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## CONSTRUCTION GROUPS CRITICIZE LIMITS IN GUEST WORKER DEAL

By Steven Greenhouse  
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Several major construction industry groups are criticizing the agreement reached last week over how many low-skilled guest workers should be granted visas each year, complaining that the proposed limits were "unrealistic." The trade associations, including Associated Builders and Contractors and the National Electrical Contractors Association, issued a statement late Wednesday highlighting their concerns about the proposal between the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

Many immigration experts expect that deal — or much of it — will become part of the immigration bill being developed by a bipartisan group of eight senators, and a representative of the trade associations stressed on Thursday that the statement was not an effort to jettison the immigration proposals but to suggest improvements.

The Chamber-labor deal calls for admitting 20,000 guest workers the first year, with the total climbing to 75,000 after four years, and future numbers adjusted according to the unemployment rate and industry needs as determined by a new federal bureau. The agreement caps the number of guest construction workers admitted each year at 15,000, and in a bow to labor unions, bars admission for any higher-skilled workers like electricians, crane operators or elevator repair technicians.

"We are deeply concerned with the size and the scope of the temporary guest worker program in the proposal now being drafted by the 'Gang of Eight' senators," the groups wrote in a statement first reported by Politico. "Capping the amount of visas for the construction industry at only 15,000 in an industry that currently employs nearly six million workers is simply unrealistic and destined to fail."

The trade associations added that a program that fails to provide enough visas to meet demand "will inevitably make it harder to fill critical labor openings and make it impossible to secure the border."

Associated General Contractors of America, Leading Builders of America, the National Association of Home Builders and the National Roofing Contractors Association also signed the letter.

Union leaders pushed hard to minimize the number of guest workers allowed, arguing that they hold down wages and take jobs away from Americans, especially when including 1.3 million people in the construction industry who are unemployed. Randel Johnson, the chamber's senior vice president for labor and immigration issues, defended the program, saying it "features a streamlined process for employers to register job openings that can be filled by temporary foreign workers, while still ensuring that American workers get first crack at every job."

On Thursday, Geoff Burr, vice president of federal affairs for Associated Builders and Contractors, tried to tamp down worries that some trade groups were trying to kill the legislation.

"The construction industry strongly supports comprehensive immigration reform, and the last thing we want is for current reform efforts to fail," Mr. Burr said in a statement. "Our statement yesterday was an attempt to help improve the Senate reform package."