

As mass demonstrations continue, Republicans split over anti-immigration bill

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Demonstrations in defense of the rights of immigrants continued in cities from coast to coast Monday, as the Senate Judiciary Committee agreed to an immigration bill that would remove many of the most draconian provisions demanded by the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives.

The biggest single protest action Monday came in Detroit, where a crowd numbering in the thousands—as many as 50,000, by one police estimate—marched from a Catholic Church in the Mexicantown area and rallied near the McNamara Federal Building downtown.

The huge crowd carried flags from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as well as the United States, and signs with slogans like “We are not criminals.” An estimated half-million Latinos, US-born and immigrant, live in the state of Michigan.

The rally attracted sympathetic coverage in the local media. Father Russ Kohler, a Roman Catholic priest in a Hispanic parish, told the *Detroit News* he was appalled that under the proposed HR 4437, he could be considered a felon for helping a needy immigrant. Referring to the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America, he said, “They have been here for 12,000 years and ‘Americans’ have only been here for a few hundred years. Who’s the invader here?”

Similar rallies took place Sunday and Monday in Boston, where 2,500 supporters of immigrant rights marched to the Boston Common; Columbus, Ohio; Oakland and San Francisco, California; and other cities. Boston’s rally was one of the most variegated, with the crowd including workers from Haiti, El Salvador, Brazil and Ireland, singing songs, chanting slogans and waving flags. In Washington, DC, some 1,500 immigrants demonstrated outside the US Capitol, many of them wearing symbolic handcuffs to denounce the legislation for redefining immigration violations—now considered civil infractions—as felony crimes.

In Los Angeles, scene of one of the largest demonstrations in US history Saturday, when more than half a million people marched through downtown to denounce the anti-immigrant legislation, the popular mobilization continued Monday with a series of mass walkouts by high school students.

An estimated 40,000 students left classes, blocking traffic on streets like Sunset Boulevard and Melrose Avenue, and on the Hollywood, Harbor, Riverside and Santa Ana freeways. The protests spread through Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura counties—the whole of urban southern California.

Smaller high school protests were reported in Dallas, Phoenix and the suburbs of Washington, DC.

The mass protests have had an impact in the US capital, reflected in the 12-6 vote on the Senate Judiciary Committee, rejecting the harshest aspects of the House bill, such as the transformation of immigrant violations into felonies, and the criminalization of schoolteachers and workers at social service agencies and healthcare facilities who help undocumented workers.

The bill generally follows the line of the legislation offered by Democrat Edward Kennedy and Republican John McCain, with the tacit backing of the Bush White House, providing billions to intensify the repression of border crossers, including the hiring of thousands of new Border Patrol and INS agents, as well as a guest worker program that would bring up to 400,000 new immigrant workers into the US each year on a temporary basis.

Despite claims in the media and by some of the more hysterical anti-immigrant demagogues, the Senate bill is not an amnesty for undocumented workers and does not grant them any new rights. It is, instead, a virtual bill of rights for employers who seek to exploit undocumented workers and maintain them in conditions of subservience.

Those workers now in the United States illegally would

be allowed to pay a fine and get in the queue for a green card, but only if they were sponsored by their employer. This gives the employers an enormous club to use against any effort by these cruelly exploited workers to demand higher wages and benefits, unionize, or otherwise join with US-born workers to assert their common class interests.

The Senate bill has a naked class character. It presumes that all immigrants who will seek legalization under its terms will be wage workers and will remain wage workers throughout the 11-year period leading to citizenship (6 years to obtain legal resident status, followed by 5 years to becoming a citizen). If these immigrants lose their jobs and are unemployed for more than 60 days, they are subject to immediate deportation.

In a special bow to the agribusiness bosses, the committee adopted an amendment sponsored by California Democrat Diane Feinstein, to permit 1.5 million agricultural workers to receive special “blue card” treatment that would allow them to pick fruit and perform other agricultural labor, but not move on to other jobs.

The 12-6 vote on the Judiciary Committee was the product of a split in the Republican majority. All 8 Democrats on the committee voted for the bill, along with 4 Republicans, while 6 Republicans voted against. This is one of a handful of occasions in the past five years where the Republican congressional leadership has lost control on an important issue.

The four Republicans on the Judiciary Committee who voted with the Democrats include the chairman, Arlen Specter, as well as Lindsey Graham of South Carolina (a state with large agribusiness interests), Sam Brownback of Kansas (whose meatpacking industry employs a largely immigrant workforce) and Michael DeWine of Ohio, one of the most vulnerable Republican incumbents in the Senate, who is up for reelection in November.

The split is driven largely by two factors: the demand by sections of big business, particularly agribusiness and construction, for a continued supply of cheap labor; and the fear of an explosive political backlash against the Republican Party among Hispanic voters, which could wipe out the narrow Republican majorities in both the House and Senate in the upcoming November elections.

Both these concerns were reflected in the comments Monday by President Bush, who spoke before a group of immigrants receiving their citizenship papers, mildly criticizing the racist invective of the most vociferous immigrant bashers among the House Republicans.

While reiterating his determination to build up the

Border Patrol and other repressive agencies, and boasting that 6 million immigrants had been arrested and deported since he took office five years ago, Bush added, “The immigration debate should be conducted in a civil and dignified way. No one should play on people’s fears, or try to pit neighbors against each other. No one should pretend that immigrants are threats to America’s identity, because immigrants have shaped America’s identity. No one should claim that immigrants are a burden on our economy, because the work and enterprise of immigrants helps sustain our economy.”

These words are remarkably hypocritical, since the Bush administration has sustained itself politically ever since September 11 by “playing on people’s fears,” while vilifying political opponents, particularly critics of the war in Iraq, as dupes or even allies of terrorism.

Bush’s key political aides, including Karl Rove, are particularly concerned that a sharp swing against the Republicans among Hispanic voters in states like Florida, Texas and California could cost them control of the House and Senate.

In a speech to the ultra-right Federalist Society last week, former Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie called anti-immigration rhetoric “a political siren song” and warned that “our majority will crash on its shoals.” He added, “The Republican majority already rests too heavily on white voters.”

This has brought the White House into conflict with a section of House Republicans, spearheaded by Congressman Tom Tancredo of Colorado, who is planning a presidential campaign in 2008 based on appeals to anti-immigrant bigotry. Tancredo denounced the mass protests against his bill, saying, “Illegal aliens now act as if they are entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship.”

The Senate Republican leadership is itself split, with Specter aligning himself with the White House, while Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee—bypassing the Judiciary Committee—has threatened to introduce his own immigration bill that would not include a guest worker program and would incorporate many of the repressive provisions of the legislation passed by the House.



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