

Anti-immigrant politics kill “reform” bill in US Senate

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The US Senate’s failure to pass a “compromise” immigration bill that ostensibly enjoyed support from both the Democratic and Republican leaderships was the result of a bitter and reactionary debate over how severely some 12 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the US should be punished for having entered the country.

The so-called compromise broke down over a procedural wrangle between Democrats and Republicans over whether Republican Senators opposed to the bill would be allowed to introduce and debate a long list of amendments aimed at making it more punitive, in what essentially constituted a delaying tactic aimed at killing the legislation.

The bill accepted by the Democratic and Republican leaders represented in essence a reprise of similar legislation enacted in 1986 under the Republican administration of President Ronald Reagan. However, given the host of repressive initiatives on the border and an even less generous offer for legalizing undocumented workers already in the country, the measure was considerably more reactionary. The fact that such a piece of legislation would be accepted by the Democratic Party and then scuttled by anti-immigrant opponents is a measure of how far the US political establishment has swung to the right in the past two decades.

That the Senate should fail to enact even the most minimal reform in the face of the demonstrations that have brought millions into the streets demanding just treatment for immigrant workers is likewise an indication of how distant the two-party system has become from the interests of masses of ordinary working people.

The scuttled legislation was aimed at allowing the two parties to bridge the gap between appealing to anti-

immigrant sentiment and avoiding a political backlash at the polls in November from tens of millions of voters who are themselves recent immigrants or are connected by family and personal ties to others who are.

Thus, it included measures aimed at militarizing the 2,000-mile US border with Mexico, more than doubling the number of Border Patrol agents to an army of 25,000 in the next five years, while deploying a “virtual wall” of cameras, sensors, aerial drones and other surveillance technology. It also included a strict new mandatory program requiring that employers verify the immigration status of everyone they hire.

The portion of the legislation dealing with the 12 million undocumented immigrants already in the country would have essentially divided them into three categories according to how long they have resided in the US. Those who have been in the country for more than five years—and can prove it—would be allowed to apply for permanent residency after working uninterruptedly for another six years. They would also be required to pay a \$2,000 fine as well as any back taxes, learn English and undergo a background check.

The next tier would include those who have been in the US between two to five years. They would have to leave the US for their countries of origin to apply for a temporary work visa.

The final group, estimated at between one and two million undocumented workers, who entered the country after January 1, 2004, would be subject to summary deportation.

Also included in the Senate version is a “bracero” guest-worker program to provide cheap immigrant labor for agribusiness.

Even if the Senate had approved this legislation, it would have had to be reconciled with an even more draconian bill approved by the House of

Representatives, which, instead of even these woefully inadequate proposals for allowing immigrants to legalize their status calls for the criminalization of both all undocumented workers and any people or organizations who aid them and includes even more repressive measures aimed at sealing off the US border.

It was this reactionary anti-immigrant bill passed by the House in December—HR 4437—that provoked the recent mass demonstrations, marches and school walkouts as well as the national day of protest called on April 10.

Whatever final version that emerged from the House-Senate conference negotiations was certain to be centered on strengthening the government's repressive powers, while maintaining millions of immigrant workers as a repressed and super-exploited source of cheap labor.

The entire debate in both houses of Congress has centered on whether the proposed legislation would offer an “amnesty” to “lawbreakers.” It has seen politicians from both parties insist that immigrant workers, among the poorest and most oppressed in society, be punished with fines and penalties.

Even the supposedly more lenient Senate version posed the nightmarish prospect of subjecting millions of workers to the threat of deportation and denial of work, while breaking up families and creating a vast new apparatus for the repression of immigrants.

The breakdown of the Senate deal, however, makes it highly unlikely that any comprehensive legislation will be approved this year. After scuttling the bill, the Congress began its two-week spring vacation and no new date has been set for considering immigration legislation.

What is now likely is that the repressive sections of the House bill will be introduced piecemeal under the banner of “national security” and the “war on terror,” which has already been utilized to terrorize foreign-born workers and deprive immigrants of civil liberties.

The US financial elite and the two parties that represent its interests—the Democrats and Republicans—have neither the interest nor the ability to resolve the issues raised by the historic growth of immigration to the US in a democratic and socially progressive manner.

Their chief concerns—and the source of their bitter differences on the issue—are contradictory. On the one

hand, they want to assure big business a steady supply of cheap labor from immigrants who are forced to leave their own countries by the desperate conditions created by global finance capital, and who are deprived of basic rights in this country. At the same time, however, they want to use immigrant workers as scapegoats to divert popular anger over growing social inequality, the scarcity of decent-paying jobs and the attacks on healthcare, education and other social programs.

Working people must oppose both of these reactionary strategies with their own independent policy, based on the fight for the unity of the working class and the demand for full democratic and citizenship rights for all 12 million undocumented workers. Against the drive by multinational capital to move freely across national borders while walling workers within them, the demand must be raised that workers be allowed to live and work in the country of their choice.

This policy can be fought for only through a break with the Democratic and Republican parties and the building of a new independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program and an internationalist perspective of uniting the struggles of workers in the US with workers in every part of the world.

This is the program and perspective fought for only by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site*. We urge all those who want to fight to defend the rights of immigrant workers to join in the campaign to place the candidates of the SEP on the ballot for the 2006 election and to bring this program to the widest possible audience.



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