Tens of thousands rally in Washington for immigrant rights

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12 April 2013

Tens of thousands of immigrant workers and their supporters marched in Washington, DC on Wednesday to demand legislation legalizing the status of some 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States and offering them full citizenship.

Significant demonstrations also took place in Atlanta, Los Angeles and several other cities amid reports that the so-called Gang of Eight Democratic and Republican US senators is preparing to unveil an immigration package by early next week.

Buses brought demonstrators to Washington from as far away as Texas, Michigan and Illinois, while farmworkers came in from California.

Many of the demonstrators carried hand-lettered signs with slogans such as "Deport injustice, not families," "We are not illegal aliens, we are human beings" and "Respect human dignity, No raids." One of the many children joining in the protest carried a placard reading, "They deported my daddy (He wasn't a criminal)."

The rally was addressed by a collection of Democratic politicians, union bureaucrats and representatives of civil rights organizations. Senator Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, told the crowd that the legislation he and the other members of the Gang of Eight are drafting is "in the economic interests of the United States and in the security interests of the United States."

Mary Kay Henry, the president of Service Employees International Union, praised President Barack Obama for his "leadership" on immigrant rights, even as his administration continues with record numbers of deportations.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported over 225,000 immigrants last year. Over the course of his first term, the Obama administration deported a total of 1.2 million immigrant workers, breaking up untold numbers of families and inflicting immense hardship on millions more.

According to the *Washington Post*, Obama has told supporters that there can be no letup in the deportations, or the administration could risk losing the support of Republicans for "immigration reform."

This underscores the right-wing, anti-immigrant character of the so-called reform being prepared by the Democrats and Republicans. Legislation now being drafted in the Senate will inevitably prove even more reactionary if and when a "compromise" is reached with the Republican-led House of Representatives.

The Senate legislation conditions the so-called path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants on the implementation of a draconian, multi-billion-dollar crackdown on immigrants crossing the US border with Mexico.

Senate aides familiar with the draft legislation told the *Wall Street Journal* that legalizing the status of undocumented workers in the US would have to wait for the Department of Homeland Security to mount a huge escalation of its operations, subjecting every inch of the US-Mexico border to permanent surveillance and achieving a target of stopping 90 percent of all those attempting to cross it without papers.

"Setting tougher border-security measures as a prerequisite to offering legal status to illegal immigrants could ease the way for many lawmakers, particularly Republicans, to support the immigration-law overhaul," the *Journal* reports.

The *New York Times*, however, reports that as part of a "delicate compromise worked out over weeks of negotiations," the legislation does "not impose any specific measurements of border enforcement results that, if they were not met, would stop the immigrants from proceeding toward citizenship."

The nature of the "triggers" in the legislation linking completion of the buildup on the border to the implementation of legalization for undocumented immigrants in the US is by no means clear. According to the *Times*, the bill will appropriate $5 billion to implement a massive border security plan that involves the deployment of large numbers of additional Border Patrol agents as well as extensive new border fencing and high-tech surveillance equipment, including pilotless drones. The plan also encompasses a nationwide employee verification system and an electronic entry and exit tracking system for airports, ports and borders to detect any foreign nationals overstaying their visas.

The buildup comes on top of an already dramatic increase in border enforcement and at a time when the flow of immigrants across the border has dropped to the lowest levels in nearly four decades due to continuing economic slump in the US and demographic and economic changes in Mexico. In fiscal 2012, the US government spent $18 billion on federal immigration, more than on all other federal law enforcement agencies combined. The number of Border Patrol agents has been doubled since 2003 to more than 21,000

The border security plan is supposed to be implemented over the course of five years, with even provisional legal status denied immigrants living in the US until it is complete. The only dispute is whether the 90 percent interception rate must also be established before any relief is granted to the undocumented, something that could delay any legalization for years more.

If Homeland Security fails to meet its goals, the bill envisions the creation of a commission made up of governors and state attorneys general from border states, which would be funded to the tune of $2 billion, to advise the federal department and to pursue additional repressive measures on the border for another five years, creating the conditions for even further delays.

"The takeaway here is that this will be the toughest border-enforcement system this country has ever had," a Republican aide told the *Washington Post* .

Once it is accepted that the border crackdown has proven effective, it would still take another 10 years for immigrants to get green cards and at least 13 years to obtain citizenship. Preconditions include passing a criminal background check, paying fines and back taxes that could amount to thousands of dollars, remaining employed, as well as learning English and "the history of the government of the United States."

The plan calls for the E-Verify program, subjecting all prospective employees to a check of their immigration status, to be implemented by all businesses with more than 1,000 employees within two years and to be made compulsory for all employers within four years. Combining this with new "fraud resistant" Social Security cards, the legislation introduces what amounts to a new national identification card system for immigrants and US citizens alike.

One of the reported sticking points in the legislation has centered around secret negotiations between employer organizations and the AFL-CIO and other union bureaucracies over "guest worker" provisions meant to provide a steady flow of cheap immigrant labor both to agribusiness and other sectors, such as construction and the hotel industry.

The *New York Times* reported Tuesday that a plan had been elaborated setting different wages for different areas of the country as well as providing for the Agriculture and Labor secretaries to set caps for the number of workers allowed into the country on temporary work visas.

"The workers' unions have agreed [to the plan], even though they say that such a deal will lower wages by roughly 10 percent," the *Times* reported.

Results of a *Wall Street Journal* /NBC poll reported on Thursday show that nearly two-thirds of Americans support providing a path to citizenship for undocumented workers, without the mass of roadblocks being set up by congressional Democrats and Republicans. As with everything else done in Washington, however, the immigration legislation is being driven not by popular will and demand, but by profit interests and the agenda of the most reactionary political representatives of the ruling financial oligarchy.