

DEMOCRATS BAR ACTION IN HOUSE ON IMMIGRATION

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Byline: By MARTIN TOLCHIN, Special to the New York Times

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Body

House Democratic leaders have blocked a sweeping revision of immigration law, which the Administration has supported, out of fear that President Reagan would score a political coup by vetoing it.

Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., Democrat of Massachusetts, conveyed that message to Attorney General William French Smith at a meeting in the Capitol on Thursday, according to Congressional sources and Justice Department officials. Mr. Smith vigorously denied that a veto was planned and pressed for House action on the measure, which the Senate approved in May.

C. Anson Franklin, a White House spokesman, denied today that the President intended to veto the bill. "Any decision on the bill would be made on the basis of the merits of the bill and not on the basis of politics," Mr. Franklin said. He noted that President Reagan had strongly supported the measure.

House Democratic leaders have blocked sweeping revision of immigration law, which Administration has supported, out of fear that Pres Reagan will score political coup by vetoing it; Congressional sources and Justice Department officials report Speaker Thomas O O'Neill Jr conveyed message to Attorney General William French Smith; Smith vigorously denies that veto is planned and presses for House action on measure; O'Neill photo (M)

Fate of Legislation in Doubt

The House Judiciary Committee approved the bill in May, and three other committees adopted amendments to it in June. But it has not been brought before the full House.

Whether or not the House Democratic leaders are correct about the veto threat, their continued perception of such a threat could mean that the legislation is dead.

The bill, which would impose fines and criminal penalties on employers who hired illegal aliens, has aroused intense concern among Hispanic groups, labor unions, civil libertarians, business organizations and farmers dependent on foreign workers.

Warning to Democrats on '84

Arnoldo S. Torres, executive director of the League of United Latin American Citizens, has warned that the bill would hurt the Democratic Party in the 1984 elections. He said there was "a tremendous amount of animosity" toward members of Congress who supported the bill.

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A House Democratic leader who declined to be identified said the bill had been blocked because "according to what the Hispanic caucus says, the Hispanics of America believe they are discriminated against badly in this bill."

"They have heard that the President plans to veto the bill, and become a hero to Hispanic Americans," he added. The President has made a strong bid for support from Hispanic Americans, historically part of the Democrats' constituency.

Mr. O'Neill told the Attorney General that the Democratic leadership had "irrefutable evidence" that the President planned to veto the measure, the sources said. This evidence, which he would not describe in detail, apparently was based on information provided by the Congressional Hispanic caucus.

Mr. Smith strongly denied that the President intended to veto the bill. "It isn't true," Mr. Smith said, according to Justice Department officials. He told the Speaker that the President would veto the bill only if it cost too much.

Justice Department officials said the Attorney General noted, "We've been working on this issue since the beginning of the Administration."

"The President would sign the Senate-passed version of the bill today if it was on his desk," the Justice Department officials quoted Mr. Smith as saying.

Assertion Called 'Preposterous'

Senator Alan Simpson, Republican of Wyoming, sponsor of the Senate bill, called the House leadership's assertion "unbelievable" and "preposterous."

"Bill Smith and I have been working on this for three years," he said.

The Reagan Administration has asserted that the bill would curtail the rising tide of illegal immigration. The employer sanctions are based on the premise that jobs are the main lure attracting illegal aliens.

Many Hispanic-Americans fear that the sanctions will increase job discrimination against them. They believe that employers will be so eager to avoid the sanctions that they will avoid hiring anyone who appears to be of Hispanic origin, including American citizens of Hispanic descent.

The bill also would offer legal status to illegal aliens who could prove they entered this country before a certain date, which would be Jan. 1, 1980, in the Senate bill and Jan. 1, 1982, in the House bill. Both bills would simplify the procedures for handling deportation cases and requests for asylum.

Verification at Issue

Under the Senate bill, employers would have to ask all job applicants for documents to verify that they were either citizens or aliens authorized to work in this country. This provision has aroused the concern of civil rights groups, who fear the creation of a "national identity card."

The House bill approved by the Judiciary Committee provides that an employer must verify the citizenship of job applicants only if the employer has been cited for a violation earlier.

The House Education and Labor Committee amended the bill to establish a presumption that if an employer hired an illegal alien without checking his identification papers, then the employer knew the alien was illegal. The committee also amended the bill to create penalties for any employer who discriminated against Hispanic workers or others because of their national origin.

The House Agriculture Committee voted to establish a "guest worker" program so aliens would be available when American citizens could not be found to harvest perishable commodities.

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The Energy and Commerce Committee proposed an amendment authorizing Medicaid benefits for certain groups of legalized aliens: pregnant women, children under the age of 18 and those who need emergency medical services.

Graphic

photo of Thomas P. O'Neill Jr.

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