

Pennsylvania Capital-Star

Immigrant advocate to Wolf: Veto bill that expands E-Verify to all Pa. construction workers

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The state Senate passed a bill Wednesday to expand federal immigration status checks to all construction workers in Pennsylvania, sending it to Gov. Tom Wolf's desk.

The bill would require all construction contractors to put new hires' information through a federal background check system known as E-Verify. If a company is found to have hired undocumented workers, the company must fire those employees and send reports on new hires to the state Department of Labor & Industry.

The legislation was backed by the state's building trade unions, who see it as a way to target unscrupulous contractors who hire undocumented workers for lower pay and in worse working conditions.

But an immigrant rights group is urging a veto.

Desi Burnette, a coordinator for the grassroots group Movement of Immigrant Leaders in Pennsylvania, called the proposal a "very shortsighted and wrong bill" that will "hurt working families in every district across this state."

"It's disappointing so many people who claim to represent workers in our state would support this anti-immigrant legislation that further divides and weakens the voice of working families in Pennsylvania," Burnette told the Capital-Star.

E-Verify's "actual accuracy rate is difficult to determine because it just checks the documents and not the worker himself," according to a 2015 report from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

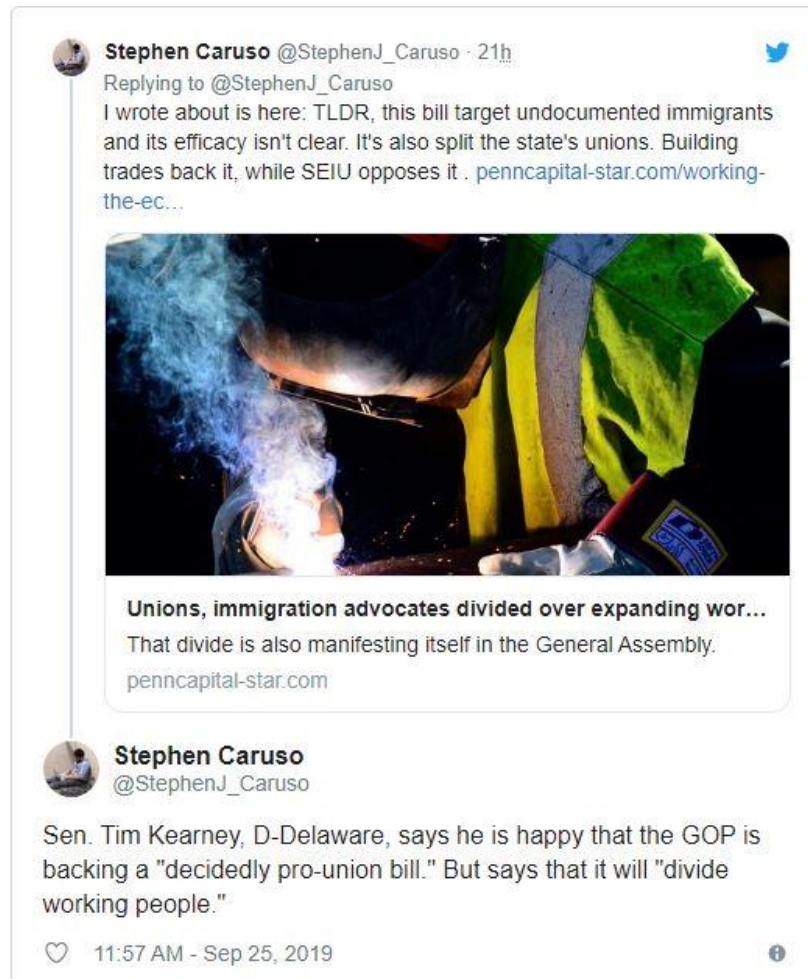
Meanwhile, use of E-Verify has succeeded in driving down the wages of mostly male undocumented immigrant workers, according to a 2017 Dallas Federal Reserve working paper.

While wages declined, there was no evidence E-Verify prevented undocumented men from working. In fact, the study found increased rates of employment among women as undocumented families tried to make up for the lost income.

The bill is also driving a wedge between the state's trade unions — which represent electricians, carpenters, and plumbers — and the more diverse and progressive Service Employees International Union, which claimed it's a divisive and unnecessary policy.

Given the choice, most lawmakers sided with the building trades. The bill passed the upper chamber 46-3 on Wednesday, and the House 170-28 in June.

On the floor, Sen. Tim Kearney, D-Delaware, critiqued the bill, saying it will “divide working people.” However, he ended up voting in favor of it.



In a statement to the Capital-Star, Kearney added that it was a “difficult vote” because the bill uses an “imperfect tool to address the serious concerns of many workers.” He added constituents in the building trade showed strong support for the bill.

“I firmly believe that a fair economy and a fair immigration system can strengthen one another, and I’m committed to working side by side with organized labor and immigration advocates to achieve this,” Kearney added.

The three Democrats who voted no are Sens. Larry Farnese and Art Haywood of Philadelphia, as well as Sen. Katie Muth of Montgomery County.

Burnette said she did not expect the opposition to be so limited.

“Immigrant families in Pennsylvania need leadership to help ensure that they can provide for their families,” Burnette said. “We need leaders who are going to work to ensure that folks have legal protections.”

While Burnette called on Wolf to veto the legislation, the high vote totals — the bill received well over the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto in both chambers — will likely give the administration pause.

Wolf said after an unrelated press conference Wednesday he'd review the legislation when it's on his desk.

But on the Senate floor, Majority Leader Jake Corman, R-Centre, said that Wolf had already agreed to sign the bill.