

US Senate begins debate on right-wing immigration legislation

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Last week the Senate began debating the 844-page comprehensive immigration reform bill being spearheaded by a bipartisan group of four Democrats and four Republicans, known as the “Gang of Eight.” The bill—officially titled “Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act”—is being presented as a progressive solution to deal with the over 11 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living and working in the United States.

In reality, however, the bill is a thoroughly reactionary and pro-business piece of legislation. Prior to last Tuesday’s vote, which moved the bill to floor debate, the Senate Judiciary Committee had reviewed nearly 300 proposed amendments to the legislation.

Demands for “border security”—a euphemism for the complete militarization of the US-Mexico border—have come from both the Democrats and Republicans in relation to the proposed pathway to citizenship process. To this end, the bill calls for an additional \$5.5 billion to be spent over the next 10 years on border enforcement mechanisms, setting a 90 percent capture rate for all illegal crossings. This would require “knowledge” and surveillance of every access point along the almost 2,000 mile US-Mexico border, including the use of drones.

Last year more than 21,000 border patrol agents were deployed along US borders with approximately 87 percent stationed along the Southwest border with Mexico. The current bill would see the hiring of about 3,500 new agents, as well as the use of National Guard forces.

The Obama administration has overseen the largest growth in border security operations and deportations in US history. An average of 33,000 deportations a month have occurred under the Obama administration, the most of any presidency.

According to a Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report published in January, in fiscal year 2012 the US government spent approximately \$18 billion on border security, a figure that exceeds the budgets of all other federal law enforcement agencies combined by nearly 24 percent. This comes at a time when illegal crossings have dropped to their lowest levels in 40 years, a result of both the economic crisis and the efforts to militarize the border. In 2011 the US Border Patrol recorded 327,577 arrests, the lowest figure since 1972 when 321,326 arrests were made.

The centerpiece of the bill, the so-called pathway to citizenship, is in fact a fig leaf aimed at concealing the essentially right-wing character of the legislation. While the reactionary Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which made it illegal to hire undocumented workers, included amnesty for nearly 2 million undocumented immigrants, the current immigration legislation will create a complicated 13-year pathway to citizenship process for the majority of the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the US.

The first stage in this process would be applying for “registered provisional immigrant” (RPI) status, a new legal classification that would be created six months after passage of the bill, contingent upon the border security mechanisms going into effect.

In order to qualify for RPI status, individuals would have to meet a host of strict anti-democratic requirements, including continuous physical presence in the US since December 31, 2011, a \$500 fine and payment of all back taxes. In addition, RPI status can be denied on the grounds of past criminal convictions as well as “activities” deemed unacceptable by the Department of Homeland Security. Those granted RPI status would be deprived of federal benefits, including

health care and welfare benefits, and have only limited legal rights.

According to the Associated Press, “After 10 years in provisional status, immigrants can seek a green card and lawful permanent resident status if they are current on their taxes and pay [an additional] \$1,000 fine, have maintained continuous physical presence in the US, meet work requirements and learn English.” Even if these requirements were met, there is no guarantee of citizenship.

In addition, an anti-democratic E-Verify system would also be implemented within four years, requiring all employers to electronically verify the legal status of workers against a federal database, as well as match immigrant workers photo ID with those in the federal system.

“This bill isn’t perfect, it’s a compromise,” Barack Obama said in a press conference held before the Senate vote last week. “And going forward, nobody is going to get everything they want. Not Democrats, not Republicans, not me. But this is a bill that’s largely consistent with the principles that I and the people on this stage have laid out for common-sense reform.”

This is a boldfaced lie meant to deceive the American population and immigrant communities. The Democrats and Republicans, the two parties of big business, will get exactly what they want. Obama’s reference to “principles” and “common-sense reform” are without merit.

Under current immigration law, employment-based visas are capped at 140,000 a year, dividing them into five preferential categories based on skill level. The immigration reform bill will significantly raise the number of work visas issued in an attempt to boost profits for major industries and large corporations. High-skilled work visas could potentially triple to 180,000, and a new low-skilled work visa—known as a W visa—would be created to bring in as many as 200,000 immigrant workers in areas such as construction and hospitality.

No efforts have been made to deal with the jobs crisis in the US. The official unemployment rate stood at 7.6 percent in May, while the youth unemployment rate (16- to 24-year-olds) was more than double, at 16.2 percent. These measures are aimed at pitting various sections of workers against each other, driving down wages and boosting profits.

The actual purpose behind the supposed comprehensive immigration reform bill is threefold. It seeks to militarize the US-Mexico border even further, provide cheap labor to large corporations and major industries through the creation of a new legal immigrant status and work visa program, as well as attract high-skilled workers to the United States. There has not been, and will not be, any discussion of the democratic rights of immigrant workers to live and work where they choose, with full citizenship rights guaranteed. Anything short of that cannot claim to be a “reform,” let alone “comprehensive.”



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