

# AFL-CIO's Trumka, SEIU's Henry touch off big immigration push

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Backed by strong statements from AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Mary Kay Henry, dozens of local union leaders from around the nation descended on Capitol Hill starting June 11 for a big push for comprehensive immigration reform.

They lobbied lawmakers to create a 13-year path to admission and eventual

citizenship of undocumented people in the U.S., plus stronger enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border and a strong employment verification system.

Their campaign came as senators began work on legislation along those lines, which President Barack Obama backs. Senate leaders want to approve an immigration reform bill by July 4.

The federation also sent activists to offices of 27 senators nationwide.

Trumka and Henry helped launch the latest drive at a White House press conference on June 11, after Obama made the point that employers who exploit undocumented workers hurt all workers.

“Right now, our immigration system has no credible way of dealing with the 11 million men and women who are in this country illegally,” Obama said. “And, yes, they broke the rules; they did-

n't wait their turn. They shouldn't be let off easy. They shouldn't be allowed to game the system. But at the same time, the vast majority of these individuals aren't looking for any trouble. They're just looking to provide for their families, contribute to their communities.

“Too often, they're forced to do what they do in a shadow economy where shady employers can exploit them by paying less than the minimum wage,

making them work without overtime, not giving them any benefits. That pushes down standards for all workers,” Obama continued. “It's bad for everybody. Because all the businesses that do play by the rules, that hire people legally, that pay them fairly, they're at a competitive disadvantage. American workers end up being at a competitive disadvantage. It's not fair. But that's the broken system that we have today.”

That's one big reason that organized labor strongly backs immigration reform. Analysis of the proposed legislation shows it would immediately bring undocumented workers, the majority of the 11 million undocumented overall, under U.S. labor laws, including the National Labor Relations Act and its right to organize, even before they seek permanent citizenship.

“What you see here is probably the broadest coalition of American society that's been assembled,” Trumka said. “You have business, you have labor, you have law enforcement, you have entrepreneurs — we have groups from all over the place, and we all agree on several things. We all agree, one, that the system is broken; two, that we need comprehensive immigration reform and we need it now.

“It will be good for not only newcomers or immigrants, but it will be good for every worker,” Trumka continued. “It will be good for business. It will be good for the economy. And that's why all of us have come together to try to push and get this thing done this year. Because every day that we wait is a day wasted and a day that we've lost, a day that the economy won't grow.”

“We want to be able to restore economic fairness across this economy,” said SEIU's Henry, whose union includes tens of thousands of immigrant workers. “We stand proudly with the rest of the sectors from all across the walks of life represented here to insist that the Senate needs to move this now.”

SEIU also took to the media to push senators to approve immigration reform. Starting June 11, it spent more than \$1 million to buy advertising on national cable television networks, urging constituents to call their senators and advocate for the bill. The ads feature law enforcement officials, small business owners, veterans, youngsters called Dreamers, who were brought to the U.S. as children, and Republican voters who call on the Senate to act.

However, presidents of two sectors of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) oppose such legislation. Kenneth Palinkas, who represents federal law enforcement officers, and Chris Crane, who represents Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, say enforcement isn't strong enough. “There has been much public concern over the fact that the legalization occurs prior to any border enforcement,” Palinkas said. “History tells us future promises will not be kept and that our border agents will be left high and dry by the executive branch as they have so many times before, regardless of who writes the plan.”

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