

Key Senate Republicans back US immigration bill based on border “surge”

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A pair of right-wing Republican senators threw their support behind immigration reform legislation on Thursday, June 20, based on a bipartisan amendment calling for a military-style “surge” on the border as a precursor to legalizing the status of any of the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the US.

The move by the two senators, Bob Corker of Tennessee and John Hoeven of North Dakota, to join the bipartisan “Gang of 8,” which has drafted the overhaul of US immigration laws, was seen as crucial by the Senate’s Democratic leadership, which has decided that any bill must win 70 votes, including the approval of the majority of the body’s Republicans.

It is still by no means assured that such legislation could clear the Republican-controlled House without even more reactionary anti-immigrant provisions being attached to it, if at all.

The bipartisan amendment includes what leading senators are describing as a “border surge,” borrowing the Pentagon’s terminology in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It nearly doubles the current border patrol force to 40,000 agents, allowing for the stationing of one agent every 1,000 feet of the US-Mexican border, 24 hours a day.

Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York praised the deployment of what amounts to an army on the Mexican border, saying it would create a “virtual human fence.”

The measure also calls for adding another 350 miles of security fencing on the border with Mexico, on top of the 350 miles proposed in the original legislation, and the appropriation of \$3.2 billion for drones and other detection gear similar to what the US military employed in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to a Senate aide, the additional agents alone would cost roughly \$30 billion over the coming decade.

Under conditions in which border crossings are at near historic lows, the provisions will roughly triple spending on border security at a time when both Democrats and Republicans insist that there is no money for basic social programs for American working people.

The measure would also enact an E-Verify system, requiring employers to establish the legal status of every employee they hire with the federal government, effectively creating a new national ID system. It also establishes a biometric system to track foreigners who enter and leave the United States at air and seaports and by land.

Under the terms of the amendment, all of these measures would have to be in place before any undocumented immigrant would receive a green card granting permanent residence status. Senator Lindsey Graham, one of the Republican members of the “Gang of Eight,” estimated that the training of the new border guards alone would take at least “a couple of years.”

While backers of the measure hope to push it through the Senate by the end of next week, as of Thursday afternoon no written amendment had been presented. There are 278 amendments that have been submitted for debate before a vote on the full bill, which its backers want before July 4.

Meanwhile, House Speaker John Boehner said Thursday that he would not push for a vote on an immigration bill unless it had the support of half of the House Republicans, which is by no means assured.

Corker and Hoeven have been acting behind the scenes for several days to produce a provision aimed at appeasing Republicans who have campaigned against any move to legalize the status of the undocumented as “amnesty.”

The key factor in swaying some Republican votes has

been a concerted lobbying campaign by the Chamber of Commerce, the high-tech industry and big agriculture, which between them were allowed by Schumer and other Senate leaders to virtually write sections of the bill—with the AFL-CIO' collaboration—to suit their interests, much as Wall Street crafted financial regulation, and the big pharmaceuticals and insurance companies health care reform.

A recent letter from more than 100 executives from the technology sector and leading innovation advocacy organizations called for quick Senate approval of the immigration reform bill to allow a more open and flexible system for the importation of high-skilled workers. The letter invokes US national interests, while implicitly threatening to shift production abroad. It states that, “America is the most prosperous country in the world,” and that, “this critically important legislation would help ensure that America continues to be the location of the world’s most innovative and fastest growing industries.”

Farmers are also calling for a quick approval, complaining that the current law reduces profits due to the ineffectiveness of its “guest worker” provisions. According to a Pennsylvania farmer, “We’ve got to stress to our legislators that we can’t wait ... we need immigration reform that will give us a steady workforce.”

The two key components of the reform bill related to such a workforce are a Blue Card program for current experienced farm workers and a new agricultural visa program to meet future labor needs. Under the Blue Card program, workers would be required to pass a background check, pay a fine, and provide proof that applicable taxes have been paid. They would also be required to continue working in agriculture before having the opportunity to qualify for a green card.

Essentially this “reform” is designed to secure a steady flow of cheap labor to bolster the profits of agribusiness.

The news that the bill is gaining more supporters accompanies the congressional approval of a plan to avoid furloughs for US Customs and Border Protection employees during fiscal 2013. According to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, the agency had initially planned to furlough employees for up to 14 days and de-authorize administratively uncontrollable overtime in an effort to trim costs. However, the CBP

will now continue to pay for such overtime, which is given to Border patrol agents who work irregular, unscheduled extra hours to fulfill their duties.

The latest bipartisan amendment hailed by Democrats on Capitol Hill was denounced as “an outrageous plan that was struck without consulting with people who live and work on the border” by Fernando Garcia, executive director of Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR) in Texas. “It only adds to a system that we all agree is dysfunctional and accountable to the people,” said Garcia. “The most obscene element of the plan is that it would create a militarized border between allied nations where there is no military conflict. We remind the Senators that more than 6 million people live on the US side of the border and this plan puts their rights, lives and prosperity at risk.”

Another voice of opposition to the increasing border militarization came in a June 5 report published by the University of Arizona’s Binational Migration Institute which analyzes trends and demographics of people who died in south-central Arizona from 1990 through 2012 after crossing the border without authorization. In that period, 2,238 bodies were discovered in that area, with the peak being reached in 2010 with a record 225 deaths. Militarization of traditional border crossings has effectively “funneled” migrants into the most hostile desert terrain where they die of exposure, the report found.



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