



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on July 10, 2009

Unqualified Immigrants Fixing American Planes?

"We just have to bring them before Congress and ask them what they're doing," said Texas Rep. Ted Poe of Houston. "I will ask Congressman Oberstar of the Aviation Committee to hold hearings with the FAA regarding this whole situation."

WFAA-TV in Dallas and Fort Worth exposed the problems with an investigation in early July. "Reporters found that aliens are being brought into the country so that they can be paid less than American workers," the TV station noted on its website. The investigation also charged that the immigrants' experience and credentials may be in question. Quoting insiders, the station claims "the companies that are importing the mechanics are so eager to save money, they're overstating their qualifications. The result may be a threat to safety, abetted by lax enforcement of immigration law."



The foreign mechanics working at San Antonio International Airport were mostly here on temporary permits called TN visas, a provision of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) designed to allow licensed professionals to work in other countries. Citing documents obtained from Mexican mechanics, the report found that many were not licensed anywhere, though they may have attended airplane repair school in Mexico. Other workers came from places like the Philippines, Chile, and a variety of other Asian and Latin American countries.

"The more experienced mechanics, we would get paired up with either one or two of these guys," said a former mechanic with San Antonio Aerospace who was laid off. "They would watch us for a month or so. And that's how they would get their training." According to a former administrator, as soon as the American employees were let go, the foreign workers would arrive.

"They've employed over 200 since I left," alleged Jada Williams, a former employee of Aircraft Workers Worldwide. The contracting company provided workers for companies owned by Singapore Technologies (ST) Aerospace, the largest aircraft repair company in the world. "And I know we had over a hundred when I was in there, just in Mobile," she added, referring to Mobile Aerospace Engineering in Alabama, which like San Antonio Aerospace is controlled by ST Aerospace.

But Chye Kiat Ang, the president of the Singapore-based company, defended the firms' actions. "They are as good as any American worker," he said, explaining that between 10 percent and 15 percent of the employees were immigrants. "No one is working in a situation where they are forced to accept a lower wage," Ang noted, adding that the company had found it difficult to recruit qualified Americans, who are required to be certified by an FAA-approved company.



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The foreign workers also defended the companies. One of the Mexicans working at the San Antonio airport explained that mechanics in Mexico learn in English using English manuals. Another, Ruben Ramirez, said, "I can prove my skills with my documents." The director of quality for San Antonio Aerospace added that the workers were very skilled and professional.

A spokesperson for the FAA, which is in charge of regulating the industry and frequently inspects the San Antonio facility, said the firm is not currently under investigation. But a former employee at the company alleges that before inspectors arrived they were given a one-hour warning. "A lot of guys who were not able to read English, they would hide those guys or send them home for the evening," he said.

Many of the foreign workers apply for Social Security numbers under their visas and stay longer than they are allowed to — sometimes forever. NAFTA has created a myriad of problems and hazards for the United States, and this is simply another example. NAFTA should be abolished so the United States can set its own responsible policies. And if it turns out that unqualified mechanics are really fixing our planes, there should be severe consequences for those responsible.



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