

IT worker who became an H-1B activist ends his fight

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December 21, 2007 (Computerworld) Five years ago, some unemployed IT workers in Connecticut formed an advocacy group to fight against the H-1B and L-1 visa programs. The group's strategy was old-fashioned for the Internet Age, relying on face-to-face lobbying to reach out to federal lawmakers.

And the group, called The Organization for the Rights of American Workers (TORAW), was successful in getting visa-reform legislation introduced in Congress.

But now [TORAW](#) is disbanding, according to John Bauman, president of the Meriden, Conn.-based group.

Bauman said this week that he has made 16 trips to Washington this year and met with about 100 legislators or members of their staffs to lobby for support of legislation designed to protect the jobs of IT workers in the U.S. But he added that TORAW is out of funds and that its membership has shrunk to a handful of people, down from the initial wave of several hundred who signed on as members.

"People lost interest in the fight," Bauman said. Many of TORAW's members have moved on, in some cases taking jobs in other industries. For instance, one of the organizers is driving an 18-wheeler, while another is doing home repair work, said Bauman, who has been focusing on TORAW's activities on a full-time basis.

If there is any hint of resignation in Bauman's voice, it's not from lack of effort. In 2003 alone, lawmakers from Connecticut [introduced three bills](#) proposing changes to the H-1B and L-1 programs. TORAW also held protests, one outside of an outsourcing conference in New York. One member of the group held a sign that read: "Will Code for Food."

"I don't regret anything that we've done," Bauman said. "We tried our best."

Congress didn't approve a proposed increase in the annual H-1B visa cap this year, despite [intensive lobbying](#) by the IT industry. But Bauman takes little solace in that. "They didn't pass an increase, but they also didn't protect the American worker," he said.

And although Bauman believes that he and other TORAW members have been effective in spurring lawmakers to file bills, none of the measures that the group backed have become law. That includes the Defend the American Dream Act of 2007, a bill introduced this year by Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.) that, among other things, would have required active recruitment of American workers by employers before they could apply for H-1B visas ([download PDF](#)).

"We were heard," Bauman said. But he added that TORAW's efforts couldn't match the clout and money of the high-tech industry.

Nonetheless, Bauman thinks it's critical for IT workers to seek out and meet with lawmakers in their own states on the visa issue. The biggest risk is complacency by workers who currently may feel secure about their job, he said.

Before co-founding TORAW, Bauman had no experience as an activist. He had held IT jobs for about 30 years and was working as a consultant when, he said, he felt that job opportunities were being lost to H-1B workers.

John Miano, founder of the Programmers Guild, a Summit, N.J.-based group that also has lobbied against the federal visa programs, called Bauman "one of America's true patriots" this week.

"The folks at TORAW carried more than their share of the weight for many years," Miano said via e-mail. "They were a bunch of individuals fighting the battle out of their own pocket against an enemy that was spending millions of dollars on hired-gun lobbyists to spread campaign cash among politicians."

Miano also credited TORAW with convincing Congress in 2004 to approve [some reforms](#) to the L-1 visa program, which is used for intracompany transfers of foreign workers.