

Border “crisis” targets immigrants

State of emergency declared in Arizona and New Mexico

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Democratic politicians in southwestern US states are vying with Republicans in an attempt to cater to nationalist sentiment against immigrants from Mexico. On August 12, Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico declared a state of emergency covering several border counties. Three days later, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano issued a similar declaration. Both cited violence related to drug and immigrant smuggling along the US-Mexico border as the primary reason.

The claim of both governors is that the federal government has failed to provide the resources needed to adequately address a supposedly escalating problem. In response, President Bush, visiting Arizona on August 29, vowed to “deploy more agents and provide more detention space” for undocumented immigrants.

Democratic and Republican politicians in California are pressuring Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to follow suit and declare a state of emergency there as well.

In Texas, Republican Governor Rick Perry has not declared a state of emergency, but a spokesman told the *Dallas Morning News* that “the option remains on the table.” Meanwhile, Republican Congressman John Culberson of Houston has introduced legislation to deputize citizens to form a militia that will “support” the vigilantes of the so-called Minuteman Project (MMP), a right-wing group that has sent volunteers to the Mexico border to watch for immigrants. The MMP is scheduled to patrol the Texas-Mexico border this fall.

The immediate purpose of the emergency declarations is financial: it provides the legal basis for using state resources to supplement local police and county sheriffs. Arizona will use \$1.5 million in state funds as a result of the declaration, while New Mexico will access \$1.75 million. The money will be used for more sheriff’s deputies, more police officers, and for overtime costs and additional equipment.

The declaration of a state of emergency in response to incidents of violence near the US-Mexico border is unprecedented. Such measures are usually reserved for natural disasters or other calamities. The move by the Democratic governors is a blatant attempt to curry favor with the right wing, in preparation for statewide elections in 2006.

In the case of New Mexico, the reports of violence cited to justify the state of emergency do not represent a qualitative increase in crime, organized or petty, along the border regions. According to the *New York Times*, a New Mexico woman was shot in the head by a Mexican police officer in the town of Ciudad Juarez July 30. The same day four undocumented immigrants were killed in a car accident as they attempted to flee Border Patrol agents. Police Chief Clare May of Columbus, N.M. claimed on August 9 that “two bullets whizzed over his head while he was checking out abandoned cars.”

The decision to declare the state of emergency has been met with a mixture of suspicion and praise from local Republican politicians. According to the article in the *Times*, “Allen Weh, chairman of the New Mexico Republican Party, said in a telephone interview on Tuesday that the party commended Mr. Richardson ‘for coming around to the concerns we’ve had for a long time.’” But Weh added, “Of course there’s political motives in the governor’s actions.” He said Mr. Richardson was concerned with trying to hold onto his traditional Democratic base “and position himself in the center.”

For her part, Napolitano has adapted shamelessly to the demagoguery of the law-and-order anti-immigration chauvinists, stating adamantly to a meeting of law enforcement personnel (which she personally organized) “I will do anything I have to, to get Washington’s attention to this matter.”

Both Richardson and Napolitano are running for reelection in 2006, and Richardson has made no secret of his desire to seek national office in 2008, either as the presidential or vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. He has already visited Iowa and New Hampshire, two states with a key early position in the campaign for the presidential nomination.

What an arch-reactionary like Weh calls a “move to the center” is actually an accelerating move by the Democratic Party to positions traditionally identified with the far right. The drastic and disproportionate measures taken by the Democratic governors are only the latest indication that the Democratic Party intends to attack the Republicans from the right on the issue of immigration in 2006 and 2008—in much the same way that the Democrats have sought to attack the Bush

administration's conduct of the war in Iraq as insufficiently violent and brutal, demanding that more troops be sent to the devastated country.

In December 2004, following the electoral debacle for the Democrats, Hillary Clinton, the Senator from New York and a likely candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination for 2008, wasted no time responding to the general call from within the party for an even further shift to the right by the demoralized party leadership. According to an article that appeared that month in the *Washington Post*, "Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is staking out a position on illegal immigration that is more conservative than President Bush, a strategy that supporters and detractors alike see as a way for the New York Democrat to shake the 'liberal' label and appeal to traditionally Republican states."

Clinton outlined the position that is now being taken up by the border-state governors. "I am, you know, adamantly against illegal immigrants," she said. "I mean, come up to Westchester, go to Suffolk and Nassau Counties, stand on the street corners in Brooklyn or the Bronx. You're going to see loads of people waiting to get picked up to go do yard work and construction work and domestic work."

The declarations have not gone unnoticed by the Bush administration, which has been internally divided over how to deal with the immigration issue. While a section of the Republican Party has sought to use the issue to whip up nationalist sentiments and promote law-and-order policies, a section of its corporate constituency, especially agribusiness, has long depended on immigrants as a ready source of cheap labor.

In response to the declarations by the Democrats, Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff promised a series of new measures. According to an August 25 article in the British paper, *The Telegraph*, "Mr. Chertoff said he would build camps for illegal migrants, speed up deportations by providing more judges and lawyers and raise the number of officers tracking down fugitives ignoring expulsion orders." Like the Democratic governors, Chertoff claims to be addressing, according to the article, "public opinion, which is increasingly restive over the unrestricted flood of people into the US."

The supposed massive public concern about immigration is largely fictional. To the extent that it exists, it is a product of the deliberate policy of the two major parties, particularly the Republicans. Especially at a local and state level, Republican politicians have sought to channel legitimate anger and frustration over declining living standards and employment opportunities towards undocumented immigrants.

President Bush echoed Chertoff when he traveled to Arizona on August 29. During his scheduled appearance, officially to discuss Medicare with senior citizens, he vowed to increase the number of agents deployed along the border and to provide more detention facilities for illegal immigrants.

Chertoff's and Bush's responses will escalate this

competition between the two parties to determine which can make the most hysterical statements and take the most drastic measures against one of the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society.

One of the more repugnant effects of the declarations will be to inflame the ultra-right immigrant-haters, who have been living in a make-believe "state of emergency" for several years. The right-wing chauvinists responsible for the MMP feel they have been vindicated by the actions of the Democratic governors and the statements of the Homeland Security department. They will anticipate even less resistance from the state governments in Arizona and New Mexico to future vigilante actions.

In addition, the Republican administrations in the neighboring states of California and Texas are now using the declarations as a justification for their own enthusiastic support for the MMP. Governors Schwarzenegger and Perry have both expressed their approval of the vigilantes in the past.

The declaration of a state of emergency over border violence comes as persistent problems affecting the livelihoods of thousands of working people and families in Arizona and New Mexico have been ignored or received only minimal attention. For example, Arizona and New Mexico's education systems rank 48th and 50th in the country respectively. And just recently in Arizona, over 20 people, most of them homeless, elderly, or immigrants, died due to dehydration and heatstroke. The deaths might have been prevented had as much attention been paid to the situation of the homeless and the dangers facing immigrants who traverse the desert, as has been paid to the so-called "emergency" on the border.

Absent from many of the commentaries on these developments, as well as the statements of the Democratic governors and their press offices, is any serious concern for those who are most often the victims of border violence—the immigrants themselves. Long before the state governments of Arizona and New Mexico felt compelled to declare states of emergency in response to the complaints of angry ranchers and the latest episodes of violence related to trafficking, hundreds of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries were succumbing to the intense heat of the Southwestern deserts and dying on the sides of roads and in the back of sealed trucks, cars and vans.



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