

US: Senate Republicans kill plan to overhaul immigration law

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The defeat Thursday of sweeping immigration legislation backed by both the White House and the Democratic congressional leadership underscores the profound crisis of the Bush administration and the continuing swing to the right by the US political establishment and both of its major parties.

The bill was killed Thursday as the Senate fell far short of providing the 60 votes needed to curtail a filibuster led by southern Republicans and move to a final vote. Only 46 senators voted in favor of cutting off debate, with 53 voting against.

Only 12 Republican senators backed the bill, which was strongly promoted by the Bush White House. Even Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who had appeared with Bush on Capitol Hill supporting the bill earlier this month, voted against it.

Following his reelection in 2004, Bush announced that he had “earned political capital” that he intended to “spend” in Washington. The demise of the immigration legislation and the turn by the predominant layer of the Senate’s Republican caucus against the White House position is the clearest confirmation that whatever capital Bush believed he had has been wiped out by the debacle over which his administration has presided in Iraq and the general shift by the American public to the left.

It signals the virtual impossibility of his lame-duck administration implementing any portion of its domestic agenda over the course of its remaining 18 months in office.

Leaders of both parties on Capitol Hill made it clear that the legislation would not be brought back for a vote, and the chances are nil of any major immigration reform being considered before a new president takes office in 2009.

Looking both angry and dejected, Bush appeared before reporters in Newport, Rhode Island Thursday afternoon and declared himself “disappointed” by the failure of the Senate to achieve “common ground” in passing the immigration legislation. “It didn’t work,” he said.

Some of the same Republicans who voted to defeat the bill on Thursday had voted in favor of immigration legislation last year that was considered far more favorable to undocumented immigrants. This time, however, the overwhelming majority of the party’s caucus—together with several Democrats—bowed to a noisy and poisonous anti-immigrant campaign conducted by the Republican right and amplified by semi-fascist talk radio hosts and media figures like CNN news anchor Lou Dobbs.

This campaign centered around the claim that the legislation represented “amnesty” for immigrants who had entered or stayed in the US without visas, portraying the growth of immigration over the recent period as an “invasion” that threatened the “American way of life.” Opposing any normalization of the estimated 12 million undocumented workers, the right-wing opponents of the bill advanced the slogans of “close the border” and “enforce the law,” euphemisms for militarizing the frontier with Mexico and carrying out mass deportations.

Recent polls have indicated that at least two thirds of the public supports the right of undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status in the US.

These sentiments, however, have largely been drowned out by the media-backed offensive by the right. This is despite the fact that attempts by these elements to organize public demonstrations against the bill flopped, with barely 100 people turning out for a rally earlier this month in Washington.

Virtually unmentioned in the mass media’s coverage of the controversy over the bill was the existence of opposition to it from the left, by civil liberties and immigrant rights groups who saw it as providing little real relief for the millions of immigrant workers confronting repression and substandard wages and conditions in the US.

In an attempt to accommodate these right-wing pressures, the White House and the Senate leadership took a piece of legislation that already placed onerous conditions upon immigrants seeking legal status and provisions to limit future legal immigration into the country, and made it even more restrictive.

After the failure of the Senate to vote to close off debate on the legislation earlier this month, the White House announced that it was altering its approach to the proposal by pledging to spend some \$4.4 billion immediately on beefing up border patrols and on immigration enforcement. This money would, in effect, pay for a “surge” against immigrants before any of the provisions in the plan promising to regularize the status of those living in the country were put into effect. It would mean both a major expansion of the militarized fencing going up on the Mexican border and an escalation of the workplace and neighborhood raids by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents that have terrorized communities throughout the country.

Another proposal aimed at garnering Republican support would have mandated the hunting down and deportation of immigrants who overstay their visas, permanently barring them reentering the country.

The demand for punitive measures became the overwhelming content of the debate in Washington. Senator Robert Menendez (Democrat, New Jersey), a proponent of immigration reform, voiced his frustration: “The process is tilted far to the right, far to the right and it has provided little to no chance for those of us trying to bring the bill closer to where it was last year.”

There is little doubt that the failure of the Senate to take any action and the effective postponement of any adjustment of US immigration law for the next two years was seen as a cruel blow by millions of immigrants, who had hoped for some means of legalizing their status and escaping from conditions of oppressive exploitation and constant fear of detention and deportation.

That being said, the legislation, even before the most recent right-wing add-ons, offered little to the undocumented and incorporated provisions that would have made American immigration law even more reactionary.

From the beginning, the proposed overhaul placed the priority on beefed up suppression of immigrants, proposing a militarized border, the doubling of the number of Border Patrol agents, the creation of new detention camps capable of holding tens of thousands, and the

introduction of a biometric ID card as a condition of employment. This last provision triggered the demise of the legislation, when the Senate leadership failed to get enough votes to table an amendment opposing the requirement for such cards—which would inevitably have been extended to the entire population.

