

Labor Groups, Business Seek Immigration Law Overhaul

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Body

Worried that surprise raids are driving away workers who are their lifeblood, businesses are pooling their money and joining unusually broad alliances that include labor unions and civil rights groups to push Congress to overhaul the nation's immigration laws.

The coalition Alliance for Immigration Reform 2007 announced its formation this week, placing the force of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Service Employees International Union and the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights group behind a unified lobbying effort to get a law passed before the politics of the 2008 presidential campaign make a compromise on the contentious issue unworkable.

Pressure has been building on employers and labor as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency becomes more active. Last month, its agents raided Swift & Co., a participant in a government pilot program that runs Social Security numbers through a federal database. The raids sent hundreds of undocumented immigrants to detention centers and jolted business groups.

"It proved that the current system doesn't work . . . and is failing everybody," R. Bruce Josten, executive vice president of the chamber, said during a conference call Thursday.

Business groups paint a dire picture of a U.S. economy without the country's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants. The National Restaurant Association says jobs in food service are growing one and a half times as fast as the U.S. labor force. And the construction industry needs 250,000 new workers per year to replace its aging workforce, according to Associated Builders and Contractors.

Proponents of a plan to legalize undocumented workers say this year offers an important window. President Bush and the Democratic-controlled Congress have called immigration reform a priority, and the coalition considers a Senate bill last year that provided a path to citizenship for undocumented workers a blueprint for the policy. That legislation stalled in November when the House and Senate could not hash out a compromise.

The table is now set, said Cecilia Muñoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights group. "Over the course of the last year the policy ideas have really come into focus."

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To hold the marriage of **business** and **labor** and right- and left-leaning politics together, the coalition's ideal bill would include both a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants already here and more visas for temporary workers, said Douglas G. Rivlin, spokesman for the National **Immigration** Forum, which is a member of the alliance.

The coalition splinters on the details. **Labor** unions advocate a new kind of visa that would not make the **immigration** status of temporary workers dependent upon their employers. **Business groups** want the visa program to be as simple as possible.

In opposition are **groups** such as the Minutemen, which raised nearly \$1 million for its political action committee last year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The money was used primarily to back candidates who support building physical barriers to illegal **immigration** and deporting those who are here illegally.

Several of the candidates that the **group** supported, including Arizona Republican Randy Graf, lost in November, and the Republican Party in general ceded a large share of the Hispanic vote, a signal to some that tough enforcement policies are not politically popular. The Alliance for **Immigration** Reform said it has a significant budget and will marshal the coalition's resources to push its message.

"We can keep the heat on the back of the neck of the leadership to get this thing done," the chamber's Josten said.

Congress has not yet begun formally negotiating **immigration** legislation. Alliance members estimate they will need 70 to 80 percent of the Democrats and 30 to 50 percent of the Republicans in both chambers to get a **law** passed.

"This is not a Democratic slam dunk, and it's not a Bush slam dunk," Rivlin said. "It's going to take a lot of working together to get things done."

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