

Arizona's Racial Profiling Push

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ARIZONA GOVERNOR Jan Brewer is quick to blame the federal government for the economic and social ills of her state. Responding to a growing movement to boycott Arizona for its new “show me your papers” law (signed by her on April 23 and to become effective July 29) as “thoughtless and harmful,” she complained that the outraged response “adds to the massive economic burden Arizonans have sustained for years due to the federal government’s failure to secure its borders.” The new law states that cops must (not merely can) stop all individuals who they determine have a “reasonable suspicion” of being “illegal.” When Gov Brewer was asked the question how reasonable suspicion is determined, she said: “I don’t know but I’m sure our cops will be trained to know how to pick people out.”

Racial Profiling Lives

One politician didn’t have Brewer’s difficulty. He said it’s obvious who is illegal: Just look at their clothes, shoes and other known features of “illegal aliens.” Racial profiling — despite official disclaimers that no one takes seriously — is the core of the law, and quite intentionally so.

The law even says any private citizen can sue cops and law enforcement agencies if they don’t stop “suspicious” individuals. Every brown-skinned person in Arizona can now face white vigilantism if they don’t show proof of citizenship. Propelled by those who think illegals carry forged drivers’ licenses and birth certificates, the inevitable false arrests and deportations of U.S. citizens of Latino heritage will occur.

If more proof is needed to show this is really about the rights of Mexican Americans and Latinos — and not about stopping “illegal criminals” — Arizona’s legislature made that crystal clear when it adopted a new anti-ethnic studies law on May 12. According to The Huffington Post, “Under the ban, sent to Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer by the state legislature, schools will lose state funding if they offer any courses that ‘promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, promote resentment of a particular race or class of people, are designed primarily for students of a particular ethnic group or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.’”

The specific target of the new law is the Tucson Unified School District’s popular Mexican American studies department. The state superintendent of schools Tom Horne charges that the program exhibits “ethnic extremism.” The program is not new or exclusionary. It’s open to all ethnic groups and is nearly 15 years old.

No Accent Allowed

In addition, *The Wall Street Journal* uncovered a move that the Arizona Department of Education has

told schools that teachers with “heavy” or “ungrammatical” accents are no longer allowed to teach English classes. Teachers who can’t meet the new fluency standards have the option of taking classes to improve English but if they fail to reach the state’s targets would be fired or reassigned.

“At least we don’t have to pretend any more,” writes African-American columnist Eugene Robinson of *The Washington Post*. “Arizona’s passing of that mean-spirited new immigration law wasn’t about high-minded principle or the need to maintain public order. Apparently, it was all about putting Latinos in their place.”

The far right is openly moving to turn Arizona into a replica of the Bull Connor [the notorious Birmingham, Alabama segregationist police chief] era when state officials of Southern governments stood in front of schools to prevent Black children from attending all-white schools.

The shift to the right among whites in general shows the retreat taking place in the country on issues of race and ethnic rights. A McClatchy-Ipsos poll found that 61% of Americans and 64% of registered voters support the Arizona law, even though few have actually read it. The same poll says some 69% of Americans don’t mind if cops stop and ask them about their citizenship.

The so-called Tea Party freedom-loving anti-government types also back the law, even though it directly puts the state government in their personal lives. White people don’t expect to be stopped, since they know who the law is aimed at.

“Good whites” — legal and illegal — don’t see the contradiction of accepting history taught in schools about Italians, Irish or others from Europe while seeing Latino heritage as un-American. Many Asian Americans (few live in Arizona) think the law doesn’t affect them since they clearly don’t look Mexican. Some African Americans back the law, thinking it may get them more job opportunities.

Of course, the “show me the papers” supporters deny the true anti-Latino intent and aims of the law. Some even claim to agree with the great civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, who fought for equality for Blacks by demanding that the country recognize everyone as individuals and not by their ethnic origins.

This twisting of history — of what King said and meant — is used to justify reactionary positions. It was common to use code words like “neighborhood schools” and “colorblind” school programs to justify the denial of desegregation and full rights for minorities. Today the code words are “protect the borders.”

Arizona’s population is 30% Latino (not including undocumented workers). The numbers are growing as the U.S.-born segment of the state continues to expand. Arizona’s white majority has never liked the fact that the state once was originally part of Mexico.

Many white Arizonans are not proud of this link to Mexican and Native American heritage. They see the country as being “taken” from them and fear the end of white political power. These are the roots of the anti-immigrant and anti-Latino heritage backlash in the state and growing parts of the country. The objective is simple: protect historic white privileges.

Many Arizonans with white skin want the “good old days” when Latinos stayed in their place and did not challenge the white political power structure. The fearmongering of demagogues is to keep white workers from understanding the demographic change taking place, that their interests as workers are not served by aligning with racists and white bosses, and that they have more in common with fellow workers of other races and ethnic backgrounds.

Memory of Jim Crow

During the days of Jim Crow segregation of the Deep South, it was easy to racially profile African Americans — by skin color. It wasn't called that then because the laws of the land in the Deep South were clear about where Blacks could eat, sleep or work. Blacks were legally denied the right to vote. White workers then were also made to believe their interests were with the bosses and bigots. It took a massive civil disobedience movement to push the federal government to act and use force against the racist state troopers and immoral laws like the one in Arizona today.