A centerpiece of the legislation was the introduction of a “guest worker” program that would have imported hundreds of thousands of workers, primarily for agricultural and other labor-intensive industries. Compelled to work under slave-like conditions as contract laborers in the US, with virtually no rights, they would have been required to return to their home countries after two years of work and remain out of the US for at least a year before returning, with a limit of three such rotations before being permanently barred from reentry.

Perhaps the most fundamental change the bill would introduce is the shift of immigration preferences from reuniting families to a point-based system that would favor the wealthier and better educated at the expense of working class relatives of immigrants already in the country. The aim of this shift is to subordinate immigration further to the needs of big business, supplying American corporations the immigrants with skills or money they desire. Critics of the legislation pointed out that the provision would only force greater undocumented immigration across the US border by people desperate to join their families and unable to do so legally.

As for the provisions for legalization of undocumented immigrants residing in the country, the legislation created hurdles that would have proven insurmountable for many, in the form of exorbitant fines and fees as well as requirements that applicants for legalization return to their home countries, with no guarantees that they would be allowed to return. The process of getting a Green Card bestowing permanent resident status would take more than a decade for most applicants, who would be left in limbo, denied basic rights and benefits and separated from their families in their home countries.

That this retrograde legislation was championed primarily by supposedly liberal Democrats, such as Senators Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Richard Durbin of Illinois, in alliance with the Bush White House, has unmistakable political significance.

While posturing as champions of immigrants, the Democratic leadership capitulated again and again to the Republican right, fashioning a piece of legislation far more punitive than the bill passed by the Senate last year, not to mention the amnesty—it was openly called that then—enacted under the Reagan administration more than two decades ago. In the end, however, the continuous moves to the right proved incapable of preventing the bill’s defeat.

After the vote, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) went out of his way to praise Bush for uniting with the Democratic leadership in pushing for passage of the immigration bill. “The president did a lot, and I appreciate that very, very much,” he said. “But the big winner today was obstruction.”

In the end, both the Democrats and Bush were acting on behalf not of the millions of undocumented workers, but of corporate America, which backed the bill as a means of regularizing the influx of cheap labor. Major big business interests bankrolled front groups such as the “Essential Worker Immigration Coalition” and the “Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform” to promote the legislation.

For a large section of the Republican Party, however, opposing the bill was seen as necessary in order to hold on to what remains of a dwindling right-wing base.

As for the trade union bureaucracy, its role in the process was no less reactionary. The labor officialdom split down the middle on the bill. The AFL-CIO leadership opposed it, largely on the national chauvinist basis of defending “American jobs” against foreign competition. It too called for toughening up immigration controls and border enforcement.

As the federation’s web site states: “The United States has the

sovereign authority and constitutional responsibility to set and enforce limits on immigration. An ‘open borders’ policy would play into the hands of corporations that would like nothing better than to treat workers as commodities. The US government’s failure to enforce US workplace standards has created a de facto open border enabling corporations to reach around the globe and encourage workers to come to this country in search of jobs.”

A rival faction of the bureaucracy backed the bill. Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union and a leader of the “Change to Win” coalition formed by unions that broke with the AFL-CIO two years ago, went so far as to draft a jointly authored opinion piece earlier this month with Thomas Donahue of the US Chamber of Commerce for the web site Politico.

The column was entitled “Immigration Needs Strange Bedfellows.” The head of a major union and the spokesman for big business joined in supporting the proposed slave-labor guest worker program, referring to it delicately as a “carefully monitored essential worker program,” which they described as needed to fill jobs in “occupations that require little or no formal education and training.”

The common interests of these “bedfellows” are obvious. Donohue sees the program as a means of boosting corporate profit through the super-exploitation of workers held in temporary contract peonage, while Stern hopes that somehow his union can find a way to deduct dues from the meager salaries of these “guest workers.”

Both factions of the union bureaucracy speak not for the working class—immigrant or native born—but for sections of the corporate elite and for their own privileged strata of labor officials, which are thoroughly integrated into the corporations and the government.

A genuine answer to the plight of the millions of immigrant workers in the US can be developed only in direct opposition to the government, the corporations and their servants in the union bureaucracy. It must start from the standpoint of the international unity of working people in every country against the globally mobile transnational companies and banks that dominate the US and world economy.

American workers must reject the attempts by the demagogues of the right to scapegoat immigrants as a means of diverting attention from the real sources of declining living standards and attacks on basic rights within the profit system itself. It is notable that all of these self-proclaimed defenders of “American jobs” have no problem with companies carrying out mass layoffs to boost their stock prices, and advance no demands for tightening borders to bar corporations from shifting their operations from the US to lower wage countries.

They know full well that such restrictions would be futile and—under conditions of the global integration of capitalist production—economically retrogressive. Yet, while defending open borders for capital, they demand militarized borders against working people.

Against the vilification of immigrants and the whipping up of national chauvinism, the demand must be raised that workers everywhere be given the right to cross borders just as freely as the international banks and corporations, and live and work with full rights in the country of their choice.



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