

THE NEW YORK TIMES

April 10, 2010

From Senate Majority Leader, a Promise to Take Up Immigration Overhaul

By **JULIA PRESTON**

The Senate majority leader, [Harry Reid](#), told an exuberant crowd at an [immigration](#) rally Saturday in Las Vegas that Congress would start work on an immigration overhaul as soon as lawmakers return this week from a recess.

“We’re going to come back, we’re going to have comprehensive immigration reform now,” he said in a speech to more than 6,000 people, mostly immigrants, gathered downtown.

“We need to do this this year,” Mr. Reid said, drawing cheers from the crowd, which included many Latinos. “We cannot wait.”

Mr. Reid surprised immigrants and advocates with his direct commitment to moving forward with legislation on the volatile issue, with the Senate already divided by the passage of a health care overhaul. Also, as a result of Justice [John Paul Stevens](#)’s announcement last week that he would retire, the Obama administration and the Senate will have to focus this summer on winning confirmation of a [Supreme Court](#) nominee.

The Democratic leader was nearing the end of a week of hard campaigning in his bid for re-election in Nevada, which is facing record unemployment and the nation’s highest foreclosure rate. After seeing small turnouts at several campaign stops, he appeared elated by the boisterous gathering in Las Vegas.

“We’re going to pass immigration reform, just as we passed [health care reform](#),” Mr. Reid said in a five-minute speech. Latino voters, who strongly support an overhaul, were crucial to [President Obama](#)’s upset victory in the state in 2008.

The rally was the largest among demonstrations Saturday in seven cities nationwide, with immigrants pressing Congress and the administration to pass an overhaul bill this year.

Organizers said they planned the rallies, on the last weekend before lawmakers return to Washington after the Congressional recess, to follow up a big rally on March 21 on the Washington Mall. They are battling to keep immigration overhaul on Congress’s agenda, even as the political odds have appeared to worsen almost daily.

The demonstrations were tinged by growing criticism of the administration from immigrant groups and labor unions that support the overhaul. They say it has continued to pursue tough enforcement leading to thousands of deportations, but has made no progress on legislation to open a path to legal status to millions of illegal immigrants.

“I’m very unhappy with President Obama because he said this would be the first thing he did when he was elected,” said Rafael Lopez, 21, an immigrant living in Las Vegas. “I’m worried because the Republicans are anti-immigrant,” he said, adding that he feared that Republicans could make important gains in the elections in November.

Mr. Reid told the crowd that he believes he has 56 votes in the Senate in support of the immigration legislation. “We need a handful of Republicans,” he said, calling on immigrant groups to help mobilize support among them for the overhaul.

He outlined legislation that would include border security measures and a temporary guest worker program for future immigrants. To gain legal status, illegal immigrants would face “a penalty and a fine, people will have to work, stay out of trouble, pay taxes, learn English,” he said. “It’s not so bad, is it?” he asked the crowd.

Opponents of such legislation said yesterday that they thought the chances for passage of an overhaul remained slim while the country is facing high unemployment.

“It just doesn’t look very feasible as the next big thing,” said Roy Beck, executive director of [NumbersUSA](#), an organization that favors reduced immigration. “I don’t think even [Nancy Pelosi](#) and the Democrats are radical enough to go back to their districts and say American workers don’t have priority when it comes to American jobs.” Ms. Pelosi, Democrat of California, is the speaker of the House.

In Chicago, at a rally that drew more than 1,000 people, Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#), Democrat of Illinois, the No. 2 leader in the Senate, echoed Mr. Reid’s promise to try to enact the overhaul this year. Speaking of President Obama’s role in pressing for health care legislation, Mr. Durbin said, “We need that same determination and that same commitment to pass comprehensive immigration reform this year.”

He said he would work to bring Republicans to support the legislation.

Senators [Lindsey Graham](#), Republican of South Carolina, and [Charles E. Schumer](#), Democrat of New York, have been working on an immigration bill. Mr. Graham said recently that he did not believe there was sufficient support among Republicans to move forward.

“That is our challenge,” Mr. Durbin told the rally in Chicago, “to bring together the Democratic voices as well as good-thinking Republicans to make this a reality of immigration reform. We can do this.”

More than one thousand people also turned out for a rally in Seattle, and there were smaller events in El Paso, New York City, Philadelphia, and Providence, R.I.

In the past week, some immigrant advocates had become openly angry with the Obama administration, saying its enforcement policies had led to thousands of deportations.

The advocates said they were reacting to news reports that agents were working to meet deportation quotas, even after senior immigration officials had said they were no longer guided by such numerical goals.

In several California cities, members of the [Service Employees International Union](#), one of the largest labor organizations supporting immigration overhaul, protested Thursday and Friday in front of immigration agency offices.

Eliseo Medina, an executive vice president of the union, said the group had been expecting Mr. Obama to shift enforcement policy after the high-profile workplace raids of the Bush administration. But Mr. Medina said that thousands of immigrants in the union who do not have work authorization had been fired from jobs in recent months while deportations continued.

“It’s pretty clear that our optimism about a change of policy was misplaced,” Mr. Medina said in an interview. “What they are doing makes no sense, so we are just basically mobilizing to fight back.”

Steve Friess contributed reporting from Las Vegas and William Yardley from Seattle.