The right wing points to polls showing a majority of people supporting the law in Arizona. If a poll were taken in the Deep South in the 1960s, a majority of whites would have supported the racist laws. They regularly complained about "Northerners" and "liberals" denying them "states rights." At the time most whites rejected full integration of Blacks into society as equals. The Confederate civil war "heroes" are still cheered in these states.

After World War II, it took a government Executive Order to integrate the military. No referendum was taken, since it is likely a majority would have rejected the president's decision. It took a powerful women's rights movement to open the door for job opportunities and education equality for women. Gays are still fighting for full equality.

Popular Protests

The response to the Arizona law is growing. City Councils in northern and southern California have passed resolutions to boycott Arizona. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, born in Austria, has spoken out against the law.

(California's reaction is noteworthy, since it was California in 1994 that passed its own anti-immigrant law and played the "illegal alien" card for political purpose. When Proposition 187 was adopted by referendum to deny social benefits to "illegal immigrants" families, the law was taken to court and never implemented.)

In New Mexico, where 45% of its population is Latino, Governor Bill Richardson also rejects targeting undocumented workers. He's proud of his Mexican roots and has promoted Mexican and Native American culture even though many whites don't like it. His state allows undocumented people to receive driver's licenses, educate their children and receive other benefits.

"There is a decided positive in encouraging biculturalism and people working and living together instead of inciting tension," says Richardson. "The worry I have about Arizona is it is going to spread. It arouses the nativist instinct in people."

On May 1, pro-immigrant protests took place in Arizona and other states. City councils, universities along with civil liberties organizations, civil rights groups (Black and Latino) and many others are calling for a boycott of Arizona. Prominent athletes are among these opponents since Latinos are a large segment of many sports teams.

In Los Angeles, singer Gloria Estefan kicked off a massive downtown march to demand immigration reform and protest the Arizona law. Estefan spoke in Spanish and English atop a flatbed truck. Proclaiming the United States is a nation of immigrants, she said immigrants are good, hardworking people, not criminals.

The popular protests reflect what occurred two decades ago, when Arizona politicians opposed making Martin Luther King Day a state holiday even after it became a national holiday. Only the huge economic price led to a change.

The Anglo news media have downplayed these protests while giving front-page coverage and constant analysis to small Tea Party events.

In contrast, the Spanish-speaking media give these events broad coverage. The Mexican president and Latin American officials have protested the law and likely racial profiling of their citizens when visiting the United States. Suits have been filed in Arizona by Latino leaders and progressive-minded whites including the mayor of Phoenix, the state's largest city.

The boycott campaign is an important weapon. People of all races and ethnic groups are denouncing the racial profiling and anti-immigrant law as an attack on their rights. Black leaders especially know the history of code words in taking away their communities' rights.

Arab and Muslim leaders know this better than any group today because of their treatment, while whites who murder pro-choice doctors or attack IRS offices and kill civilians are not even called terrorists.

Open Borders and Citizenship

Rand (son of Ron) Paul, a Tea Party hero who won the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate to replace the retiring Jim Bunning, wants to repeal or "reinterpret" part of the 14th Amendment that confers citizenship on anyone born in the USA to exclude citizenship for children of "illegal" immigrants. So much for the Constitution (Paul isn't a big fan of the Civil Rights Act either). While this kind of thinking may be part of the right-wing freak show at the present moment, it represents a menace that must be confronted head-on in a principled fashion.

While liberals and other pro-immigration reform supporters have no viable solutions to help undocumented workers or solve the immigrant citizenship issue, they all know that 10 million undocumented working people cannot and will not be kicked out of the country. These workers play an invaluable role and have a positive impact on society. They reject the racism of the right.

What is a viable pro-immigrant solution? First and foremost we can demand that all racial profiling is made illegal. Second, we can raise the demand to open the borders so all workers and their families can freely migrate to work.

Hundreds of people die each year trying to cross the border looking for jobs and to help their families. If these workers could freely travel to work, they couldn't be so easily abused by the landowners and employers who deny them their benefits and wages. They could also join unions, which would benefit all workers.

The solution offered by Democrats and the Obama administration does not move in this direction. Instead it pushes for more stringent border patrols to arrest "illegals" and to declare intent to find a long-term path to citizenship for undocumented workers who currently work in the country.

The emphasis is on law enforcement and building new fences and walls, not human rights. Many Latino leaders and reform supporters, unfortunately, have accepted this "compromise" solution.

There is a deep misunderstanding about the relationship between free labor movement and citizenship. Just as workers across Europe can travel and be employed in member countries of the European Union, it does not give them the vote unless they are citizens. This is what should happen in North America. And it is the demand for which labor and the civil rights and civil liberties organizations should press.

Any compromise with the anti-immigrant hysteria and so called "Take Back America" crowd will undermine genuine reform. The issue of open borders is a way to turn the tables on the right. Calling for an open border policy and free labor movement is the only solution that can end the second-class status of undocumented workers and paves the way for solidarity and unity between citizen workers and noncitizens. It also can allow a legal path to citizenship for those who may want it.

It is not enough to oppose the racism of the right, or to call the new Arizona "show me your papers" laws as racial profiling and un-American as the ACLU does. It is necessary to demand fundamental reform that defends the rights of these working people.

The defense of undocumented workers is a defense of all working people. The issue of immigrant rights is an issue of human rights.

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P.S.

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