

Bosses fight back in immigration debate

Az group says jobs being created, must be filled

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Sheridan Bailey said he is tired of being painted as a greedy business owner who wants to get rich off cheap, immigrant labor and steal jobs from U.S. citizens. Now, he's speaking out.

"I've had enough," said Bailey, who recently started the Arizona Employers for Immigration Reform. "Legislators aren't hearing anything from the people who are creating jobs. The only people talking are (extremists), the ones that want to hunt people down and send them back to Mexico."

In the past couple of years, Bailey has struggled to find workers for his steel



fabrication company in Phoenix, he said. That is despite placing ads in newspapers and increasing his employees' wages to \$18 an hour from \$15.

It's a familiar complaint among Tucson-area business owners, who report labor shortages yet have been afraid to speak up for fear of repercussions by activists and the government, Bailey said.

Marshall Vest, an economist at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management, agreed that there is a shortage of laborers, but said employers could attract more workers if they paid more.

A large supply of cheap, immigrant labor from Mexico has brought down wages in border states, Vest said.

"If you were to somehow magically build that fence and shut off that supply of

labor, wages would go up," he said.

But it wouldn't resolve the laborer shortage because there aren't enough U.S.-born workers to take the jobs, Vest said.

An aging and better-educated U.S. population means less availability of low-wage workers, and immigrants have stepped up to fill in the void, helping the economy grow, Vest said.

He said a slower growth rate would mean fewer jobs, higher prices and lower wages.

Bailey said he supports an overhaul of the country's immigration system, and hopes the formation of the coalition will encourage business owners to speak up. He also thinks the time is right.

The November election proved the public doesn't support hard-line, anti-immigrant candidates such as congressional hopeful Republican Randy Graf and Rep. J.D. Hayworth, R-Ariz., who both lost in the election, Bailey said. If reform is going to happen, he said, it will be in 2007.

Immigration is much too hot an issue for legislators to take on in 2008, a presidential election year, Bailey said.

The coalition is just getting off the ground and Bailey gave his first public presentation to about 100 Tucson business owners from the Alliance of Construction Trades on Wednesday.

Bailey is trying to reach out to a number of industries, including agriculture, transportation, hospitality and restaurants.

Nan and Dick Walden, who own the Green Valley Pecan Co., signed on to the coalition's executive committee.

"I'm hoping we can hear from the silent majority about the importance of this labor supply to the American economy," Nan Walden said.

The coalition is following in the footsteps of a similar group formed over the summer in Texas.

Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a conservative think tank in New York, has been a vocal advocate of immigration reform and has been asked to advise the new coalitions.

Business owners from several other states have contacted Jacoby to set up similar groups.

She said it is the first time individual business owners have stepped forward to talk about immigration, and she believes they can have a big impact.

"It's one thing when the big trade association comes in to a member of Congress and says, 'I have a list of eight things I care about and this is No. 4,' " Jacoby said. "But it's another thing for an actual business owner who maybe knows the member or has donated to his campaign to come in and say, 'Look, I can't get my work done without these workers. I'm sick of lying to the government just to get the job done.' "

Work site raids by federal agents looking for illegal immigrants increased considerably in the past five years.

In 2002, federal agents made 25 arrests related to hiring illegal immigrants. Last year, they made 718.

The trend will continue, said Laura Mack, a spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The government's confusing immigration laws are unnerving for employers, said Frank Siqueros, who owns Mountain Power Electrical Contractor Inc. in Tucson. Employers are restricted by law in the kinds of questions they can ask of employees, and too many questions can bring on discrimination lawsuits, he said.

"We're not allowed to ask the typical questions like: 'Were you born in this country? Did you go to school here?' " Siqueros said. "You can't even ask them if they're legal or not. All you can do is just ask for their identification."

According to the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, workers, not employers, have the right to choose which work authorization document they provide when applying for a job.

Employers cannot demand to see a specific document, or to require more than one.

That is called "document abuse" and is illegal, according to the National Immigration Law Center in Los Angeles.

To prevent discrimination against immigrant employees, Congress created the Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices, which is part of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

Legal confusion aside, Siquieros said he is unable to expand his business because of a serious labor shortage.

He said he needs 25 to 30 more electricians. The jobs pay about \$20 an hour, and he can't find enough workers, he said.

His company trains 10 to 12 apprentices a year, and works closely with Sunnyside High School.

Steven Camarota, director of research at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Immigration Studies, dismissed the notion that businesses have been left out of the debate.

Business interests drive the debate, and the government has turned a blind eye to employers who skirt the nation's laws by hiring illegal immigrants, he said.

Camarota said a larger economy does not translate into increased wealth if it is fueled by immigration.

"Adding more workers makes for a larger economy, but it also means more people," Camarota said. "It doesn't increase the wealth of the population to add workers. That doesn't change the per capita income."

He believes industries should mechanize instead, and points to the increased use of manufactured homes in Europe and Japan, where construction labor is scarce.