

Democrats, With Outside Support, Get Behind Comprehensive Immigration Bill

By Michael Rose

Oct. 3 — A comprehensive immigration overhaul bill (H.R. 15) introduced by House Democrats, had gained 120 co-sponsors by Oct. 3 —one day after its introduction—with lawmakers looking at it as a potential vehicle for further action in the chamber.

Despite a lukewarm reception from Republicans upon the bill's introduction (192 DLR A-14, 10/2/13), several House Democrats spoke at a pair of press conferences Oct. 3 sponsored by advocacy groups that favor a comprehensive overhaul, including the League of United Latin American Citizens and America's Voice.

The bill is based largely on the comprehensive immigration overhaul passed by the Senate in June (124 DLR AA-1, 6/27/13), but substitutes a border security measure approved by the House Homeland Security Committee for the Senate's border security language.

Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said Oct. 2 that he still preferred a “step-by-step” approach to an immigration overhaul, including individual bills that already have been considered by the committee.

‘Constant Conversations.’

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), the chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's immigration task force and one of the House's most vocal immigration advocates, announced at the America's Voice press conference that he was adding his name as a co-sponsor of the bill. After the event, he told Bloomberg BNA he had met with Goodlatte as recently as two weeks ago.

“Democrats and Republicans are in constant conversations,” Gutierrez said. “There is a bill that's the Democratic bill that's been put forward by my colleagues in the Democratic caucus, but notwithstanding that, there are many conversations.”

Asked about the series of bills passed out of the Judiciary Committee, including those dealing with high-tech workers (H.R. 2131); (124 DLR AA-2, 6/27/13) and agricultural workers (H.R. 1773); (119 DLR A-6, 6/20/13), Gutierrez said “We can do so much better.”

“The Republican party has always been the party of business, and I want them to be the party of business, because I can join them in ensuring that the business community has everything they want,” Gutierrez said.

As for agricultural workers, “the United Farm Workers and the major growers reached a historic agreement. If labor and business and owners have gotten together,” Gutierrez said, “shouldn't the Congress just say, sounds good to me?”

Individual Bills ‘Horrendous.’

Rep. Judy Chu (D-Calif.), meanwhile, said the four individual immigration bills that have been approved by the Judiciary and Homeland Security Committees were “so horrendous that I could not see” them as a vehicle for passing overhaul legislation.

The Republican sponsors “have no hope of getting the high-skilled worker bill or the agricultural worker bill out without Democratic support because there are some on the Republican side who would never vote for any bill that would change the immigration system,” Chu told Bloomberg BNA. “But the bills are so bad that they would not get the Democratic votes” either.

Among other reasons, Democrats largely are opposed to the high-skilled immigration bill because it also would eliminate the current diversity visa lottery. Many take issue with the measure dealing with agricultural workers because it would require workers to return to their home countries after the term of employment. The bill also would mandate that part of workers' pay be withheld until they leave the U.S.

‘Biggest Enemy Is Time.’

Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Texas), who spoke at the LULAC event, said the “biggest enemy we have right now on immigration reform ” is time.

Democrats in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus first approached President Barack Obama about an immigration overhaul in 2009, Cuellar said, but it got displaced with other priorities, and the “window of opportunity” was closed that year.

If Congress doesn't pass immigration reform this year, “what's going to happen is we're going to see the window close and we're not going to talk about immigration reform again until 2017,” Cuellar said.

The latest comprehensive bill, he said, was Democrats' way of “planting our flag” in terms of what provisions of a bill they supported, while remaining open to discussions with Republicans.

That echoed a point made Oct. 2 by Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), that the bill was “a suggestion” to Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), “not a challenge.”

Smith Response

The bill still faces an uphill climb, however. In addition to Goodlatte's comments favoring an overhaul built with individual bills, Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas), another Judiciary Committee member and former chair of the committee's Immigration Subcommittee, said in an Oct. 2 statement that Democrats were “putting the interests of illegal immigrants ahead of American workers.”

“Republicans are on the side of hardworking Americans,” Smith said. “We want to make sure that our nation's immigration policies put the interests of Americans first.

Smith said that means “attracting and retaining highly skilled immigrants who contribute to American innovation, and the establishment of an agricultural guest worker program that meets the demands of our food supply.”

“These are policies that can improve our immigration system. It's disappointing that Democrats continue to insist on amnesty for illegal immigrants rather than supporting policies that help the American people,” Smith said.