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Silicon Valley and Immigrant Groups Find Common Cause

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

SAN FRANCISCO — What do computer programmers and illegal immigrants have to do with each other?

When it comes to the sweeping overhaul of the nation's immigration laws that Congress is considering this year, the answer is everything.

Silicon Valley executives, who have long pressed the government to provide more visas for foreign-born math and science brains, are joining forces with an array of immigration groups seeking comprehensive changes in the law. And as momentum builds in Washington for a broad revamping, the tech industry has more hope than ever that it will finally achieve its goal: the expanded access to visas that it says is critical to its own continued growth and that of the economy as a whole.

Signs of the industry's stepped-up engagement on the issue are visible everywhere. Prominent executives met with President Obama last week. Start-up founders who rarely abandon their computers have flown across the country to meet with lawmakers.

This Tuesday, the Technology CEO Council, an advocacy organization representing companies like Dell, Intel and Motorola, had meetings on Capitol Hill. On Wednesday, Steve Case, a founder of AOL, is scheduled to testify at the first Senate hearing this year on immigration legislation, alongside the head of the deportation agents' union and the leader of a Latino civil rights group.

"The odds of high-skilled passing without comprehensive is close to zero, and the odds of comprehensive passing without high-skilled passing is close to zero," said Robert D. Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a nonpartisan research group based in Washington.

The push comes as a clutch of powerful Senate Republicans and Democrats have reached a long-elusive agreement on some basic principles of a "comprehensive" revamping of immigration

law. Separately, a bipartisan bill introduced in the Senate in late January focuses directly on the visa issue.

The industry's argument for more so-called high-skilled visas has already persuaded the president.

"Real reform means fixing the legal immigration system to cut waiting periods, reduce bureaucracy, and attract the highly-skilled entrepreneurs and engineers that will help create jobs and grow our economy," Mr. Obama said in Tuesday's State of the Union speech.

In a speech in Las Vegas in January in which he introduced his own blueprint for overhauling immigration law, Mr. Obama embraced the idea that granting more visas was essential to maintaining innovation and job growth. He talked about foreigners studying at American universities, figuring out how to turn their ideas into businesses.

In part, the new alliance between the tech industry and immigration groups was born out of the 2012 elections and the rising influence of Hispanic voters.

"The world has changed since the election," said Peter J. Muller, director of government relations at Intel, pointing out that the defeat of many Republican candidates had led to a softening of the party's position on broad changes to immigration law. "There is a focus on comprehensive. We're thrilled by it."

"At this point," he added, "our best hope for immigration reform lies with comprehensive reform."

Mr. Case, the AOL co-founder, who now runs an investment fund, echoed that sentiment after meeting with the president last Tuesday.

"I look forward to doing whatever I can to help pass comprehensive immigration reform in the months ahead," he said, "and ensure it includes strong provisions regarding high-skilled immigration, so we are positioned to win the global battle for talent."

That sort of sentiment delights immigrants' rights advocates who have banged their heads against the wall for years to rally a majority of Congress around their agenda.

"The stars are aligning here," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum. "You've got the politics of immigration reform changing. You've got tech leaders leaning in not just for high-skilled but for broader immigration reform."

Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah, who is co-sponsoring the bill to increase the number of visas available for highly skilled immigrants, said the cooperation went both ways.

"All the talk about the STEM field — science, technology, engineering, mathematics — has awakened even those who aren't all that interested in the high-tech world," he said.

While the growing momentum has surprised many in Washington, comprehensive change is still not a sure thing, especially in the Republican-controlled House.

Mr. Hatch said he would push forward with his measure even if the broader efforts foundered. But his Democratic co-sponsor, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, said she would press for the bill to be part of the comprehensive package.

Last year, technology executives had a taste of what could happen with stand-alone legislation.

In November the House passed a bill, sponsored by Representative Lamar S. Smith, Republican of Texas, that would have provided 55,000 visas for foreigners graduating from American universities with advanced degrees in STEM fields. Mr. Smith, then the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, brought considerable clout, and the tech industry rallied behind the bill.

But the legislation died in the Senate, because Democrats wanted any technology-specific measure to be part of a broader bargain that would include more visas for family members.

In pressing its case, the industry has used some vivid examples to sway lawmakers, arguing that if skilled workers cannot get visas, tech companies will simply move the jobs overseas.

Facebook was the latest to make this case. It said it had to place nearly 80 engineers in its office in Dublin in 2011 because it could not obtain even temporary work visas to employ them at the company's headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. Those temporary visas, called H-1B visas, are capped at 65,000 a year and usually run out within a couple of months. The bill proposed by Mr. Hatch and Ms. Klobuchar would more than double that number.

Microsoft has also argued that the visa backlog takes jobs out of the United States, saying it was forced to open a development office in Vancouver.

Hundreds of thousands of foreigners, the largest share from India and China, come to American universities every year to study science and engineering. But it can take so long for them to get permanent residency that many end up returning home. Mr. Hatch said he was keen to see

foreign-born graduates of American universities remain in this country rather than work for competitive firms elsewhere.

"China, India — they would love to have these Ph.D.'s return to their countries," he said. "They see the benefits. Why can't we?"

There is no dearth of jobs in Silicon Valley. Employment in San Francisco and its southern suburbs grew about 3.6 percent in 2012, twice the growth rate nationally, according to a study released last week by Joint Venture Silicon Valley, a nonpartisan research organization.

But many of those jobs are filled by foreigners. In San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, nearly two-thirds of those employed in science- and engineering-related jobs were born abroad, compared with about one-fourth nationwide, according to the study.

Industry executives hope to employ many more.

"The issue has truly ripened," said Bruce Mehlman, a veteran Washington lobbyist and executive director of the Technology CEO Council. "Levels of optimism are higher than they've been in a while."

Julia Preston contributed reporting from New York.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/business/tech-companies-and-immigrant-advocates-join-forces.html?emc=tnt&tntemail0=y&_r=0