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Senate Continues to Work on Immigration Bill

By CARL HULSE and JIM RUTENBERG

WASHINGTON, May 18 — The Senate continued its work on an immigration bill today, approving an amendment that would allow immigrant workers to apply for permanent residence without the sponsorship of their employers.

The amendment, offered by Senators Edward M. Kennedy and John McCain, was intended to prevent "abuse of employees," according to Senator Kennedy. It was adopted by a vote of 56 to 43. .

President Bush also today wrote to the House speaker, J. Dennis Hastert, today, formally asking for an emergency appropriation of \$1.9 billion to pay for the deployment of 6,000 National Guard troops to assist the Border Patrol, a plan he outlined in a speech on Monday. Mr. Bush said he would cut a similar amount from an emergency request for funds for the Department of Defense.

Since the speech, administration officials have focused on border security. But Mr. Bush is facing a revolt among conservatives over a proposal that would allow some illegal immigrants to qualify for residency, and the White House on Wednesday dispatched Karl Rove, the president's political adviser, to a meeting of House Republicans to make the case for the president's call for comprehensive changes in immigration laws.

House members said that Mr. Rove had made little headway and that most Republicans remained adamantly opposed to any plan that leads to citizenship for those unlawfully in the United States.

One House Republican also warned Mr. Rove that it was dangerous to work too closely with Senator Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who is one of the authors of the Senate legislation.

The Senate voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday to bar illegal immigrants convicted of a felony or three misdemeanors from having a chance at citizenship and to add hundreds of miles of fencing along the Mexican border. The actions bolstered the law enforcement provisions of the Senate bill, which the White House has signaled it supports.

Another House Republican, J. D. Hayworth of Arizona, said of the divide between House Republicans and the White House over citizenship and temporary foreign workers, "This is a polite but profound disagreement." At a demonstration near the Capitol on Wednesday afternoon, scores of immigrants chanted "Work, yes! Deportation, no!" as they protested provisions in the Senate legislation.

They said the measure would impose new hardships on asylum seekers, expand the deportation and detention of illegal immigrants and deny a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who had been here for less than two years.

By a vote of 83 to 16, the Senate approved a proposal by Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama, to construct about 370 miles of "triple layer" fencing on the Southwest border along with 500 miles of vehicle barriers.

Mr. Sessions said that type of fencing would cost about \$3.2 million a mile, but he said the cost would be offset by reductions in the expense of detaining and processing people illegally crossing the border. The House has approved 700 miles of fencing.

"It is important for the country to make clear to our own citizens and to the world that a lawful system is going to be created, that there is no longer an open border," he said.

The Senate also agreed 99 to 0 to a proposal by two Republican senators, Jon Kyl of Arizona and John Cornyn of Texas, that would deny potential citizenship to convicted criminals and those who ignored deportation orders.

"I think it reflects the will of the American people that however we treat people who are here illegally, there are some limits," Mr. Kyl said.

He said about 500,000 illegal aliens out of more than 11 million could come under the plan, most for failing to comply with deportation demands.

The provision, initially seen as a proposal that could sink the Senate bill, was narrowed to allow for family hardships and other exceptions. It was endorsed by Democrats.

"We want to keep those who can harm us, the criminal element, out," Mr. Kennedy said.

The Senate, on a 66-to-33 vote, defeated an effort by Senator David Vitter, Republican of Louisiana, to kill a provision that would allow illegal immigrants who meet certain qualifications and pay a fine and back taxes to seek citizenship.

Mr. Vitter said the provision would result in illegal immigrants' "being treated better than the folks who have lived by the rules from the word go." He said that amounted to amnesty.

Advocates of the Senate bill said critics were distorting it to stir opposition. "The American people deserve an honest debate," said Senator Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska. "Let's stop this nonsense."

As the debate unfolded, the White House asserted that the president's speech on Monday and efforts on Capitol Hill were paying dividends, if only small ones.

Tony Snow, the White House press secretary, pointed to remarks by Mr. Hagel supporting the president's plan to send as many as 6,000 National Guard troops to the border with Mexico. Mr. Hagel had been critical of the Guard proposal but said he had warmed to it after hearing its particulars.

Pressed to name one Republican House member who had moved from the position that the president's call for possible citizenship for some illegal immigrants — namely, those here for many years who pay fines and back taxes — amounted to amnesty, Mr. Snow did not.

He said it would take time to define the meaning of "amnesty." "It's not amnesty," Mr. Snow said. "Amnesty means 'sorry, no harm, no foul, no crime, go about your business.' "

An indication of the difficulty facing the proposals came from Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin. Mr. Sensenbrenner, the Judiciary Committee chairman, would take the lead for the House in efforts to draft compromise legislation.

"Regardless of what the president says, what he is proposing is amnesty," Mr. Sensenbrenner said.

On Wednesday night, President Bush took his case to an influential group of party faithful during a speech at the Republican National Committee's annual gala dinner in Washington.

"The Republican Party needs to lead on this issue of immigration," Mr. Bush said. "The immigration system is not working, and we need to do something about it now. America can be a lawful society and a welcoming society."

Mr. Hayworth, an outspoken critic of the president's approach, planned to travel to Arizona on Air Force One with Mr. Bush on Thursday for an immigration event. Mr. Hayworth, who attended the signing of the tax bill on Wednesday, said the president had offered a playful warning about the trip and Mr. Hayworth's opposition.

"He said, 'Hey, be careful over by the emergency exit at 30,000 feet,' " Mr. Hayworth recounted.

Rachel L. Swarns contributed reporting from Washington for this article, and John Holusha and John O'Neil from New York..