

# Arizona and the Struggle for Immigrant Rights

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ARIZONA'S VERSION OF ethnic cleansing, SB 1070, came into force on Thursday, July 29, minus those provisions halted by a federal court injunction - notably the requirement that police check the immigration status of anyone suspected of being "illegal." The ruling by federal judge Susan Bolton is heading for appeals that will almost certainly wind up in U.S. Supreme Court. That body has recently distinguished itself by upholding the "personhood" rights of corporations, but not those of detainees at Guantanamo and Bagram among other "war on terror" prison facilities.

Judge Bolton has reportedly received numerous obscene messages and death threats, while the infamous Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio says that his mass "immigration sweeps" will continue in any case. A substantial though unknown number of immigrants, including legal residents, are reported to be fleeing the state. Large-scale protest actions in Phoenix and around the country are protesting the Arizona law and similar ones that have been introduced into other state legislatures.

The immigrant rights struggle has become a defining issue in U.S. politics. Solidarity supports the resistance against this law and the targeted boycott of Arizona companies, as well as the demand on Major League Baseball to move the 2011 All-Star game from Phoenix.

Injunction or no, much of SB 1070 is already in force. It criminalizes anyone who transports or employs the undocumented, with a special provision persecuting day laborers. Those employers found in violation will have their businesses placed on a three- to five-year probationary period. During that time the employer must submit a report to the county district attorney every four months. In turn, DAs are mandated to certify that the company is in compliance or the court will suspend all of its operating licenses.

## Arizona's Bill in Context

Arizona governor Jan Brewer and the bill's chief sponsor, State Senator Russell Pearce, position the bill as a response to "Washington's failure to defend the border" and claims of a mythical crime wave linked to immigrants. Within the state, the much-hyped (and still unsolved) March 27 murder of rancher Robert Krentz near the border was used to conjure up images of a violent immigrant invasion.

But the law-and-order rhetoric can't cover up the fact that SB1070 is just the latest part of an "attrition" strategy targeting immigrants, their families and communities. Other laws passed in recent years have made English the official state language (the United States does not and never has had an official language) and limiting educational opportunities for immigrants. The politicians responsible, including Pearce, have well-known connections to white nationalist and racist organizations. Now similar bills have been introduced in 11 states as right-wing politicians pander to the white racist vote.

Meanwhile, since the Clinton-era "Operation Gatekeeper" increased security at the Tijuana-San Diego border, migration routes have shifted deep into the deadly Arizona deserts. As for McCain's

assertion of border violence, and with the presence of vigilant paramilitary groups such as the Minutemen, Ranch Rescue, American Patrol and the Barnett Brothers, the main violence has been in the number of immigrant deaths in the desert: from 23 in 1994 to 827 in 2007 and 725 in 2008. In fact the four safest big cities, according to FBI statistics, are San Diego, El Paso, Austin and Phoenix — all in border states.

Since 9/11 officials at all levels of government have launched an attack on immigrants. By 2009 there were 17,415 border guards, with the cost rising from \$326.2 million as recently as 1992 to \$2.7 billion in 2009. Over 500 kilometers of a wall have been built across the Southern border and over 1,100 kilometers of electric fence installed. This summer, president Barack Obama sent 1200 National Guard troops to the Southern border. Under his administration, employers' records have been checked for "no match" social security numbers, leading to mass firings and increasing criminal deportations. Although the mass raids common under Bush have declined, the number of deportations during Obama's first year have resulted in an all-time record: over 387,000 — or well over 1,000 people deported every single day.

### **Immigration, Nativism and Working-Class Unity**

How can an "immigrant" nation be so anti-immigrant? Of course, historically there have always been backward elements opposed to the new immigrants, but the first anti-immigrant laws date from the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These people of color were seen as "undesirable" and posing a threat to white workers. As William Finnegan notes in his "Borderlines" article in the July 26 New Yorker, "anti-immigrant backlashes don't always track closely with actual immigration. They track with unemployment, popular anxiety, and a fear of displacement by strangers." These policies directed the animosity of U.S.-born workers toward immigrants and established some racial groups as permanent "foreigners" subject to harassment and persecution. Later, the 1940s bracero program introduced a system of managed cross-border labor migration which sacrificed the human rights of those "temporary" workers in the interests of big business, mainly agriculture.

The capitalist common sense held by many reinforces these policies. It is always so much easier to blame the "foreigner" for one's joblessness than to blame the economic system that puts profit before human needs. If many people blame NAFTA for job loss, they fail to make the connection between "free trade" and the number of immigrants who did enter the United States over the past fifteen years. This is partly because many assume "free trade" meant workers in other countries were the "beneficiaries" of the U.S. job loss. Certainly the U.S. media has not investigated the collapse of agriculture in Mexico and Central America under the weight of exports from U.S. agribusinessenormous, (which had already led to a crisis of small farmers in the United States). Small businesses and local economies throughout Mexico were disrupted and led to driving millions of others north. In 1990 there were barely 3.5 million undocumented immigrants. Today that figure has tripled, even though immigration has decreased since the recession began.

SB1070 will drive immigrant communities further underground, making it easier for those without papers to be exploited and degraded. Reports that others have already chosen to leave Arizona suggest a continued cycle of instability and rootlessness. But if the reactionary and xenophobic response is clearly inhumane, what kind of immigration policy should be implemented?

Immigrants should not only have the right to work, but the right to join with other workers in unions. Through common organization and action at the workplace, workers can overcome the artificial divide of citizenship and end the segregated pay scale that allows bosses to play each side against the other. For an historical example, we can look at one of the great contributions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and 1940s: its ability to organize across the color line and begin to destroy the employers' use of racism in order to exploit both Black and white workers.

Outside of the workplace, defense of the cultural and language rights of immigrants is another important struggle, connected to similar struggles by the continuing struggle of Native peoples for sovereignty and cultural preservation. The creation (and, frequently, imposition) of a common culture and language has been a key element in the construction of American capitalism. The national diversity of peoples in this country enrich the cultural life of the working class; media scare-mongering of encroaching “foreign” cultures is a tired routine that only serves those wish to drive a wedge of chauvinism between workers. We support the right for full civic and political participation by all regardless of language along with accessible education and language programs to assist immigrants who want to learn English.

We also solidarize ourselves with young undocumented immigrants who are demanding passage of the DREAM Act so that they can continue their education. Given their status, their bold direct action has been both brave and inspiring.

According to the capitalists, borders should be open for the flight of capital but closed to those who seek a better life. We say reverse the priorities and put human life above profit, in fact, tax capital flight! Let us work to build a just immigration reform and for the abolition of the system that criminalizes all of us.

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\* From Solidarity website:

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