

Arab residents denounce government witch-hunt at Detroit-area forum

Shannon Jones

29 November 2001

On November 20, the US Justice Department Civil Rights Division sponsored a public meeting in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan, billed as a “community forum” on combating the post-September 11 discriminatory backlash against Arabs. The irony of the government posing as a friend of Arab residents, while carrying out a dragnet and holding hundreds of Middle Eastern immigrants in secret detention, was not lost on those who attended the meeting.

Dearborn is home to a large Arab-American population. Some 200 Dearborn residents are on a Justice Department list of 5,000 recent immigrants from the Middle East whom the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) plans to interview in relation to the September 11 attacks.

Six days after the “community forum,” the US Attorney in Detroit sent letters to 560 Middle Eastern men living in Eastern Michigan asking them to schedule interviews with the FBI. Some 200 to 300 FBI agents have been assigned to conduct the interrogations in Michigan, with the assistance of local police.

The November 20 meeting became a forum for residents to voice their opposition to the arbitrary interrogation of thousands of Arab men and the general wave of repression launched by the Bush administration. People in the audience were incensed by the hypocrisy of the Justice Department claiming to be concerned for the civil rights of Arab-Americans when the agency is trampling on their constitutional rights and stoking anti-immigrant prejudice.

After opening remarks by the panel, chaired by the assistant attorney general for civil rights, Ralph Boyd Jr., audience members unleashed a barrage of complaints.

Imad Hamad, regional director of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, said, “People cannot

help but feel that they are suspects if their name is on the list. Will people be incriminated due to guilt by association?”

Another audience member asked, “How can the Justice Department claim to oppose discrimination against Arabs when they plan to interrogate 5,000 people of Arabic origin. Won’t these interviews help fan the flames of hatred?”

A speaker told how a pro-Palestinian web site that he helped operate had been shut down by Yahoo following the September 11 attacks. “We received a note saying it would be closed because of its views,” he reported.

Other speakers noted that more than 1,000 immigrants from the Middle East were taken into federal custody as a result of the roundup ordered by the Justice Department in the wake of the events of September 11. Only a handful of those held are suspected of involvement in the terror attacks. The vast majority of the detainees have been charged with minor immigration violations. The Justice Department is refusing to reply to demands that it give a full accounting of those it is holding and provide them access to legal counsel.

One woman drew a heavy round of applause from audience members when she compared the actions of the Bush administration in relation to Arab-Americans to the tactics of the Nazis.

Noel Saleh, an attorney with the Arab Community Center for Social Services, called the questioning a form of racial profiling. Recalling the Iran hostage crisis, he disputed the claim that the interviews would be voluntary: “There was a sweep of Iranian students. If they did not show up, they began deportation proceedings. If they found minor immigration violations, they began deportation proceedings.”

An Arab restaurant owner told how his business had

been devastated due to a malicious emailing that alleged that his employees cheered news of the September 11 attacks. He said the FBI had refused to investigate his complaint. “Since then,” he said, “my business has been deserted. Day by day they are destroying my life.”

Assistant Attorney General Boyd replied with evasions and stonewalling. He defended all the actions of the Bush administration, including the mass detentions of Middle Eastern immigrants and the directive by US Attorney General John Ashcroft to monitor attorney-client conversations of those suspected of terrorism. He concluded, “These are extraordinary times and it calls on all of us to react with courage.”

After the meeting several people stopped to speak with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*. An older Somali immigrant said as he walked out of the meeting, “They are not going to give us any details on how they came up with that list of 5,000 people they are going to question.”

Ahmed Talab, president of the Detroit chapter of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, told the WSWs, “The people they are interviewing don’t know their rights. They should interview them with an attorney present. I think they want to find out the political beliefs of these people. I don’t believe in it. Most are students just coming here to study.

“The media are doing their job too by feeding this whole situation. We need to educate the American people. Why would someone come over here, build a business, raise a family, and want to attack this country?”

The questioning of Middle Eastern men could begin this week and is supposed to be wrapped up by the end of December. While Justice Department officials claim the planned round of interviews will be voluntary, a memo instructs FBI agents to “use all appropriate means of encouraging an individual to cooperate.” It goes on to stress the importance of enforcing immigration regulations, suggesting that those reluctant to talk could face the threat of deportation or incarceration.

According to the memo, those questioned will be asked to provide visas and passports as well as the names and phone numbers of family and close associates. They will be grilled on their political views,

education and training, and foreign travel. All the information collected will be fed into a government data bank.

The actions of the Justice Department are so dubious from a constitutional standpoint that even some city police departments have raised objections. The Detroit police department, not noted for its respect for civil rights, has said its officers will not help the FBI in questioning the 83 Detroit men on the Justice Department list.

The city of Portland, Oregon has objected to the Justice Department guidelines for the questioning, saying they are too broad and intrusive. An Oregon statute prohibits police from collecting information about groups or individuals unless there are reasonable grounds to suspect an individual may be involved in criminal activity.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact