

Immigrant Activists Cast a Wider Net

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Body

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- After a boisterous three-day congress here, more than 600 leaders of a national movement of young immigrants living in the country without legal papers voted to expand beyond their past demands for citizenship for young people, and to mobilize in support of a bill to legalize 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

The leaders of the United We Dream network, the largest organization of youths here illegally, decided to push President Obama and Congress next year for legislation to open a path to citizenship for them and their families. The move will increase pressure on Mr. Obama and lawmakers to pass a comprehensive overhaul, rather than taking on the debate over immigration in smaller pieces to try to gain more support among Republicans.

The network's platform calling for an "inclusive pathway to citizenship," which the leaders adopted unanimously in a vote on Sunday morning, is likely to have a large influence on the debate Mr. Obama said he planned to kick off soon after his inauguration in January. The young people, who call themselves Dreamers, generally attract more sympathy from American voters than other immigrants here illegally, because most were brought to the country as children and many became activists after their illegal status thwarted their plans for college.

They take their name from the Dream Act, a bill that would create a pathway to citizenship for young people, which lawmakers on both sides of the aisle view as having a better chance than broader legalization measures. This year several Republicans, including Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, worked on alternative proposals that could attract support from their party. An estimated 1.7 million young immigrants would be eligible for legal status under the Dream Act.

But the youths opted to fight for broader gains, concluding that events were working in their favor after the Nov. 6 election, when Latino voters turned out in large numbers, overwhelmingly in favor of Mr. Obama.

"We have an unprecedented opportunity to engage our parents, our cousins, our abuelitos in this fight," said Cristina Jimenez, a leader of the United We Dream organization, using the Spanish word for grandparents.

Although most of the young people who attended the conference do not have legal papers, it was a sign of their new confidence that the network held its congress in the convention center downtown, in a conservative state where most voters oppose amnesty for illegal immigrants.

In June, Mr. Obama announced two-year reprieves from deportation and work permits for hundreds of thousands of young immigrants, an initiative that they saw as a victory for their protests over the past two years. Some participants here already had their reprieve documents.

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For many young people, getting here was still a challenge. Some who came from California said they had taken the risk of flying for the first time, passing security with state identity documents. Others came by car from places like Florida, New York and Texas, driven by the few among them who have valid licenses.

Their decision to push for legal status for their families was intensely emotional. When they were asked at a plenary session how many had been separated by deportation from a parent or other close family member, hundreds of hands went up. They were critical of Mr. Obama for deporting more than 1.4 million people during his first term.

"When Obama is deporting all these people, separating all of our families, I'm sick and tired of that," said Regem Corpuz, a 19-year-old student at the University of California, Los Angeles, who was born in the Philippines.

"Our families' dreams were to get a better future," said Ulises Vasquez of Sonoma County, Calif., "but our future is with our families together."

On Sunday, six **immigrant** parents, also here illegally, joined a "coming out" ceremony where they spoke in public for the first time, as many youths have done in recent protests.

One father, Juan Jose Zorrilla, 45, who is from Mexico, recounted how he had entered the United States several times by swimming across the Rio Grande. "For parents, there is no sacrifice so large that we won't make it for our children," Mr. Zorrilla said. A mass of youths jumped up from their chairs to embrace Mr. Zorrilla and the other parents.

Much of the debate centered on how the movement would navigate hard realities in Washington. Opposition to legalization remains strong among Republicans, who control the House.

Network leaders said the election results, in which Mitt Romney won only 27 percent of the Latino vote, give them new influence with both parties, but particularly with Republicans.

"The Republican Party alienated Latino voters in ways they hadn't done before," said Lorella Praeli, a leader of the United We Dream organization. "Our leverage is that our community is growing," Ms. Praeli said. She suggested that young **immigrants** ask Republicans: "Do you want your party to see the inside of the White House again?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/03/us/young-leaders-cast-a-wider-net-for-immigration-reform.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: Delegates at the United We Dream congress for young **immigrants** took a moment to reflect on Saturday in Kansas City, Mo. Left, a participant took a picture of a banner on Friday. More photographs are at nytimes.com/national. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN GILL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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