

**Disconnected Dobbs**

by  
Alejandro Portes<sup>\*</sup>  
Princeton University

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<sup>\*</sup> Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Migration and Development, Princeton University

The great immigration battle of 2006 features, on one side, millions of immigrants and their supporters and, on the other, the Minutemen, some Congressmen, and Lou Dobbs. On the face of it, the battle is uneven, but then Dobbs has television on his side, and he uses it to great effect. The Sensenbrenner bill is what put the immigrants on the streets since it seeks to criminalize those here without a visa, their employers, and anyone who renders them assistance. The bill was not preceded by any massive citizen mobilization against immigrants: African-Americans did not rally in the streets, nor did Americans “whose jobs immigrants take away”; the middle class did not march in protest nor did the employers. Passage of the Sensenbrenner bill was preceded by just talk, TV talk.

“Our Broken Borders” is the motto adopted by Dobbs for his campaign. The obvious question is “broken by whom?” The seven-to-one difference between Mexican and U.S. wages is clearly a powerful motivator for workers from south of the border, but so is the fact that these jobs exist. Entire sectors of the U.S. economy – from agriculture to services – have become dependent on a foreign labor supply, not only because these workers are available but because *there is no alternative native labor supply*. Declining fertility and rising education levels in the United States are the key factors behind this shrinking supply of native workers willing to take low-paid, manual jobs.

An unemployment rate in the single digits points to an abundance of employment opportunities and makes jobs at the bottom increasingly unattractive to American workers. But even, if by some miracle, every adult in the nation’s inner cities were to be persuaded to accept a job in agriculture or in unskilled construction crews, *they would fill only a fraction of the demand*. An economy the size of the largest fifteen European countries put together generates a huge demand for manual labor that today only a reliable foreign labor supply can meet.

Firms that hire migrant workers for picking crops, building houses, and providing a multitude of services pay in turn taxes and create administrative and white collar jobs that American workers do want and fill. These positions – from office personnel to mail carriers; from bus drivers to insurance adjustors – would not be there if there were not a multitude of labor-intensive firms driving the economy from below and generating, in turn, demand for a wide variety of high-skill services.

The great American service economy sits atop productive manual labor and immigrants provide an indispensable source of it. There is a vast disconnect between these realities and the pronouncements of Mr. Sensenbrenner in Congress and Mr. Dobbs on primetime TV. They appeal for votes and ratings points by plying on the fears of the general public about what immigrants would do to American society and culture. They fail to notice that the same citizens to whose patriotic sentiments their speeches appeal benefit daily, as workers and consumers, from the silent labor of thousands of immigrants. The same nationalists who wax indignant about the Mexican peril think nothing of buying low-cost fruit and vegetables, cheap restaurant meals, and enjoying well-stocked stores, manicured lawns, and clean offices and homes, all courtesy of Mexican and other migrant workers.

But the antics of Disconnected Dobbs and his followers are not harmless. Their campaigns hurt American businesses and harm their immigrant workers and their families. Their speeches foment ethnic animosities where there were none before and create conflicts where none previously existed. The “fragmentation of America” which these people denounce is ultimately their own creation.

It is time to leave this strident crowd behind and restore sense to the nation’s immigration policy by putting into place a flexible foreign labor management program. America’s borders

are not “broken” by the immigrants but by the hypocrisy of a system that seeks to keep them out while simultaneously recruiting them to fill a vast labor demand at the bottom. This is an unsustainable disconnect which must be addressed if order, reason, and peace in the streets of this country are to be restored.