

Big business, labor find common ground on immigration

Alan Gomez, USA TODAY 4:20p.m. EST February 21, 2013

Breakthrough agreement would create a new federal bureau to track visas granted to foreign, and often low-skilled, workers.

Story Highlights

- The two groups are traditionally at odds on issue
- A proposal to Congress could hold sway as it moves to revamp immigration policy
- At least half of those whom farmers hired for field work in 2007-09 were illegal immigrants

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the AFL-CIO announced Thursday they have agreed on a set of recommendations to deliver to Congress on how to revamp the nation's visa programs that bring in low-skilled workers.

The pro-business group and labor union have often been at odds on the issue of expanding the numbers of foreigners permitted to work temporarily in industries such as farming, landscaping and restaurants. So a proposal that both agree on could carry significant weight as President Obama and members of Congress push for an overhaul to the nation's immigration laws.

The failure of some business and labor groups to reach a consensus was one of several factors that contributed to the downfall of the 2007 attempt by Congress to fix the nation's immigration laws. The heads of the chamber and AFL-CIO said in a joint statement that this time should be different.

"We are now in the middle — not the end — of this process, and we pledge to continue to work together and with our allies and our representatives on Capitol Hill to finalize a solution that is in the interest of this country we all love," read a joint statement by chamber President and CEO Thomas Donohue and AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka.

Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a group pushing for an immigration overhaul that includes a pathway to citizenship for the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants, was closely involved in the 2007 immigration negotiations. He said the business and labor communities were generally supportive of the 2007 immigration efforts, but never agreed on a new guest worker program until Thursday.

"This is a real breakthrough," Sharry said. "A lot of people have been predicting that this issue of how to craft a new worker program would be an insurmountable obstacle and could even sink

this year's reform effort. This joint statement of principles indicates that they're determined to come to an agreement that will make reform more likely to pass."

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., said it's encouraging that "two groups often on opposite sides of the aisle are serious about putting politics aside and finding solutions."

But Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Services, which opposes expanding guest worker programs, saw the announcement as a sign that negotiations are actually falling apart. The joint statement included no details on the number of guest worker visas that would be granted each year and how long foreign workers would be required to stay with their employer - two critical components to any agreement.

"It doesn't really mean anything until there's actual meat on the bone," Krikorian said. "There's no indication that they resolved those issues."

Separate proposals being drafted by the White House, the Senate and House will address guest worker programs as a way to eliminate the reliance some employers place on illegal immigrants. At least half of the workers that farmers used for field work from 2007 to 2009 were illegal immigrants, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Many can also be found in the construction and hospitality industries.

The agreement would create a "professional bureau in a federal executive agency" that would monitor the nation's labor market to adjust the number of visas granted to foreign workers.

U.S. businesses would still be required to hire American job applicants first. But when the newly created bureau identifies labor shortages, it could then adjust the flow of immigrant visas to quickly respond.

"Our challenge is to create a mechanism that responds to the needs of business in a market-driven way, while also fully protecting the wages and working conditions of U.S. and immigrant workers," the joint statement said.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/02/21/immigration-chamber-labor-agreement/1935995/>