Mass protest in Washington demands rights for immigrant workers

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22 March 2010

In what was unquestionably the largest protest in the United States since the election of President Barack Obama in November 2008, tens of thousands of immigrant workers and their supporters marched in Washington on Sunday to demand an end to anti-immigrant repression and legal status for the millions of undocumented workers who live in the US.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will publish a further report on the demonstration on Tuesday.

Organizers estimated the number of demonstrators at 200,000. The crowd filled the Washington Mall. While the great majority of the marchers were Latino workers and youth, many of them Mexican and Central American, there were also numbers of African and Asian immigrants. Buses brought marchers from as far away as Texas, Florida and California.

It was also the largest demonstration on the issue of immigration since 2006. Then, mass protests and marches swept cities throughout the country after a Republican-led House of Representatives passed a bill that would have turned immigration violations from a civil offense into a federal crime, essentially turning nearly 12 million undocumented workers in the US into criminals overnight.

The corporate-controlled media gave short shrift to Sunday's huge outpouring on the mall, while treating a relative handful of right-wing protesters opposing Obama's cost-cutting health care legislation outside the Capitol as if they represented a genuine mass movement.

Among many immigrant workers there is growing anger over the administration's failure to act on Obama's promise to advance a comprehensive reform of the country's immigration laws during his first year in office.

Instead, they have seen a continuation and intensification of the anti-immigrant policies that were pursued under the Bush administration, with an increase in deportations.

During Obama's first year in office, immigration authorities deported nearly 388,000 people, the largest number ever. The number deported in 2009 was more than double the number deported in 2001, during George W. Bush's first year as president. The number of immigrants detained, often under inhuman conditions, has risen from just over 20,000 in 2001 to more than 33,000 during Obama's first year in the White House.

The criminalization of the immigrant population has continued unabated. Non-citizens now make up 30 percent of the inmates in federal prisons, the bulk of them there solely for immigration-related offenses. Over the past two years, there has been a 45 percent increase in the number of people jailed for such offenses.

The Obama administration has provided tens of millions of dollars to fund even more jail cells for immigrants, while expanding the so-called 287(g) program, which provides federal money to essentially deputize local police in the enforcement of federal immigration laws.

Immigration raids have continued unabated. Recently, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) reported arrests of undocumented workers at a meatpacking plant in Nebraska and a string of restaurants in Maryland. ICE spokesmen insist that these are not "raids," but rather "enforcement actions."

Another program introduced under the Bush administration—"Secure Communities"—has been expanded under Obama. It mandates authorities to check the immigration status of people booked into local jails, even for the most minor offense.

Now, with the 2010 midterm elections approaching, the Obama White House has declared once again its commitment to the overhaul of immigration policy. Two thirds of Hispanic voters cast ballots for the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008. There is growing concern within the Democratic leadership that many of these voters will stay away from the polls in disgust over the administration's policies.

The so-called immigration reform being embraced by Obama, however, will do nothing to ameliorate the attacks on immigrants.

Last week, the president declared his support for a legislative proposal advanced by Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. In an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post*, Schumer and Graham outlined their bipartisan proposal, while failing to spell out its details.

The two senators began with a call for a more effective crackdown on undocumented immigrants. While praising stepped-up immigration enforcement, they lamented that "too many people seeking illegal entry get through."

In response, Schumer and Graham advocate the further militarization of the US-Mexican border, spending even more money on the building of real and "virtual" barriers and increasing the number of Border Patrol agents deployed to apprehend immigrants crossing the border.

"More personnel would be deployed to the border immediately

to fill gaps in apprehension capabilities," they vowed.

They also called for a further integration of immigration enforcement and local police departments and jails in order "to better apprehend and deport those who commit crimes." They made no distinction between serious felonies, which both the Bush and Obama administrations have claimed are being targeted, and minor, non-violent offenses that are used in the vast majority of cases to deport the undocumented.

The proposed legislation would also integrate information on people legally entering the US and overstaying their visas into police databases on wanted criminals.

One of the more controversial features of the proposed legislation—and one that has far-reaching implications for the democratic rights of US citizens as well—would create "high-tech, fraud-proof" biometric Social Security cards, without which no one in the US would be able to get a job.

The claim by Schumer and Graham that the information on the cards would not be incorporated into government databases is hardly credible. What is being proposed is the introduction of national identification cards that can provide police and intelligence agencies with a vast new infrastructure for wholesale surveillance and political control.

After these enforcement measures, the second top priority of the Schumer-Graham plan is that of "developing a rational legal immigration system [that] is essential to ensuring America's future economic prosperity"—i.e., tailoring immigration law to suit the profit interests of US corporations and the financial elite.

Their proposal would expand the issuance of visas to "the world's best and brightest"—those most likely to generate high incomes—while introducing "a rational system for admitting lower-skilled workers."

This "rational system" amounts to a temporary labor scheme—similar to the infamous *bracero* program utilized by agricultural interests half a century ago. The senators claim that this would facilitate a "desired circular migration," with immigrant workers "coming here to earn money and then returning home." The plan would create a new category of exploited workers, virtually without rights and wholly at the mercy of their employers and the government.

As for the nearly 12 million undocumented workers already in the country, Schumer and Graham propose "a tough but fair path forward" that, for the great majority, would provide no escape from the repression and discrimination imposed upon this section of the working class.

First, these workers "would be required to admit they broke the law and to pay their debt to society by performing community service and paying fines and back taxes." Once again, an entire population is to be criminalized, while the fines and taxes that are a condition for their "legalization" will prove out of reach for millions of undocumented workers, who are among the lowest paid and suffer disproportionately from the mass unemployment gripping the US.

In addition, those seeking legal status would have to "pass background checks and be proficient in English." At the end of this entire process, declare Schumer and Graham, they would be required to go "to the back of the line of prospective immigrants to earn the opportunity to work toward lawful permanent residence."

The full implications of going to the "back of the line" are not spelled out. In earlier abortive immigration proposals, this meant being forced to return to their home countries to wait their turn to reenter the United States, thereby breaking apart families.

The statement written by Schumer and Graham includes not one word about bringing a halt to the inhuman practice of separating children from their parents through deportations, dismantling a for-profit immigrant detention system that daily condemns tens of thousands to appalling conditions that violate basic human rights, or lifting the reign of terror that ICE police state-style raids impose upon entire communities.

Obama declared this reactionary proposal a "promising, bipartisan framework" that "can and should be the basis for moving us forward."

It is certain that if and when this legislation moves forward, it will become even more reactionary, as the Obama administration and the Democratic leadership in Congress bow to the right-wing chauvinist campaign of the Republicans, which charges the Democrats with granting an "amnesty."

In the end, the most likely outcome is that the legislation will be scrapped by Congress, in the same way that a similar reactionary proposal was scuttled in 2007 in the face of a campaign by the political right to make immigrants scapegoats for the mounting social crisis.

For the huge crowds that turned out in Washington on Sunday and the millions more immigrant workers that they represent, the Obama administration and the entire two-party system offer only intensified oppression and exploitation. A genuine solution to the crisis confronting immigrant workers can be found only in the unification of the working class as whole in a common struggle for a socialist program that includes the right of workers of every nationality to live and work in the country of their choice with full and equal rights.

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