

THE NEW YORK TIMES

April 6, 2006

Senate Republicans Strike Immigration Deal

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

WASHINGTON, April 5 — A group of Senate Republicans reached agreement Wednesday night on a compromise proposal that they hope can garner bipartisan support and bring passage of a bill on the future of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants.

The compromise, which followed a day of negotiations, was endorsed by Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, the majority leader. But it did not have the commitment of all Republicans, much less Democrats who have backed an approach that would put nearly all illegal immigrants on a path toward citizenship.

As outlined by Senate Republicans late Wednesday, the compromise would place illegal immigrants in three categories:

Those who have lived in the country at least five years would be put on a path toward guaranteed citizenship, provided that they remained employed, paid fines and back taxes, and learned English, a senior Republican aide said. The aide said this group accounted for about 7 million of the roughly 11 million illegal immigrants believed to be living here.

Those who have lived here for two to five years, said to number about three million, would have to leave the country briefly before reporting to an American port of entry, where they would be classified as temporary workers. They would be allowed to apply for citizenship but would have no guarantee of obtaining it. Those who did not would have to leave after participating in the temporary worker program for six years.

The remaining one million or so, those who have lived in the country less than two years, would be required to leave. They could apply for temporary worker status but would not be guaranteed it.

Senators of both parties and their aides huddled in meetings throughout the day, trying to hash out a deal by week's end, the deadline set by Mr. Frist for a vote on an immigration bill. For the first time, senior Democrats, including Senators Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, joined in the negotiations, an acknowledgment that they lacked the backing to get a vote on broader legalization.

The Senate will decide on Friday whether the compromise should be considered for a vote. But lawmakers, who gave impassioned partisan speeches on the floor, remained deadlocked over its details late Wednesday. Senators warned that if the negotiations collapsed, Congress might fail to take action this year on an issue that has riveted the nation and pushed tens of thousands of immigrants and their supporters into the streets for rallies across the country.

Mr. Frist placed blame for the stalemate on Democrats, who refused to allow Republicans to vote on major amendments and have used a parliamentary tactic that will force

lawmakers to decide Thursday whether the bill more favorable to illegal immigrants should be considered for a floor vote.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the minority leader, blamed the Republicans, saying they had continued to "stonewall" by seeking to pass amendments that would gut that broad legalization bill, approved by the Judiciary Committee last week with bipartisan support.

As the party leaders pointed fingers, Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, rose on the floor and pleaded with his colleagues to come together to prevent a rare opportunity from slipping away.

"This is one of the greatest challenges we face in our time, securing our borders, taking 11 million people out of the shadows who are exploited every day, fulfilling the job requirements we all know are necessary to ensure the economic future," Mr. McCain said.

"Americans are passionate in general," he said, "but this issue has brought passion few of us have seen in this country — in Los Angeles, New York City and around the nation. It seems we owe every American a resolution to this issue. Could we please move forward?"

President Bush, who met with Republican Congressional leaders on Wednesday, also pressed the Senate to move ahead. "I strongly urge them to come to a conclusion as quickly as possible and pass a comprehensive bill," the president said.

Republicans said the compromise, whose prominent backers include Mr. McCain and Senators Mel Martinez of Florida and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, would attract votes from their members who are uncomfortable with broader legalization. But the compromise cannot pass without the support of Democrats, who said they were still weighing their options.

"Aren't we entitled to at least a chance to have a vote on a comprehensive approach?" Mr. Kennedy said.

There were signs, though, that some of Mr. Kennedy's allies among business and immigrant advocacy groups were throwing their support behind the compromise proposal.

The leaders of the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, which represents hotels, restaurants and other service industries, said a limited legalization would be better than a bill that focused solely on tightening border security.