

Legal but in Limbo, Skilled Immigrants Rally for Change

CAPITOL HILL PROTEST

By Pamela Constable

Washington Post Staff Writer

September 19, 2007

A brainy and buttoned-down crowd of about 1,000 legal immigrants, many of them first-time protesters taking time off from research labs and computer consoles, gathered on the West Lawn of the Capitol yesterday to politely demand a swifter and surer track to permanent U.S. residency.

The participants, all skilled-worker visa holders from India, China and a smattering of other countries, expressed anger and frustration with long bureaucratic delays and strict numerical limits on employer-based U.S. green cards. They said that their families are stuck in limbo and that their professional ambitions have been stymied by an uncertain future.

"We come here to work in the land of the free, but the best and the brightest of us are finding themselves prisoners of statutory walls," said Vivek Gupta, 39, a neuroradiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and a former medical resident at Yale University. "I have received awards for my teaching and skills, yet I am forbidden to get federal research grants, and I have to renew my visa year after year after year."

The demonstrators, who waved American flags and carried bouquets of roses, said they are asking Congress to change laws that limit the number of green cards granted each year and set different quotas for each country, creating a backlog of skilled workers waiting for residency.

Legal-immigrant groups had set their hopes on comprehensive immigration reform proposals that circulated in Congress in the spring, but those measures collapsed in June amid a wave of public opposition to provisions that would have offered a path to legalization to an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.

"Why should our problems be held hostage to the issue of illegal immigrants?" asked Aman Kapoor, 35, a computer programmer from Florida who heads a national advocacy group called Immigration Voice. "We are law-abiding, taxpaying future Americans, and Congress is turning us into underachievers."

Most skilled visas, valid for up to six years, are granted to highly educated immigrants working in medicine, engineering, technology and administrative fields. Applicants must be sponsored by a U.S. employer.

The collapse of immigration reform dashed hopes that Congress would double the number of new skilled-worker visas, now limited to 65,000 a year. In July, skilled immigrants received a second blow when the government, which had announced in June that it would accept thousands of new work-based residency applications, abruptly reversed course and said it would reject them all because the annual quota of 140,000 had been filled.

Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) told the protesters that he will continue pressing for immigration reform and said that they should also put pressure on presidential candidates to address the issue. McDermott's district includes several major high-tech firms that employ highly skilled immigrants.

Although rally participants sought to differentiate themselves from illegal immigrants, yesterday's event highlighted a tenuous new alliance between the two largest groups of skilled-worker visa holders: those from India and China. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, of 267,000 skilled-worker visas approved in 2005, Indians received the most (118,500), followed by the Chinese (24,500).

"There have been some differences between our communities, but it is time for us to focus, unite and fight together," Robert Sun, a San Francisco economist and leader of the Legal Immigrant Association, told the crowd. "Out in Silicon Valley, we say that IC is built on IC: Integrated chips are built on Indians and Chinese."

Perhaps the most dynamic speaker was a British software engineer and designer named Mark Bartosik, 38, who wore a pinstripe suit and carried a sign that said he had paid more than \$385,000 in federal and states taxes since he arrived in 2000.

"I love it here. I have put down roots, and I want to stay," said Bartosik, who lives in a solar-heated home on Long Island. "But after seven years, I am still on probation. I can't change jobs without starting all over again, and I can't test my inventions. It is a waste of intellectual capital."

The demonstrators marched silently from the Washington Monument to the Capitol, then stood while one member sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" and cheered a folk singer's pointed ditty: "We're your Microsoft, your eBay, your Google." Many held up placards that emphasized their professional contributions to American society. "A green card delay keeps the doctor away," read one.