

Obama announces his immigration “reform” plan

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In an appearance Tuesday in Las Vegas, Nevada, Barack Obama made his case for the adoption of “common sense, comprehensive immigration reform.” The proposals he presented followed the general framework of an immigration “reform” plan unveiled Monday by a bipartisan group of eight US senators. (See “US senators unveil draconian immigration ‘reform’”)

The president said that the time had come to end a situation where “11 million illegal immigrants live their lives in the shadows.” This would be achieved, he said, through beefing up border security, cracking down on undocumented workers and streamlining the pathway to legal immigration and citizenship.

In remarks that were large on demagoguery and short on specifics, Obama outlined a proposal involving further militarization of the US-Mexico border and implementation of enhanced verification of immigrants’ status. Similar to the senators’ plan, it would leave the vast majority of undocumented immigrants waiting a decade or more to achieve permanent resident status, if they could do so at all.

The president drafted a proposal to overhaul the immigration system in 2009, but withdrew it in the face of Republican opposition in the US House. In his speech Tuesday, he endorsed the principles put forward in Monday’s bipartisan proposal, which he said “are very much in line with the principles I’ve proposed and campaigned on for the last few years.”

He said, however, that if lawmakers failed to advance their own proposal he would send legislation to Congress based on his own principles “and insist that they vote on it right away.”

The president was criticized earlier Tuesday for his apparent failure to endorse one of the more reactionary components of the Senate “framework,” which would

make any immigration legalization reforms contingent on “securing” the US-Mexican border, through increasing drone surveillance of the border and other measures. The decision on whether the border was “secure” would apparently be in the hands of a commission comprised of governors, attorneys general and “community leaders” in the states bordering Mexico.

Speaking on Fox News, Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, argued that allowing illegal immigrants to obtain green cards—let alone citizenship, before “the enforcement stuff is in place ... would be a terrible mistake.” He indicated that he would not support an immigration bill that did not tie legalization measures to approval of border enforcement by such a panel.

While skirting this issue, Obama made clear that his vision of immigration “reform” was based on the same draconian principles as those advanced by the bipartisan Senate group. He touted his administration’s record number of deportations—nearly 410,000 last year alone and 1.2 million in his first term—and doubling the number of “boots on the ground” at the US-Mexico border compared to 2004.

A White House Fact Sheet distributed to coincide with the president’s remarks outlined some of his proposals to build up border security, including the establishment of “border community liaisons” by the Department of Homeland Security along the southern and northern borders of the continental US. The plan would also expand “smart enforcement efforts” to target immigrants in prisons for deportation.

Proposals allegedly aimed at “cracking down on employers who hire undocumented workers” would in fact expand surveillance of immigrants and the population at large, through the use of federal

government databases to verify workers' eligibility to work in the US. Mandatory electronic employment verification would be phased in over five years, with certain exceptions for small businesses.

In a move toward establishing a form of national identity card, the plan would also mandate development of a "fraud-resistant, tamper-resistant Social Security card" as well as creating "a voluntary pilot program to evaluate new methods to authenticate identity and combat identity theft."

In order to attain "provisional legal status," undocumented immigrants would have to register with the government, submit biometric data and pass a criminal background and national security check. They would also be required to pay back penalties and fees that could amount to tens of thousands of dollars.

Clearly, such requirements would serve to discourage immigrants from coming forward, either due to inability to pay the fines and fees, fear of deportation, or both. Those granted provisional status would not be eligible for welfare and other federal benefits, or for subsidies included in the new health care legislation.

Having reached provisional status, immigrants would then have to "get at the back of the line" to seek permanent resident status. Those applying for a green card would have to pay back taxes, pass additional criminal and security checks, register for the draft (if applicable), and learn English, among other requirements. If these hurdles are passed and the green card is granted, an individual could apply for US citizenship after five years.

The Obama proposal would temporarily increase annual visa numbers in the family-sponsored immigration system. It would also treat same-sex families as families, giving US citizens and lawful permanent residents the opportunity to apply for a visa on the basis of a permanent relationship with a same-sex partner.

The plan includes several proposals for fast-track residency that will have little impact on the vast majority of the millions of undocumented immigrants looking for legal residency, work and a future for their families. Foreign students achieving graduate degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) would have a green card "stapled" to their diplomas if they find a job in the US.

Obama's immigration reform would also create a

"startup visa," through which foreign entrepreneurs with funding from US venture capitalists and other investors could remain permanently in the US. "After all, immigrants helped start businesses like Google and Yahoo!" Obama noted. "They created entire new industries that, in turn, created new jobs and new prosperity for our citizens. In recent years, one in four high-tech startups in America were founded by immigrants."



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