and U.S. federal, state and local governments are losing desperately needed tax revenue.

Many multinational companies will not invest in U.S. enterprises if they cannot be assured that their people will be there to oversee the projects. This partly explains why foreign direct investment from Europe to the United States plunged by about \$39 billion from 2019 to 2020, costing the United States thousands of jobs.

Infectious disease control is a legitimate function of government, but these American restrictions lack a public health rationale. Every traveler to the United States — even U.S. citizens — must obtain a negative COVID-19 test before traveling. Moreover, most skilled workers are vaccinated. Yet they cannot return to their lives here.

Allowing Americans to vacation in COVID-19 hotspots such as Colombia or unvaccinated regions in Africa while banning foreign workers whose homes are here and who are coming to engage in productive economic activities is the very personification of Trump's "America First" agenda. Yet few Democrats seem to care.

We can't know why foreign workers are subject to much stricter restrictions, but the fact that the administration has adopted much more favorable rules for many other travelers — both citizens and noncitizens — reveals at least an ambivalent, if not hostile, attitude toward people making massive contributions to this country's well-being.

Whatever the reason for delaying, the president cannot wait any longer. Every single month that the borders remain closed costs the United States billions of dollars in investment and economic growth. If it persists for another year, it could permanently reshape flows of talented workers and global investment. The time to act is long overdue.

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