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House Votes to Change Health-Care Law's Definition of Full-Time Work

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Eighteen House Democrats voted with Republicans Thursday to change the definition of full-time work as it relates to the Affordable Care Act, signaling that for some members of President Obama's party the law remains a difficult political issue.

The bill approved Thursday would change the law's definition of full-time work from 30 hours a week back to 40 hours, a move that Republicans say is necessary as employers continue limiting the hours of part-time workers in anticipation of the law's employer insurance requirement.

Rep. Todd C. Young (R-Ind.), the lead sponsor of the proposal, said the reductions in work hours unfairly target lower-wage workers whom the law was designed to help.

"These are cafeteria workers, these are substitute teachers, these are adjunct professors," he said this week. "These are folks who help us in terms of serving at restaurants. On balance, these are folks who can least afford to see a cut in their take-home pay. And so we want to restore the 40-hour workweek."

Obama threatened to veto the House bill this week, citing a recent report by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office that said about that 1 million people would lose employer-backed coverage and that the number of

uninsured would climb by almost 500,000 if the law's work definitions were changed. And most congressional Democrats, buoyed by the new enrollment figures, said Thursday that Republicans were merely bending to the will of companies who are using the new law as an excuse to cut workers' hours and pay.

"It is not Obamacare that decides how much somebody works, it's the person who runs the company," Rep. James McDermott (D-Wash.) said Thursday.

The law passed 248 to 179. All voting Republicans were joined by 18 Democrats, most of whom have voted repeatedly in recent months to approve GOP-backed measures that would repeal all or parts of the health-care law. The group includes Democrats most at risk of losing reelection this year, including Reps. Ron Barber (Ariz.), Ami Bera (Calif.), Patrick Murphy (Fla.) and Nick J. Rahall II (W. Va.).

Thursday's vote marked the 55th time the GOP-led House has voted to scale back all or parts of the law - and it won't be the last. When the White House announced Monday that more than 7 million Americans had enrolled in health-care coverage, Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) vowed that "House Republicans will continue to work to repeal this law."

Ahead of the vote, Republicans repeatedly cited the concerns of the service industry, a job sector that has continued hiring despite the fragile economic recovery. The American Hotel and Lodging Association complained Thursday that the law is affecting the already-complicated process of scheduling workers to staff hotels 24 hours a day. And the National Restaurant Association, a powerful Washington lobby, warned lawmakers Thursday that changing the law's work rules "would help avoid any unnecessary disruptions to employees' wages and hours, and would provide significant relief to employers."

Even though the House measure has little hope for consideration in the Democratic-controlled Senate, some Democratic senators suggested this week that they are open to discussing ways to tweak the health-care law's work rules. Citing the concerns of restaurateurs, Sen. Richard J. Durbin (Ill.), the chamber's second-ranking Democrat, told reporters Wednesday that "If [House Republicans] want to sit down in a constructive bipartisan discussion on that issue, I want to be at the table."

"There are legitimate concerns expressed in many industries, including restaurants, about how we're going to define a full-time employee," Durbin said later. "Let's sit down and work on it constructively."