

Connecticut, US: local police deputized to pursue immigrants

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An estimated 4,000 demonstrators, many of them immigrant workers, professionals, small business owners and their families, protested outside the city hall in Danbury, Connecticut late last Wednesday as Mayor Mark D. Boughton and the Common Council voted 19 to 2 to deputize local police officers to enforce immigration laws.

The program known as ICE ACCESS (Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agreements of Cooperation in Communities to Enhance Safety and Security) will train two of Danbury's police officers in immigration regulations and allow them to check federal databases for criminal records of any immigrant they detain. They will also be able to issue summonses to those without proper documentation to appear in federal immigration court.

Republican Mayor Boughton, one of the main proponents of the bill, said in an interview with the *New York Times* that "the intention is to target criminal aliens," to stop document forgery and drug smuggling. The mayor and other council members insisted there would not be sweeps or roundups. However, members of Danbury's immigrant population reacted with anger and fear, citing already high levels of police harassment and racial profiling in this city of 80,000 to 90,000 residents, more than a third of whom are foreign born.

In one instance, a social worker with American citizenship described being stopped three times in one month. "I can't change the way I look; I'm short, I'm brown, and boy do I have a Brazilian accent!" she said. The police sniffed her car for drugs and asked if she knew what was going on in the alley behind a nearby pizza parlor (hatcityblog.com).

The passage of ICE ACCESS is only the latest in a series of repressive measures targeting immigrants in Danbury, whose number has burgeoned over the past

decade. Like many small cities and suburbs across the US, once centers of manufacturing and trade, Danbury had seen its main street boarded up as factories closed and big box stores and malls replaced local tradesmen.

Downtown Danbury—once known as the "Hatting Capital of the World"—had become an economic wasteland in the 1980s. However, the tides of globalization flow two ways, and over the course of the 1990s immigrants were drawn to the area by low-paying service and construction jobs, as well as educational opportunities at Western Connecticut State University and proximity to New York City, less than an hour and a half away. According to the *Hartford Courant*, from 1990 to 2000 the city's population grew by 14 percent, the largest growth of any city of comparable size in the state.

By 2006, Danbury had a greater proportion of foreign-born residents than any other city in Connecticut, a total of 34 percent, up 7 percent since 2000 alone, according to census data.

The city has a sizeable community from Brazil, as well as Connecticut's largest population of people from Cambodia, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador, and the second largest population in the state from India. As a result, Main Street was revitalized with businesses and restaurants largely owned by and catering to the needs of the new immigrant community.

The Chamber of Commerce and City Hall have seized on this economic growth to attract additional investment, and boast of Danbury being "a multicultural, multi-industrial city united in purpose and bursting with energy and pride," as Mayor Mark Boughton said in his annual State of the City address at the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce annual award luncheon in 2005 (*Fairfield County Business Journal*, 26 December 2005).

However, as economic polarization between the town's working people—immigrant and non-immigrant alike—and the town's wealthier residents increases, Mayor Boughton has whipped up anti-immigrant sentiments to deflect social tensions. No newcomer himself, Boughton, age 43, traces his ancestry in Danbury back 300 years. He just won his fourth two-year term in office to become the city's longest-serving Republican mayor.

Boughton's anti-immigrant bias has been confirmed in his appearances on right-wing demagogue Lou Dobbs' show on CNN. Rumored to have national political aspirations, Boughton campaigned on behalf of similarly pro-big business Mitt Romney for Republican Party presidential nominee until he dropped out of the race last week. He now supports McCain, though his stance on illegal immigration remains closer to Romney's desire to ship all undocumented workers out of the US.

Boughton has also used "quality of life" legislation to intimidate and harass immigrant residents. Housing inspection teams have been sent out to find the telltale multiple satellite dishes or numerous cars in driveways indicating subdivided homes where dozens of mostly immigrant workers live in basements and attics.

A crackdown on backyard volleyball games, a favorite pastime of the Ecuadorian community, was undertaken in the summer of 2005 on the pretext that they were occasions for illegal activity. Already back in April 2005, the mayor tried to deputize police as federal immigration officers, but Leonard C. Boyle, commissioner of the State Department of Public Safety, denied his request, saying the city and state had other means of enforcement (*New York Times*, 2 August 2005).

Local residents are right to fear that the police will use the new deputization from the INS to hunt for illegal immigrants. In 2006, a police sting operation in the town park where day laborers wait for jobs picked up 11 illegal immigrants by offering them work, and then arrested them.

However, the turn to police intimidation and use of immigrants as scapegoats in Danbury is far from unique. An increasing number of immigrants live in the towns, small cities and suburbs in the United States that have been hardest hit by the recent economic downturn, not just traditional magnets like New York and Los

Angeles. Isolated in ethnic enclaves, often with limited language skills and few resources or legal protection, immigrant workers are amongst the most exploited.

"I've seen young men who are 17 or 18 years old, and their family has sent them to help support their family in Ecuador," Maria-Cinta Lowe, executive director of the Hispanic Center of Greater Danbury, told the *Hartford Courant*. "I've had people tell me, 'I thought I would find heaven, and I found hell.'"

Passage of the ICE ACCESS bill comes during a national presidential campaign in which both Democratic and Republican candidates, particularly but not exclusively the most right-wing elements, have sought to use anti-immigrant hostility to divide workers along national and racial lines, whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism to deflect anger over the mounting economic and social crisis confronting the working class as a whole.



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