

Boston Globe

Immigration hearing roils emotions

2 sides in N.H. sound off over guest-worker plan

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | August 25, 2006

CONCORD -- New Englanders on both sides of the proposed guest-worker plan for illegal immigrants sounded off at a special US House Judiciary Committee hearing yesterday, with witnesses offering low-key testimony while passions bubbled up beyond the hearing room doors.

Across from the New Hampshire State House, the site of the hearing, immigrant rights protesters chanted their support for a US Senate-approved bill that includes the guest-worker plan and a path to citizenship for most of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country.

On the other side of the State House about a dozen people who want tighter immigration laws held signs such as "No Surrender, No Amnesty."

The most intense exchange, however, occurred after the hearing, when two witnesses representing opposite views came face to face in the men's room.

John Young, a white-haired New Hampshire apple farmer who was advocating for more temporary visas in the agricultural industry, had just finished an interview with a reporter when Peter Gadiel, a Connecticut father whose 23-year-old son died in the north tower of the World Trade Center during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, walked in.

"The policies this man proposes resulted in the deaths of my son and will cause more murders," said Gadiel, president of the 9/11 Families for A Secure America, which advocates for stricter immigration laws.

At the end of Gadiel's comments, Young extended his arm for a handshake, but Gadiel rebuffed the gesture, even though the two sat at the same table during the nearly two-hour long hearing: "I can't shake your hand. You and your people are responsible for my son's murder."

The hearing -- one of 21 around the country arranged by House Republicans opposed to the guest-worker plan -- was intended to provide an outlet for passions that roiled Congress last spring as it debated ways to cope with illegal immigration along the Mexican border.

The issue drew many competing interests, from the Latino community's desire for more immigrant visas to security-minded citizens' vows to crack down on illegal immigration, to the business community's need for more lower-income workers.

In New Hampshire, at the 18th of the 21 regional hearings and the site of the only one in New England, similar views were carefully recited before seven members of Congress and about 200 onlookers in the state's house chamber.

The hearings are considered unusual because they are taking place after both the House and Senate have each passed their own immigration reform bills. The House bill focuses on border security, while the Senate goes further with the guest-worker plan and path to citizenship.

Democrats repeatedly called the hearings a "road show" designed to promote an anti-immigration agenda.

Attacking the House bill, which Democrats interpret as calling for the immediate deportation of all undocumented immigrants, Representative Martin Meehan, a Lowell Democrat, asked one witness, "How do we magically round up that many people? How many planes would it take?"

The witness, Steven Camarota, of the Center of Immigration Studies, said the more immediate problem was shoring up border patrols, and then shifting attention to tracking down people who are already here.

To which Meehan quipped, "So we are going to go a couple of years without rounding them up?"

Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin, denied the hearings were politically motivated. On hand at the hearing were US Representatives Charles Bass and Jeb Bradley, both New Hampshire Republicans.

"I don't think we should force everyone to come to D.C. to testify on a bill," Sensenbrenner said during a press briefing after the hearing. "To hear from local people and talk informally with local people after the hearing is not an opportunity we would have had."

The committee also heard from John Lewy, a doctor with the American Academy of Pediatrics who spoke of the need to provide medical care to undocumented immigrants; and New Hampshire state Representative Andrew Renzullo, a Hudson Republican, who stressed the need to tighten immigration laws.

Many New Englanders who showed up for the hearing were disappointed they couldn't testify.

"I think with democracy, everyone should have a chance to speak," said Eva Castillo, 50, a Venezuela native who moved to the United States in 1975 and is married to a Manchester native.

She and other immigrant rights advocates wore T-shirts featuring the Statue of Liberty and a message written in either English or Spanish that read: "No Human Being is Illegal."

At the pro-immigration rally, two Boston high school graduates and two Boston area high school seniors, donning graduation caps and gowns, protested a policy that prevents them from receiving federal financial aid and attending college because of their citizenship status.

They said it's unfair they are being punished for the decisions of their parents who brought them to this country.

"We had no choice in the matter. We grew up here. We essentially are Americans," said Patricia, a 21-year-old Brazilian who moved to Massachusetts with her parents 15 years ago. She asked that her last name not be used because she fears deportation.

The students carried signs such as "Don't Criminalize Immigrants." One woman on a nearby sidewalk, alongside a dozen people who want more restrictions on immigration, yelled to one of the students: "Wow, we paid for another graduate."

"They are going to steal jobs, take the money, and run back to their countries," said Cyndi Ross, who lives in suburban Boston. "They don't care about America." ■