

Obama seizes on Arizona law to push repressive immigration overhaul

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The anti-immigrant law passed in Arizona last week has caused widespread shock and anger, and a wave of protests in Arizona and across the US.

Senate Bill 1070, passed by Arizona's legislature and signed into law by Republican Governor Jan Brewer on April 23, requires that police stop any person under the mere "reasonable suspicion" that they may be undocumented immigrants. Anyone found without proper photo identification—a driver's license, passport, or Green Card—may be arrested, imprisoned, and deported. The law makes it a crime for any person, group, or community to shelter undocumented workers, and requires local governments to enforce its measures or face lawsuits.

The law's mandate that police act on the suspicion that an individual may be an illegal immigrant will inevitably lead to the racial targeting of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and other Hispanic populations. There is nothing in the legislation, moreover, to prevent police from applying its broad powers for warrantless apprehensions to wider layers of the population.

Since its passage, demonstrations have taken place in cities and towns in Arizona and California, including high school walkouts in several cities, and as far away as Chicago, where dozens were arrested while attempting to block the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) from deporting as many as 70 undocumented immigrants from the Broadview detention center. On May 1, major protests are planned in Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, Dallas, Milwaukee, and other cities.

The bitter opposition of millions against the Arizona law is not shared by the Obama administration, the Democratic Party, and American liberalism. Far from condemning the bill for its authoritarian and racist elements, Obama has muted his criticism, calling it

"misguided," comments echoed by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano—who was elevated to her position based on her own anti-immigrant credentials.

The criticism of the Arizona bill as misguided, "ill-conceived," or "unhelpful" has been echoed by much of the news media. A vaguely-defined movement to boycott Arizona has been launched by Obama's liberal backers, with the city of San Francisco and political opportunist Al Sharpton leading the way.

In fact, the White House and the media have seized on the extreme right-wing Arizona law to promote their own reactionary and anti-democratic immigration agenda—legislation proposed by Democratic Senator Charles Schumer, of New York, and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina.

Schumer and Graham spelled out the contours of their initiative in a March 17 column for the *Washington Post*. The bill's central component would be the creation, in all but name, of an internal passport system. It would require "all US citizens and legal immigrants who want jobs," to carry new, biometric Social Security cards "to ensure that illegal workers cannot get jobs." In spite of Schumer and Graham's protests that personal data "would be stored only on the card" and that "no government database would house everyone's information," the high-tech cards would offer the government a powerful new tool for monitoring the entire population.

The bill would impose new punitive measures on undocumented workers who seek a legal path toward residency, while offering little in return. According to Schumer and Graham, undocumented 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." This stipulation is a clear violation of the Fifth Amendment's protection against

self-incrimination.

Even after undocumented workers confess they are criminals, pay fines and serve “community service” sentences, Schumer-Graham would force them “to pass background checks and be proficient in English before going to the back of the line of prospective immigrants to earn the opportunity to work toward lawful permanent residence.”

The mass of immigrant workers who complete this process would be placed in a “guest worker” program, where they would have virtually no rights and would work entirely at the mercy of their employers.

The proposed legislation would also call for increased militarization along the Mexico-US border by immediately deploying more Border Patrol agents. Like the Arizona law, Schumer-Graham would dragoon local police and jails into national anti-immigration enforcement. (An analysis of the bill is included in “Mass protest in Washington demands rights for immigrant workers”)

Obama has given his full endorsement to the Schumer-Graham proposal, saying in March that he would “do everything in my power to forge a bipartisan consensus this year on this important issue so we can continue to move forward on comprehensive immigration reform.” Similar proposals were supported by Bush during his presidency, and have the support of broad sections of the political establishment.

The Obama administration and its liberal allies will now seize on the Arizona legislation to attempt to push through measures that they know are deeply unpopular. At the same time, the effect of the Arizona legislation will inevitably be to push the “comprehensive reform” even further to the right.

The attack on immigrant workers serves two interrelated purposes. Under conditions of mass joblessness and increasing poverty, singling out immigrant workers is a time-honored means of dividing the working class. At the same time it serves as a pretext for a vast expansion of the police power of the state.

It is mirrored by developments in a number of countries. European governments have pursued the same brutal policies toward immigrants and minorities, raiding immigrant encampments, building mass prisons, and militarizing the Mediterranean Sea. They have increasingly attempted to scapegoat their Muslim

populations, with France pushing for a total ban of the wearing of the burqa, or full-face veil, in public.

In the United States, a broad array of authoritarian and police-state measures have been implemented or are being planned. None of these measures—including the Patriot Act, the litany of domestic spying operations, and the expansion of military operations within the US—have been reversed by Obama. Only a few days after the immigration law was passed in Arizona, a proposal was raised in Chicago to introduce the National Guard to police the city under conditions of mounting social inequality.

Whatever the immediate impulse behind the bill in Arizona, there is a logic to the policy of the American ruling class. There are sections of the political establishment that are well aware that their policy of bank bailouts and social austerity will inevitably provoke mass social opposition. The attack on the rights of workers and the turn to authoritarian forms of rule is their response.

Obama’s support for the right-wing Schumer-Graham immigration reform demonstrates that democratic rights cannot be defended by looking to the Democratic Party or any section of the ruling class.

Workers can oppose these attacks and defend democratic rights only by uniting across all national and racial boundaries behind their own, independent policy. This must include the right of all workers to live wherever they choose. The expropriation of the personal fortunes of the financial elite and the conversion of the finance industry into a public utility will provide the foundation for a massive program of public works that will put tens of millions to work in the US and throughout the North, Central and South America.



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