

# Democrats and Republicans whip up anti-immigrant racism in Suffolk County, New York

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Seven months after the brutal beating of two Mexican immigrants in the New York suburb of Farmingville, local Democratic and Republican officials have again demonstrated their indifference and hostility to the immigrants who have come to the area in search of work.

The attack on Magdaleno Escamilla and Israel Perez last September 17 focused attention on the miserable conditions that thousands of these workers, most of them undocumented, face every day. The two were lured to an abandoned building with the promise of jobs, and then assaulted by two white men.

The assault shocked many residents of the area, in Suffolk County, on the eastern end of Long Island. It was widely publicized, and there were also demonstrations by immigrant workers and their supporters calling for improvements in their conditions and denouncing anti-immigrant racism. Local officials feigned concern.

In recent weeks, however, they have revealed where they really stand. The Suffolk County Executive vetoed a bill which would have established a community support center for day laborers like the ones who were beaten last September. Last week the county legislature upheld the veto.

The bill would have transferred \$80,000 in county funds for the 2001 fiscal year to the Catholic Charities, for the purpose of establishing a center that would offer educational, legal and referral services to the immigrants, functioning in part as a kind of hiring hall. In the summer as many as 1,000 of these workers come to Farmingville looking for seasonal or casual work in construction, landscaping or other odd jobs. The town itself has only 15,000 permanent residents. Other

suburbs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties similarly attract thousands of these workers.

The legislation, which passed last March 20 by a vote of 12 to 2 with three abstentions, was little more than a gesture. It did not address the issues of poverty wages and lack of regular employment these workers face. It was apparently aimed mainly at putting a stop to the gathering of these workers at busy intersections and along local roads.

Now, however, it appears that even this gesture is far too much for the local big business politicians. In vetoing the bill last April 4, Suffolk County Executive Robert J. Gaffney, a Republican who is the highest elected official in the county, issued a statement complaining that it would mean government support for the hiring of illegal immigrants.

Gaffney's veto was easily upheld. Some of the same officials who hypocritically expressed sympathy at the time of last year's assault have vied in recent weeks to whip up anti-immigrant prejudice. Andrew Crecca, a Republican who had originally supported the bill, said he had changed his mind. Paul J. Tonna, the leader of the Republican majority in the legislature, said that his March 20 vote had been an effort to ensure public health and safety, thus making it clear that he was not in favor of assisting the immigrant laborers.

One of the local Democrats, William J. Lindsay, was most explicit in his appeal to bigotry and chauvinism. "The hard-working, blue-collar worker that I have represented most of my life is concerned about a legion of undocumented workers being available in our communities to take their jobs," said Lindsay. He went on to call for a government task force, consisting of federal, state and local officials, to deal with the issue

of workers gathering on town streets and intersections in search of jobs.

Lindsay is also the business manager of Local 25 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and his comment perfectly sums up the role of the trade union leaders and the Democrats, as well as the meaning of their alliance. Like the rest of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, Lindsay has spent most of his life, not representing the blue collar workers, as he claims, but instead pitting the employed worker against the unemployed and the native-born against the immigrant.

This political development in the New York suburbs is a sinister sign of things to come. Anti-immigrant demagoguery has been put on the back burner by many Democratic and Republican politicians in recent years, as the growth of a wealthy upper-middle-class layer fueled the need for low-paid service workers. With the economic downturn beginning to hit millions of workers, however, these representatives of big business are preparing to use immigrants as a useful scapegoat to blame for increasing unemployment and economic insecurity.



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