This much is clear about the confusing many-sided debate over immigration law reform: Whatever Congress finally comes up with — if it manages to come up with anything — is certain to victimize hundreds of thousands of our most important workers.

The major legislation before Congress, be it bills backed by Democrats or by Republicans, by liberals or by conservatives, would make life even harsher for the already badly treated immigrants from Mexico, Central America and elsewhere who grow and harvest much of the food that sustains us all.

One bill would make felons of the many immigrant farm workers who are here illegally. Other bills would make them "guest workers." That would give them at best a chance to try to meet a series of stiff requirements, including payment of large fees, to become legal residents sometime in the distant future.

In the meantime, they'd be exploited in the same ways as the undocumented immigrants of today. They'd have few rights other than to work under whatever conditions growers might impose on them. They'd dare not unionize or otherwise seek better conditions or try to switch employers, lest they be fired and deported, to be replaced by other immigrants desperate for work.

Under other terms of the proposed guest-worker programs, the immigrants could in any case remain in the country only for as long as they were employed in temporary seasonal jobs — and then for no more than six harvest seasons. There'd be no unemployment benefits for those laid off, no welfare benefits, only return trips to their home countries.

The guest workers, in short, would be second-class workers and second-class residents despite the great importance of what they do. They'd be in effect indentured servants, members of a large underclass with no opportunity to become part of the communities where they live, no opportunity for anything but temporarily filling poverty-level jobs that could be arbitrarily taken from them at any time.

No complaints about that, however, from growers — most importantly the large corporate growers who dominate agriculture. None, either, from President Bush and the other powerful Republicans and conservative Democrats, who are the big growers' closest allies.
Growers would be guaranteed as many unorganized and uncomplaining workers as they wanted. And they could have them for as long as they wanted – however little they paid them, however few the benefits they might grant, however poor or even dangerous the working conditions. They'd be largely exempt from the labor laws that guarantee basic rights and protections to non-immigrant workers and be free of the economic pressures that often require other employers to raise pay and improve conditions in order to attract needed workers.

But growers and their apologists whine loudly and constantly that U.S. workers consider farm work too hard and too dirty and will not do it whatever the inducements. You've heard their line many times, the pitiful complaint that "Americans won't do stoop labor."

Sure. Then who is it that cleans our sewers and collects our garbage? Who are our cement masons, who spend most of the workday on their knees? Our roofers who work with scalding hot tar all day? Our steelworkers? And the many others who perform similarly rough work?

They are of course Americans. They are treated with dignity, paid a decent wage, given decent working conditions, and not thrown into competition with desperate workers who have no choice but to accept whatever pay and conditions may be offered them.

There's not a shortage of U.S. residents who'd be willing to take farm work, nor a shortage of unemployed and underemployed residents. There's instead a shortage of growers who'll offer workers what is offered by other employers, many of them in industries less profitable than corporate agriculture.

Even some immigrants, legal and otherwise, leave farm work for better paying jobs, in construction and elsewhere. Which is another reason why growers favor the guest-worker programs that would keep immigrant workers trapped on the farm. The proposed programs are patterned on the thoroughly discredited Bracero program that provided growers a virtually unlimited supply of cheap, docile and captive Mexican labor from 1942 to 1964, and so enabled them to keep the pay and working conditions of foreign and domestic farm workers alike at the lowest possible levels.

Blatant employer mistreatment of the Mexican Braceros and heavy unemployment among U.S. workers in all industries finally generated the
pressure needed to kill the program. Growers and their political allies have tried ever since to revive it. But the most they've managed is a much smaller guest-worker program that has subjected workers to the same mistreatment suffered by Braceros before them.

The very nature of guest-worker programs makes that inevitable. They invite abuse by blocking workers from seeking jobs elsewhere and bargaining collectively on their terms of employment or exercising other labor and civil rights.

Farm workers, all workers, deserve much better.