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Strassel: Immigration's Poison Pill: Big Labor

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President Obama, in his otherwise lofty immigration speech this week, felt compelled to warn Americans that as "reform becomes more real," it will be attacked by people determined "to pull this thing apart." He'd know better than most.

The president was of course referring to Republicans, hoping to reinforce the perception that the GOP is the only obstacle to an immigration solution. This perception is highly convenient for Democrats, since it masks the fact that their party is effectively run by a force that despises comprehensive immigration reform and tanked it in the past: Big Labor.

The more honest media stories will at least acknowledge that organized labor remains opposed to central pieces of reform, in particular a guest-worker program. That mechanism would allow low-skilled immigrants to legally fill temporary labor demands, and it is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid a future flood of illegal immigrants.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka greets President Obama after Mr. Obama's speech on immigration reform at Del Sol High School in Las Vegas, Jan. 29.

What the media rarely note is the highly cynical reason for the unions' opposition. Big Labor likes to suggest that its beef with guest workers is that they "steal" American jobs, an argument designed to appeal to populist fervors. This is hokum. Labor unions are hugely in favor of giving today's 11 million illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, a move that would free up these shadow workers to "steal" far more American jobs than any guest-worker program.

The issue here is instead one of power—via organizing. The labor movement is hemorrhaging members and is now at a crisis stage. Unions see an opportunity to pull in immigrants but have been frustrated in

their efforts by undocumented workers fearful of being caught and deported. This would change with a path to citizenship. And it explains why AFL-CIO chief Richard Trumka sat in the front row at President Obama's speech and gave his full support to the "top priority" of immigration reform: "citizenship."

A guest-worker program, by contrast, is of no use to Big Labor. Temporary workers are not open to union cards. Worse from the union perspective, these nonunionized immigrant workers can swell the ranks of certain industries, decreasing union power to force business to give in to their demands.

Labor's hatred of guest-worker programs traces back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, though was taken to even uglier heights by the left's hero, Cesar Chavez, who coined the phrase "Si, se puede" (often translated as "Yes, we can"). The audience members chanting that motto during Mr. Obama's immigration speech may have been unaware that Chavez's United Farm Workers were violently opposed to any workers they couldn't organize, even establishing a "wet line" (Chavez's charming term) of armed union thugs who beat up Mexicans trying to cross the border.

That loathing has extended to recent immigration debates, in which Big Labor has used Democratic allies to kill reform. One of their top go-to guys was a freshman senator from Illinois, Barack Obama. In 2005, Sens. John McCain and the late Ted Kennedy attempted reform. Mark Salter, a McCain aide, wrote in 2011 for RealClearPolitics that at every 2005 immigration meeting, Mr. Obama would appear and "draw from his shirt pocket a 3x5 index card, on which he had written changes he insisted be made to the bill before he would support it. They were invariably the same demands made by the AFL-CIO, which was intent on watering down or killing the guest-worker provisions."

The 2007 reform effort looked more promising, until North Dakota's then-Sen. Byron Dorgan, at Big Labor's demand, offered an amendment to kill the guest-worker program after just five years. It passed by one vote, with Mr. Obama's support. Republicans and businesses pulled their backing, and reform died.

Why didn't Mr. Obama do immigration reform in his first term? It could be that he knew he needed the union machine to get re-elected and was unwilling to cross Big Labor before November.

He remains unwilling. The president deliberately excluded mention of a guest-worker program from both his speech and the White House's written immigration principles. This appears designed to give unions the maximum cover to water down or sabotage any program. Big Labor's means of accomplishing this is a series of talks it is currently holding with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, ostensibly to forge an "agreement" on guest workers.

The unions want no agreement, but their political fallback is the AFL-CIO's 2009 proposal to create a commission—made up of government, business and labor—that each year would set a cap on guest-worker visas. As the Cato Institute's immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh noted to me, this would give the unions "effective control over guest-worker policy." Unions could use the commission to severely limit visas and to direct the few that are issued to industries that aren't unionized. The goal, in short, is a guest-worker program in nothing but name—and the GOP shouldn't fall for it.

Republicans in fact have an excellent opportunity to both highlight Democratic fealty to this special interest and to reassure their own voters that they are serious about stemming future illegal immigration. Big Labor has succeeded as the quiet spoiler for far too long.