

Congressional Democrats present Biden immigration bill

Kevin Reed
18 February 2021

On Thursday, congressional Democrats and the Biden White House announced legislation that would make significant changes in the US immigration system but which both the corporate media and the Democrats themselves said had little chance of ever becoming law.

In effect, the 353-page bill—called the US Citizenship Act of 2021—introduced by Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Representative Linda Sanchez of California and ten other Democrats, is a public relations gesture, aiming at showcasing the “sympathy” of the Biden administration for immigrants, as opposed to the vicious hostility of Donald Trump and his fellow bigots.

The real purpose of the bill, however, is to start a process of negotiation with Senate Republicans—and some Democrats—over what watered-down compromise, if any, will eventually be adopted. “It is his vision of what it takes to fix the system,” one White House aide told the *Los Angeles Times*, “and it’s also a chance to kind of reset and restart conversations on immigration reform after the last four years.”

The bill provides two different versions of a “pathway to citizenship” for the 11 million undocumented immigrants. The majority, at least seven million, would have temporary status for five years, and then become eligible for a green card, giving them permanent resident status for another three years, for a total of eight years. The minority, about four million—those brought here as children and eligible for DACA protection, farmworkers employed under the H-2A visa plan and refugees with Temporary Protected Status—would be immediately eligible for green cards, with a three-year wait for citizenship.

While Senator Menendez told reporters on Thursday, “We have an economic and moral imperative to pass big, bold and inclusive immigration reform that leaves no one behind,” two other pieces of legislation have already been introduced for a much smaller scale legalization. The Farm Workforce Modernization Act creates a pathway to citizenship only for agricultural workers employed under the H-2A visa. The Dream and Promise Act creates a pathway to

citizenship only for DACA recipients.

As reported by Politico, “White House officials wouldn’t say if Biden is considering passing elements of immigration reform through a second budget reconciliation process later this year or if they are already talking to lawmakers about passing smaller items. But they conceded the end result could be very different.”

An unidentified White House official confirmed that Biden was fully prepared to give up provisions of the “expansive” bill when he said of the president on Wednesday evening, “He was in the Senate for 36 years and he’s the first to tell you the legislative process can look different on the other end of where it starts.”

As Politico put it, “Sources close to the White House have said for weeks that the administration is open to passing targeted bills that could be more likely to garner 60 votes.”

It is widely recognized that the Democrats do not have enough votes in the Senate to reach the 60–40 majority needed to pass the legislation. It is not even clear how many of the 50 Democrats would support such a bill. Four Democrats—both senators from Michigan and both from Arizona—voted for an amendment that would bar undocumented workers from receiving any aid under Biden’s proposed coronavirus recovery bill.

Another anonymous White House representative expressed the cynicism behind the draft immigration law, “This bill was not designed to get to 60. There’s no pathway to 60.”

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi also expressed the willingness of the Democrats to use the rights of immigrant workers and their families as a bargaining chip, when she told reporters, “I salute the president for putting forth the legislation that he did. There are others who want to do piecemeal and that may be a good approach today. That’s up for the Congress to decide.”

As explained on the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 20, the 8-year path to citizenship aspect of the legislation is terribly inadequate for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the US and can be reversed before the eight-year process has been completed.

One aspect of the bill that has been touted as significant by the Democrats is the removal of the word “alien” from US immigration laws as “dehumanizing” and its replacement with the word “noncitizen.” However, in all the discussion and news reporting about this terminological modification, there is hardly a mention of the right-wing nationalist, xenophobic and racist hatreds and attempts to criminalize being immigrant workers by prominent members of the US political establishment that stands behind the phrase “illegal alien.”

Another component of the bill that is being given scant attention is Title II which advances a plan for “responsibly managing the southern border.” While the Democrats have claimed that the legislative proposal is a radical departure from the immigration policies of the Trump Administration, the language in this section proves just the opposite.

While the fascistic Donald Trump promoted the construction of a wall at the US southern border, the Biden plan calls for a “strategy to manage and secure the southern border of the United States by deploying smart technology...” This strategy includes an assessment of the “physical barriers, levies, technologies, tools and other devices that are currently in use along the southern border of the United States.”

The bill then outlines a plan of action for selecting and deploying technologies to “achieve and maintain situational awareness of the southern border” and for the goal “of evaluating the performance and identifying the effectiveness rate of U.S. Border Patrol agents and operations.”

In other words, while Trump was building an expensive and ineffective wall, the Democrats are proposing use of sophisticated technologies to militarize the southern border and to establish “cost effectiveness calculations for each technology, tool, or other device that will be deployed, including an analysis of the cost per mile of border surveillance.”

The correspondence of Biden’s immigration policy with that of Trump is also evident in the immigrant deportations carried out by the new administration. According to a report in the *American Prospect* on Thursday, “The deportation machine polished and perfected under President Trump appears to be running without a hitch under President Biden.” The liberal publication points out that last week the Biden administration carried out 21 removal flights to six different countries, which is on a par with the weekly average of the Trump administration.

Flights to Mexico and Central American countries as well as Haiti, Jamaica, Cameroon, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo have been carried out “every single day, since February 1,” according to Guerline Jozef, president of the Haitian Bridge Alliance.

On Wednesday, a letter signed by more than 40 Democrats in Congress was sent to Biden and the new Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas calling for an 18-month pause in deportations to Cameroon, which have become known as “death planes” because those being returned are guaranteed to go to prison or be killed by the government of the central African country.

The website UnitedWeDream.com is publishing a live count of the number of confirmed deportations under Biden. The counter—which has reached 26,248 as of this writing—is accompanied by the following language, “Under the Biden-Harris Administration’s watch, deportations are taking place daily, despite a promise to stop deportations.”

The site also has a database of human rights atrocities committed by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and says that there is a “mountain of evidence” proving that the abuse is taking place and that “politicians are trying to hide” it.

Late Thursday, the Biden administration released a memo on its new guidance for ICE which the ACLU has characterized as “a return to form viz. immigration enforcement under the Obama administration. Some of the new provisions are likely to be of extreme concern to immigrants, immigrant communities and immigration rights activists/advocates.” During the eight years when Biden was vice president (2009–2017), President Barack Obama became known as the “deporter in chief” for his aggressive immigrant deportation policies. These were then picked up and further developed during the Trump administration.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)