

US senators unveil draconian immigration “reform”

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A bipartisan group of eight senators unveiled an “enforcement first” plan Wednesday for dealing with what they termed a “broken” US immigration system.

The blueprint includes a further militarization of the US-Mexican border, while a supposedly “tough but fair” legalization plan would leave the more than 11 million undocumented workers currently in the US waiting a decade or more to achieve permanent resident status, if they are able to do so at all.

The proposal, which was termed a “framework” or set of “principles” for “comprehensive immigration reform,” was introduced Wednesday at a Capitol Hill press conference by its authors: Democrats Chuck Schumer of New York, Dick Durbin of Illinois, and Robert Menendez of New Jersey; and Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Marco Rubio of Florida. Also signing on to the proposal were Democrat Michael Bennet of Colorado and Republicans Jeff Flake of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

This represents the third time in less than six years that an immigration reform plan has been put forward in the US. In 2007, the Bush administration floated an abortive proposal in the wake of mass demonstrations of immigrant workers. President Barack Obama put forward his own agenda for an immigration overhaul in 2009, but quickly dropped it in the face of Republican opposition within the House of Representatives.

In introducing the latest proposal, Senator McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, acknowledged that it differed little from what had been proposed under Bush in 2007. Asked what had changed, he framed his answer in terms of cynical political calculations.

“The Republican Party is losing the support of our Hispanic citizens ... this is a preeminent issue with these citizens,” he said.

It is estimated that 80 percent of undocumented workers in the US are from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. Hispanic voters accounted for 10 percent of the electorate in the 2012 election, with 70 percent of them voting for Obama.

Nonetheless, substantial Republican opposition to any legalization proposal remains. Representative Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican and former House Judiciary chairman, denounced the proposal put forward by the senators, saying that “by granting amnesty, the Senate proposal compounds the problem by encouraging more illegal immigration.”

Obama, while making rhetorical gestures over the immigration question, has pursued a policy that is even more reactionary than that of the Bush administration, overseeing one of the most ruthless crackdowns on immigrants in the country’s history. Last year, his administration set a new record in terms of deportations, which reached a total of 409,849. While immigration authorities have tried to portray those thrown out of the country as criminals, the vast majority were guilty of no more than violating immigration statutes or other minor offenses.

According to 2011 figures, nearly one quarter of those deported were parents of children who were born in the US and are citizens.

Obama is set to make a speech in Las Vegas, Nevada on Tuesday afternoon, outlining an immigration agenda largely similar to that put forward by the eight senators, who reported that they had the US president’s support in advancing their proposal.

The senate proposal makes clear at the outset that any “path to citizenship” for undocumented workers in the US will be “contingent upon securing our borders and tracking whether legal immigrants have left the country when required.”

Under conditions in which border crossings have fallen off dramatically and net immigration to the US has dropped to close to zero, in large measure due to the protracted economic crisis and destruction of jobs since the Wall Street crisis of 2008, the proposal would pour untold billions of dollars more into border militarization and cracking down on the undocumented.

Last year alone, the federal government spent \$18 billion on immigration enforcement, more than the funding for all other federal law enforcement agencies combined.

“We will continue the increased efforts of the Border Patrol by providing them with the latest technology, infrastructure and personnel needed to prevent, detect and apprehend every unauthorized entrant,” the senators’ statement declares.

What is proposed is another increase in the number of Border Patrol agents. The ranks of these agents have doubled since 2004, and there are currently nine times as many armed agents on the US-Mexico border as in the 1980s.

Among the concrete proposals included in the senate “framework” is increasing the number of pilotless drone aircraft conducting surveillance over the US-Mexican border.

In making any legalization measures contingent on “securing” the border, the Senate proposal also appears to place the decision as to whether this goal has been achieved into the hands of a commission to be made up of governors, attorneys generals and “community leaders” in the states bordering Mexico.

It will be up to this panel, the senators’ statement says, to “monitor the progress of securing our border and to make a recommendation regarding when the bill’s security measures outlined in the legislation are completed.”

This appears to place a potential veto into the hands of virulent anti-immigrant politicians such as Arizona’s Republican Governor Jan Brewer, who signed into law legislation requiring police to stop and determine the immigration status of anyone they suspect of being an undocumented immigrant. She has also enacted measures denying all public services to such immigrants and preventing them from getting driver’s licenses.

New legislation submitted in the Arizona legislature recently would require that hospitals determine the immigration status of anyone seeking medical care and immediately notify police if they suspect that patients are undocumented.

As to the proposed legalization process itself, the terms are so onerous as to ensure that millions of undocumented immigrants currently in the US will reject official appeals to “come out of the shadows” for fear that they will only be turning themselves in for eventual deportation.

Those who sign up would be given “probationary status,” which supposedly means that they would not be subject to immediate deportation and could work, though they would not be eligible for any federal public benefits.

Once, if ever, the border was declared secured, legalization would require that those granted probationary status undergo criminal background checks, pay fines and back taxes, learn English and prove they are employed before being allowed to apply for permanent residency. Under the previous

legislation drafted under the Bush administration, fees and fines imposed on immigrants seeking legal status ranged from \$6,500 to \$15,000.

In their written statement and in their press briefing Monday, the US senators repeated the phrase that those undocumented workers residing in the US would have to “get in the back of the line” of those applying for permanent residency. There are millions of family members of legal US residents in this line for permanent resident visas. The wait list for US citizens trying to bring an unmarried adult child from Mexico is now more than 17 years, while a US citizen trying to bring a sibling from the Philippines has to wait for 22 years.

The reactionary provisions in the new immigration proposals are aimed not only at immigrant workers, but the entire working population. The measures include the imposition of mandatory employer use of E-Verify, a government-run, Internet-based system that compares information on every employee to the databanks of the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration.

The requirement amounts to the imposition of a police-state style electronic national ID system, in which every worker in the country would be tracked by the authorities in Washington.

While the system is now used voluntarily by a small fraction of US employers, it reportedly has a “false alarm” rate as high as 20 percent, meaning that its universal use would subject tens of millions of “legal” American workers to government investigations as immigration violators.

Finally, the proposal includes provisions aimed at ensuring an uninterrupted supply of cheap labor for sections of industry dependent on low-paid immigrant workers, particularly agribusiness. This would take the form of a “guest worker” program, like the infamous “bracero” system used to bring Mexican farm laborers into the country under slave-like conditions in an earlier period.

That the Democratic and Republican parties in the Senate as well as the Obama administration have united behind this reactionary immigration proposal is another indication of the sharp shift to the right of the entire official political spectrum and the rejection by every section of the ruling establishment of basic democratic rights.



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