

Bipartisan Senate plan would deepen exploitation of immigrant workers

Barry Grey
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A group of Democratic and Republican senators on Thursday announced a bipartisan proposal to overhaul the US immigration system that contains punitive measures against undocumented workers currently in the US and regressive provisions that would prevent future immigrants from bringing parents, adult children or other family members into the country.

Details of the proposed legislation, which runs 380 pages, remain sketchy. However, certain key points are clear.

The plan contains discriminatory and anti-democratic language provisions, requiring immigrants seeking permanent legal status to learn English, and mandates a massive expansion, to 18,000, of the border patrol police, the erection of 370 additional miles of fencing on the US-Mexican border, and a hi-tech employment verification system for immigrant workers.

It would also establish temporary worker programs to vastly expand the number of immigrant workers brought into the country to serve as highly exploited cheap labor for agribusiness and other corporate interests.

The plan would allow most undocumented workers who entered the US before January 1 to receive a temporary residency permit until they obtained a “Z Visa,” which would enable them to live and work in the US legally. However, they would have to pay a \$5,000 fine and administrative costs before receiving the “Z Visa,” and face the prospect of waiting eight to thirteen years before achieving permanent residency.

The heads of households of so-called “illegal immigrant” families would have to return to their home countries within eight years to apply for permanent residency status for family members, but under the new proposal, only spouses and minor children would be guaranteed admission to the US.

This marks a significant, and reactionary, shift from previous immigration law, under which legal immigrants were able to bring their entire families into the US. Under the new plan, a point system for applicants would be established giving priority to employment experience and skills, educational levels and English proficiency over family ties. As a result, many immigrants seeking to live and work in the US would suffer the breakup of their families.

This policy shift highlights the essential character of the proposed overhaul. It is above all tailored to the profit interests of US corporations and employers, who wish to have a large and stable pool of cheap and super-exploited labor at their disposal, as well as a smaller number of highly skilled and educated immigrants.

This was underscored by the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan, who on Thursday called for the easing of immigration restrictions to increase the flow of skilled workers and build up US infrastructure.

Similarly, a draft of the legislation says that Congress intends to “increase American competitiveness through a merit-based evaluation system for immigrants.” It adds that Congress will “reduce chain migration” by limiting the number of visas issued exclusively on account of kinship.

“We are wildly uncomfortable with a lot of what we’re hearing,” said Cecilia Munoz, chief lobbyist for the National Council of La Raza.

The legislation reflects the overall political context of the immigration debate in Washington, in which impoverished workers from countries long oppressed by the United States who seek employment in the US are cast by the media and politicians as law-breakers, and scape-goated to whip up chauvinism and racism.

Yet on the same day that the discriminatory “reform”

with its establishment of a privileged status for English was unveiled, the government released a new Census report showing that fully one third of the US population, 100 million people, are either Hispanic, Asian or African-American.

Hispanics remain the largest minority group at 44.3 million (15 percent of the US population) and accounted for almost half of the nation's growth of 2.9 million from July 1, 2005 to July 1, 2006.

The immigration proposal was announced at a press conference attended by three Democrats—Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Dianne Feinstein of California, and Ken Salazar of Colorado—and seven Republicans, including John McCain of Arizona, a contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008. Also present were Bush administration officials who took part in the closed-door talks that led up to the agreement—Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez.

Later on Thursday Bush issued a statement from the White House lawn praising the agreement and urging both houses of Congress to adopt it. Stressing that the measure would not grant “amnesty,” he claimed it would “treat people with respect.”

The plan was touted by Kennedy, its chief Democratic sponsor, who said it “upholds our humanity and our tradition of a nation of immigrants.” As he spoke, he was standing alongside the two Republicans, McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican from South Carolina), who led the passage of the Military Commissions Act last year that stripped so-called alien “illegal enemy combatants” of their habeas corpus rights and sanctioned the illegal practices at Guantánamo and other US concentration camps, including the use of torture.

In some respects, the current proposal is even more onerous than the bill passed by the Senate and endorsed by Bush last year. That bill was killed in the House of Representatives, where most Republicans denounced it as a scheme to grant “amnesty” to “criminals” and “lawbreakers.” The House Republican majority insisted on even more repressive measures to enforce the US-Mexican border and punish undocumented workers.

While last year's Senate bill would have allowed laborers entering the country as temporary workers to stay and work toward citizenship, the new proposal would require temporary workers to spend a year

outside the US between two-year stints within the country. It also incorporates the point-system giving preference to immigrants with greater utility to US businesses and scuttling the previous guarantees for family members.

According to a report in the *Chicago Tribune*: “The compromise at the heart of Thursday's agreement is a ‘trigger’ requiring tough enforcement measures, such as the doubling of patrols at the borders, before the guest worker program or the path to citizenship would take effect. The proposal would also shift the criteria for permanent residency away from immigrants with family members in the US and toward those with skills that could help the US economy.”

Senators hope to bring the bill to the floor for debate and a vote next week before they leave for the Memorial Day holiday. However, its adoption by the House remains in doubt.

The Service Employees International Union and Unite Here have threatened to pull their support from any immigration bill that would not give temporary workers a way to remain in the country. These unions see the legalization of temporary immigrant workers as a means for creating a pool of cheap labor from which they can boost their membership rolls and dues income.

A more substantial impediment to passage of the plan is the openly anti-immigrant, chauvinist agitation of House Republicans. Lamar Smith of Texas, ranking Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, said of the Senate plan: “This proposal would do lasting damage to the country, American workers and the rule of law. Amnesty puts lawbreakers ahead of those who are law-abiding, puts foreign workers ahead of American workers, and encourages even more illegal immigration.”



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