# Massachusetts Senate attaches anti-immigrant measure to state budget

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This year, the budget process in Massachusetts is being used to wage a two-pronged assault on workers: drastic cuts in school budgets and social services as well as a backdoor attempt to pass a draconian anti-immigrant measure through the state legislature.

The anti-immigrant measure, which was attached to the Senate's fiscal year 2011 budget proposal in the form of two amendments, passed by a wide margin in a body where only five members are Republicans. Twenty-three Democrats joined the Republicans in approving the amendments by a 28-10 margin.

The Senate amendments would deny in-state tuition rates at public universities to "unlawful immigrants," and would deny them any of the public health benefits available under Chapter 118E of Massachusetts law. These benefits include medical assistance for pregnant women, hospital care for the elderly, medical care for disabled children, and access to the MassHealth insurance program funded by the government.

The amendments include a provision that "an applicant for assisted housing under this chapter who is not eligible for federal assisted housing….shall not be given priority over or otherwise displace an applicant who has such status." While seeming just to give priority to legal residents, this clause would open the way for federal raids of people's homes, which have already begun.

The amendments would add to Massachusetts law a new provision to imprison for up to one year anyone who uses a false ID when applying for a job at any state agency—including the MBTA and state universities—or any private employer contracted by the state to provide goods or services. Given the secretive and arbitrary detention system that has been set up for deportees nationwide, there is no guarantee that this one-year limit would be respected once an immigrant has been arrested. Private employers would be denied any state contracts unless they participate in an electronic "work authorization program" of the sort run by the federal Department of Homeland Security to verify immigrants' status.

Most ominously, the state Senate measure would establish a telephone hotline for anonymously reporting any state contractor or agency suspected of employing immigrants who are ineligible to work. Suspected violations of federal immigration law would be referred to the US attorney general.

The *Boston Globe* described the late-night meeting where the Senate leadership drafted the amendments "over strawberry cream pie, cranberry-lime seltzer, and M&Ms—the group, mindful of a new poll showing overwhelming public support for barring illegal immigrants from state services." The reactionary measure was then presented to Senate members just minutes before the vote. It was in this atmosphere that a law affecting the livelihoods—and potentially the lives—of thousands of human beings was decided.

Local media portrayed the Senate vote as a reaction to a poll of Massachusetts residents, conducted between May 20 and 23, which found that 53 percent of respondents supported Arizona's new anti-immigrant law, and that 84 percent were in favor of forcing "individuals to provide proof of citizenship or legal residency if they seek state benefits such as public housing or public assistance."

In truth, state Democrats are moving to the right due to electoral pressures. The surprise election of Scott Brown to the US Senate last fall has led to more Republicans running for state legislative seats, which in the past have often remained under Democratic control uncontested. Democrat William Galvin, the Massachusetts secretary of state, recently told the *Boston Globe* that "the trend is obvious. There are more competitive races, especially in suburban areas where Republican candidates tend to compete best." After the Senate amendments passed, one Senate Democrat who helped to draft them commented to the *Globe*, "Why are we letting the Republicans spot us

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on issues that we were with them on?"

The senators were also reacting to federal pressures manifested most recently in a highly publicized raid in the Boston suburb of Watertown. Three Pakistani men were hauled off in that raid, accused of funneling money to alleged Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad. One of those men has been ordered deported because of immigration and "marriage fraud" charges, but terrorism charges have yet to be brought.

The state's House of Representatives, also controlled by the Democrats, recently voted down its own version of anti-immigrant legislation. However, in the current climate, the House may very well turn to the right. It is common at this time of year for both legislative bodies to attach measures to the budget that are not strictly related to it, and the FY11 budget has not been finalized.

Under Democratic Governor Deval Patrick's watch, two high-profile raids have taken place with his foreknowledge. His office released a press release after the Watertown raid in May, calling it a "a safe and successful operation." After a March 2007 federal raid on the Michael Bianco factory in New Bedford, the *Boston Globe* reported that Patrick's administration had been powerless to persuade the federal agents to provide social services to the workers, despite months of negotiations.

In the Michael Bianco factory raid, 361 immigrant workers were arrested and many were sent directly to deportation centers, despite having left young children at home when they went to work that morning. (See "More than 300 seized in Massachusetts immigration raid")

Should the amendments passed by the Senate become law, more such raids are all but inevitable. Governor Patrick—a friend and supporter of President Obama—feels no need to posture publicly against Obama's policies as he did under the Bush administration.

At the beginning of May, the Boston City Council unanimously passed a resolution urging Mayor Thomas Menino to boycott Arizona businesses. The mayor responded that he "will consider canceling city contracts with firms based in" Arizona if they agree with that state's new law, according to the *Globe*. When considered in light of the Senate's anti-immigrant measures, such gestures would be exposed as even less than toothless.

Many immigrants come to Massachusetts from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti. Using data from 2006-2008, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than 200,000 Massachusetts residents, both legal and illegal, are from this region. Driven to leave by the loss of jobs in their home countries as capital looks around the world for ever-cheaper sources of labor, these workers are now being scapegoated by the political establishment and the media as the economic crisis worsens in the US.

The response from local immigrant advocacy organizations to the Senate measure has been mixed. Renan Leahy of the Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers told the WSWS, "As an organization that works hard to make sure everyone has the right to a dignified life regardless of legal status, we are very disappointed in the state Senate. This unfair amendment can only create more fear and push hard-working immigrants into hiding, punishing us all, including documented and undocumented immigrants, as well as American citizens."

The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition, which took a leading role in aiding victims of the Michael Bianco factory raid in 2007, carries a brief report on its web site of a protest against the Senate amendments.

State and federal law enforcement agencies have been using county jails, the former Fort Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts, and other facilities for detaining immigrants. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) has also established, with typical secrecy and public evasion, a facility in an office park in the Boston suburb of Burlington.

The web site of one immigration lawyer, describing the Burlington facility, notes that the "deportation office is tricked-out with latest state-of-the-art electronics and a 'War Room' with 100 cubicles—all filled with immigration officers hard at work figuring out how to arrest and deport people. In terms of detention, the ICE's Burlington office has 4 cells, each holding about 25 immigration detainees."

The ICE contends that the facility is not being used to hold immigrants overnight, but given the secrecy surrounding such facilities, it is impossible to determine the accuracy of such claims. In a December 2007 article about the facility, GateHouse News Service reported that the Burlington town selectmen and the town administrator were told nothing about the facility for more than a year after the lease was signed.

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