



Silicon Valley clamours for change to US immigration laws

By: Hannah Kuchler – November 22, 2013

Heavy bags hang under the eyes of the undocumented immigrants who struggled through the night for a cause they believe in – a battle they are trying to win with Silicon Valley’s favourite weapons: video games and social networks.

FWD.US, the pro-immigration reform lobby group spearheaded by Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, gathered the twentysomethings for a 25-hour “hackathon” this week as part of its push for undocumented migrants to be given the right to stay in the US. Frustrated by the barriers to hiring foreign programmers, the technology industry has become a vocal critic of the US immigration laws.

Working with Mr Zuckerberg and other founders of technology’s household names, the immigrants created networks to connect the so-called “DREAMers” with mentors, and apps to help them lobby Congress, where support for an immigration reform bill appears to be withering away.

Edson Sreria, a Mexican immigrant from North Carolina, helped build a site for pro-reform celebrities to encourage people to send postcards to their representatives. He said the government needed to put politics aside. “Like Mark said last night – they gave us 25 hours to create a project. We all did it so why can’t they in 20 years?”

Silicon Valley may be clamouring for change but in Washington, immigration reform appears to have stalled. John Boehner, house speaker, insisted on Thursday that the reform was “not a dead issue” but there is no timetable for a vote.

FWD.US is trying to remain optimistic. It is using tactics ranging from an unusual video game to teach people about the lives of unauthorised migrants, to a more conventional national TV advertising campaign launched this week.

Joe Green, president of FWD.US, said immigration reform could still happen in 2014.

“This is hard. We didn’t take it on because it was easy. We took it on because it is really important,” he said.

While Silicon Valley has complained about the difficulties it faces recruiting much-needed engineers from abroad for years, FWD.US was a departure from its normal discreet lobbying. It brings together a high-profile coalition in very public push for reform.

Mr Zuckerberg is joined by a cast of some of the most important people in the industry, from Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, to Reid Hoffman, executive chairman of LinkedIn, while its contributors include Google's Eric Schmidt and Marissa Mayer of Yahoo.

The campaign stumbled in its early days, when it decided to fund TV adverts supporting unrelated issues such as the Keystone XL pipeline and drilling in the US arctic. It was trying to bolster support for two US senators seen as vital to advancing the immigration agenda. But it angered environmental organisations and two of its founders quit.

One was Elon Musk, the chief executive of electric car company Tesla Motors, and the other was not identified, though the name David Sacks, founder of Yammer, the business social network, was removed from the list of backers on the website.

Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, said the campaign's problems with the "co-mingling" of issues would continue as it was hard to create unity around a single issue.

She added that it had made most of its headway with more traditional lobbying tactics in Washington. "They want to have their cake and eat it too – they want to be about innovation and a new way of looking at things, not playing the Washington game, and on the other hand they are spending an increasing amount of money on lobbying," she said.

But Dan Schnur, professor of politics at the University of Southern California, said that FWD.US deserved credit despite the faltering progress of immigration reform, as the purveyors of smartphones and tablets had been able to use Silicon Valley's "halo" to win over voters.

"They represent very credible voices in the tech community and they are letting the key decision makers know how important immigration is to them without being too heavy handed," he said. "One of Silicon Valley's biggest challenges in the past is that they often come across as if they expected Congress to bow and scrape at their feet and this coalition has been very good about walking the line between confidence and arrogance."

Alex Nowrasteh, an analyst at the Cato Institute, said he was still hopeful that immigration reform could be passed during Barack Obama's second term as president, despite the approaching midterm elections. He said FWD.US had helped by making the campaign seem more professional, "not chaining themselves to buses to stop deportation".

He added: "When respectable people like Mark Zuckerberg work with the unauthorised to show off their skills – that gets around the talking points that unauthorised immigrants are just a bunch of unskilled people."