

# Lawmakers struggle over guest workers in immigration bill

By Caren Bohan

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(Reuters) - As the Senate gets ready to debate the details of a broad U.S. immigration bill, a group of House of Representatives lawmakers is still struggling to write its own legislation, hung up in part over guest worker programs sought by businesses.

Programs allowing employers in high-tech, agriculture, [construction](#) and other industries to hire foreign workers were also a stumbling block for senators who introduced a separate immigration bill last month.

In the end, the four Republicans and four Democrats in the Senate "Gang of Eight" group incorporated into its bill a deal reached between the AFL-CIO labor organization and the Chamber of Commerce, the huge U.S. [business](#) lobby.

Immigration reform is Democratic President [Barack Obama's](#) top domestic priority. Although the Senate is controlled by Democrats, the bill will need some Republican support to meet the minimum 60-vote threshold for passage.

Still, passage of the bill in the Republican-led House is seen as the biggest challenge.

Although many Republicans view immigration reform as a way to help repair their party's weak standing with Hispanic voters, many others are resistant to comprehensive reform that includes a path to citizenship. Conservative critics of that provision view it as a form of amnesty.

The House immigration group, which has been negotiating largely in secret for nearly four years, is moving closer to an agreement and hopes to unveil an immigration bill in the next few weeks, according to several lawmakers and aides.

Two congressional aides familiar with the talks said the size and details of the guest worker program were among the outstanding issues for House lawmakers.

The Senate bill includes caps on the number of foreign workers businesses could hire and requirements for certain wage levels. Businesses would like larger guest worker programs and fewer restrictions on wage levels.

Some Republicans in the House group are sympathetic to those concerns, while Democrats object to upsetting what they see as a balance on the guest worker provision painstakingly negotiated by business and labor during the drafting of the Senate bill.

In interviews this week, two Republicans in the House group, Representatives Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, and John Carter of Texas, said the lawmakers were close to an agreement. The group's talks have intensified. Over the last six weeks, the four Democratic and four Republican lawmakers have met daily for two to three hours a day when Congress has been in session.

When lawmakers departed a week ago for break, Carter said the House group had two remaining issues to resolve when they return to Washington next week.

"We're close - real close," the Texas congressman said.

Members have said they were close before. But Diaz-Balart predicted the group would introduce a bill within a "matter of weeks - not many weeks."

### SENATE STEPS UP PACE

The guest worker provisions will be one of the more contentious issues the Senate Judiciary Committee faces when it considers changes to the legislation in its "markup" next week.

The Senate gang has worked closely with a range of interest groups - from labor to business to agriculture to immigrants' rights organizations - in an attempt to produce a broad coalition of support for immigration reform.

The House group has allowed some input but kept these groups at a greater distance. Carter said that what matters most to the group is selling their proposal to other lawmakers. "We've tried to keep this thing without outside influence," he said.

But as the House lawmakers' talks have intensified, some of the outside groups are pushing to have their views heard.

The [construction](#) industry, which was disappointed with the limits the Senate version placed on the hiring of guest workers in its industry, is among those that has offered input.

"We have been meeting with those offices in the House gang more and more frequently and we are optimistic that the end product is going to be better, especially with respect to construction," said Geoff Burr, vice president of federal affairs for the Associated Builders and Contractors trade group.

Immigrants' rights groups are also weighing in. Frank Sharry, executive director of the advocacy group America's Voice, said rights groups have been rattled by reports that Republicans are pushing to move the bill to the right.

Sharry said the media leaks have prompted his group to start "banging on the door" of the House group more forcefully.

"We gave them a lot of room. But as some of these leaks have come out, they've raised questions," Sharry said.

Though the guest worker provision has been tough to resolve, the House group has managed to bridge differences on whether to grant a path to citizenship to undocumented immigrants.

The Senate bill would give provisional legal status to many of the 11 million people in the country illegally. They would be able to apply for a green card granting permanent residency after 10 years and eligible for citizenship three years later.

The House group's draft language would create a longer time-frame for citizenship - 15 years instead of the 13 envisioned by the Senate. Rather than having a three-year wait time between obtaining a green card and citizenship, the wait would be five years. The five-year wait time is what is spelled out in the current process for legal immigration to the United States.

The language satisfies the concerns of Republican House lawmakers who were reluctant to grant a special new path to citizenship to undocumented immigrants.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/03/us-usa-immigration-congress-idUSBRE9420W920130503>