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Judith Havemann

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Job Training Bill Conference Degenerates

Administration Threatens Veto as GOP, Democrats Begin Pointing Fingers

By Judith Havemann
Washington Post Staff Writer

A bipartisan job training bill that passed both houses of Congress by overwhelming margins staggered out of a conference committee after 10 months of contentious meetings yesterday without the support of a single Democrat and with two Cabinet secretaries threatening a presidential veto if it moves another step.

"This is like a dead mouse in the middle of the ballroom floor that everybody is ignoring and nobody wants to retrieve," said Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.) "It is shocking that the governors, the president, the vice president, the leaders of the House and Senate and various business groups can unite behind something and it can be scuttled on the rocks of the far right."

Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum, (R-Kan.) sponsor of the legislation, protested that she thought "this mouse is still wiggling," but admitted that her assessment was an act of optimism.

Rep. Dave E. Kildee (D-Mich.) said the "strong influence" of Phyllis Schlafly, president of the Eagle Forum, a conservative advocacy group, was responsible. Schlafly made defeat of the bill a top priority because she felt it granted the federal government too big a role in local schools and too much power to collect data on students.

"The first day we met, the Republicans said we've got to move this bill fast because she's closing in," Kildee said.

Republicans said they negotiated with dozens of groups, not just Schlafly, deleting some objectionable

provisions, but producing a bill that was moderate and useful, but that failed to meet the ever-higher standards set by Democrats. They also complained that Democrats complicated the process by making fresh demands for changes in the bill months after the conference committee began deliberations.

The job training measure would consolidate 128 federal education and job training programs and turn them over to the states. It passed the House last September 345 to 79, and the Senate a month later 95 to 2.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) did not answer directly when asked whether he would filibuster

"This may not be the beginning of the end, but it's the end of the beginning."

— Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.)

the measure if it were brought up on the Senate floor. "I don't think it will become law and I don't think the president will sign it," he said.

"It fell into a dark hole for six months while the majority negotiated with itself," said Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich, and what emerged has "no standards, no accountability, no assured help for workers, and no system of vouchers to allow workers to get retraining as they need it."

Both Reich and Education Secretary Richard W. Riley said they

would recommend the president veto to the bill.

Rep. Sonny Bono (R-Calif.) said the final bill is far from "extreme or radical" and for the Democrats to characterize it as such because of Schlafly's influence is a "fundamental distortion." And indeed, the Democrats final complaints about the bill were less about what it contained, than what it did not.

In what was almost a perfunctory final conference meeting yesterday, Kennedy failed to win Republican support for reinstating school-to-work apprenticeship programs, for setting aside \$1.3 billion for dislocated workers, and for requiring states to devote some funds to providing education programs for prison inmates.

Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-Calif.), the economic and educational opportunities subcommittee chairman, said he had tried to involve everybody in the process, not only conservative family groups, but also education, local government, community colleges, vocational educational groups and others.

Part of the problem, he said, was that the bills passed by the House and Senate were vastly different. "Maybe we should have had a few more meetings earlier on," he said. By the time the administration weighed in with strong concerns, it was "kind of late in the process," he said.

Eleventh-hour appeals Tuesday night from the nation's governors and from business groups to hold off the conference until the members could come up with a bipartisan plan failed.

Kennedy expressed sadness at the outcome of months of conference meetings. "But I don't think I have any useful suggestions of how to get out of this impasse," he said.