

Senate approves bill; victims' rights expanded



WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate overwhelmingly approved a major civil rights bill Wednesday that President Bush has agreed to sign. It expands the rights of sexual discrimination victims to sue and negates a series of Supreme Court rulings on job bias.

The bill now goes back to the House, which has already approved a similar measure. House Speaker Thomas S. Foley said the House will take up the bill early next week and predicted, "The House will likely approve the Senate action."

The Senate approval, on a vote of 93-5, came after three days of haggling over a series of amendments. Senators accepted changes that would apply the bill's job protections, and those of other anti-discrimination laws, to their employees.

In addition, the Senate agreed to require its own members to pay any judgments in such cases from their own pockets.

Senators voting "no" were Republicans Dan Coats of Indiana, Robert Smith of New Hampshire, Jesse Helms of North Carolina, Steve Symms of Idaho and Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming. Not voting were Democrats Robert Kerrey of Nebraska and Harris Wofford of Pennsylvania.

The legislation has been in the works for two years, since the Supreme Court issued several rulings in 1989 that made it more difficult for victims of job bias to win lawsuits against their employers.

The bill had been stalled until a compromise agreement last week by Senate leaders of both parties and Bush.

That agreement laid to rest the politically charged debate over hiring quotas, which Bush had said earlier versions of the bill would encourage.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., hailed the vote as "a resounding victory for civil rights."

Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole, R-Kan., who brought the administration and Senate sponsors to the bargaining table last week, said the compromise "is the only way out of the civil rights quagmire, without producing quotas."

Democrats voiced complaints over the bill's limits on the amount of damages that can be awarded to victims of sexual discrimination cases, although the bill still represents a major expansion of their rights. Kennedy said he would sponsor a separate bill to remove those limits.

The agreement with Bush averted a second threatened veto. A year ago, the Senate sustained Bush's veto of a similar bill by a single vote.

Before a final vote, the Senate approved a bipartisan amendment applying the job protections in the rights bill, as well as those in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including age discrimination and disabled-rights laws to its own employees and to most political appointees of the executive branch.

It first accepted a modification to that amendment requiring senators to pay any judgments out of their own pockets.

That change was offered by an opponent of congressional coverage, Sen. Warren Rudman, R-N.H., and was accepted after the Senate rejected, 74-23, a motion to table or kill the change.

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell condemned Rudman's move as a "poison pill amendment."

The Senate voted by voice to accept the amendment on Senate coverage, which was sponsored by Mitchell and Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa. It first narrowly voted to kill, 54-42, another proposed

change that would have subjected senators to punitive damages in discrimination cases.

Rudman argued against congressional coverage, contending that allowing appeals to the courts by Senate employees would violate the Constitution's separation-of-powers provision. But the Senate rejected, 76-22, a procedural motion that the amendment was unconstitutional late Tuesday night.

Although the fair-employment protections would apply to Senate employees, the enforcement method would be different from other workers. For Senate employees, the amendment would establish an independent panel to decide

job-discrimination complaints, and provide for appeals to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for a hearing by a judge.

In addition to Senate employees, the measure covers White House employees and other government workers who had been exempted from civil rights statutes.

The Senate bill would not cover House employees, who already can take job-related complaints to a special board.

Agreement on the bill itself last week broke a two-year civil rights stalemate that had included one Bush veto and threats of another. Bush charged that the bill would encourage employers to use quo-

tas in hiring and promotions.

From the Senate, the bill must go back to the House for concurrence in the Senate's changes. The House overwhelmingly approved a similar bill earlier this year.

The bill expands the rights of victims of sexual harassment and discrimination to sue for damages. They currently can collect only back pay and attorney fees. But as part of the compromise, sexual discrimination cases would be subject to dollar limits on awards, ranging from \$50,000 to \$300,000, depending on the size of the company.

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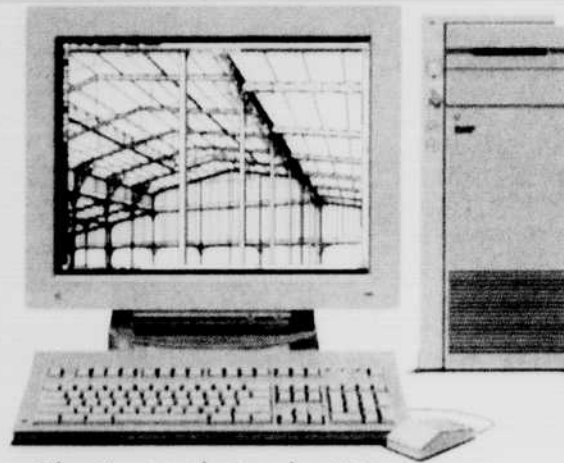
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