

US detains thousands as states pass new anti-immigrant laws

Bill Van Auken
25 June 2011

US immigration authorities announced a record number of arrests resulting from a nationwide dragnet last month. According to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), 2,400 undocumented immigrants were rounded up in one week of raids carried out in all 50 states. ICE described the crackdown as the largest ever of its kind.

ICE director John Morton claimed that the raids, dubbed Operation Cross Check, were targeted at “convicted criminal aliens who prey upon our communities” and immigrant “fugitives who game our nation’s immigration system.” He attributed the record number of detentions to “excellent teamwork among law enforcement agencies who share a commitment to protect public safety.”

The mass arrests took place amid mounting criticism and tensions surrounding the Obama administration’s hardline immigration approach and the escalating efforts of federal authorities to dragoon local and state police into immigration enforcement.

While he campaigned for the presidency on a platform promising immigration reform, since taking office, Obama has presided over a dramatic increase in the pace of deportations with roughly 400,000 immigrants being thrown out of the country each year.

Earlier this month, New York became the third state to reject participation in ICE’s Secure Communities, or S-Comm as it is known in police circles.

The program enlists local police departments and jails in enforcement of immigration laws, compelling them to forward fingerprints of all those detained to federal authorities so that they can be compared with immigration databases. While ICE has touted the arrangement as a means of removing “dangerous criminals” from the streets, the administration’s own

statistics indicate that three out of five of those who are ensnared in this way and subsequently subjected to deportation proceedings are undocumented workers whose sole offenses consist of entering the country without proper visas or misdemeanors such as traffic offenses.

Local and state police in many areas have opposed the program on the grounds that it intimidates immigrant communities from reporting crimes either as victims or witnesses out of the fear that any contact with the cops can end in immigration detention and deportation.

Immigrant rights advocates have charged that the program serves as an incentive for racial profiling and unwarranted arrests by police intent on discovering the immigration status of individuals who appear “foreign” but would never have been stopped otherwise.

The Obama administration is now insisting that the program is mandatory and that all states must comply by 2013, with those failing to do so facing federal lawsuits.

In an apparent response to the widespread criticism of the program, the Department of Homeland Security last week announced certain modifications to Secure Communities. It said it had issued directives to ICE agents and immigration prosecutors allowing them to use “discretion” where deemed appropriate in deciding whether to seek deportation of immigrants who have committed no serious offenses.

ICE director Morton also said that the agency had created an advisory panel to suggest improvements in the program. Also proposed is statistical monitoring of the program and training for local police.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which has opposed Secure Communities, described the proposals as “nothing more than window dressing” that “failed to

remedy the many civil rights problems associated with S-Comm, including racial profiling and pretextual arrests made by state and local law enforcement officers.”

According to the ACLU, there have been numerous cases in which immigrant women facing domestic violence have ended up being arrested and deported after calling police for help.

The stepped-up enforcement has swelled a vast and inhumane gulag of INS detention centers, privately-run prisons and county jails into which hundreds of thousands of individuals are thrown each year, many of them held for months and some cases years for asylum hearings, deportations or court decisions.

A bill moving through Congress drafted by Texas Republican Representative Lamar Smith called the “Keep Our Communities Safe” Act proposes to legalize the indefinite detention of immigrants that the government is unable to deport.

Paralleling the crackdown against immigrants on the federal level, a growing number of states have passed their own legislation aimed at witch-hunting this section of the working class. Many of them are inspired by Arizona’s controversial S.B. 1070, which was signed into law in April of last year but was blocked by a court injunction after the Justice Department filed a suit that charged the state with usurping the power of the federal government to set immigration law.

On June 9, Alabama Governor Robert Bentley signed into law one of the most draconian of these new legislative measures. Set to go into effect on September 1, the law requires all immigrants to carry documents with them at all times proving their legal status. It makes it a crime for citizens to knowingly give rides to undocumented immigrants or provide them with shelter.

The law also mandates that Alabama public schools determine the immigration status of all of their students and their parents. It does not bar undocumented children from attending schools, which would violate federal law, and the bill’s sponsors claim the measure is meant only to determine how much the state is spending on these youth. It is widely anticipated, however, that this kind of inquisition will intimidate parents into keeping their children out of school for fear that their immigration status will be exposed.

Last month, Governor Nathan Deal of Georgia signed

into law the controversial HB87 which also calls on police to review immigration status of those stopped, and penalizes anyone offering shelter or transportation to undocumented immigrants.

The South Carolina legislature approved a similar measure, creating a state “Illegal Immigration Enforcement Unit”. All police and jail officials are required to investigate the immigration status of all those who they have “reasonable suspicion” of being undocumented. It also requires employers to check the immigration status of their employees against a federal data base under a program known as “E-Verify”. The law creates a new group of state inspectors tasked with visiting businesses to see if they are compliant.

Similar laws have also been approved in North Carolina and Tennessee.

Meanwhile, the Texas legislature appears likely to pass legislation promoted by Governor Rick Perry which would bar any city in the state from refusing to have its local police collaborate with immigration authorities. These so-called “sanctuary cities” would be penalized with a cutoff of state aid.

All of these measures will incur multi-million new expenses in enforcement and administration for states that are confronting crippling deficit crises and are seeking to implement punishing cuts to social services and public employee jobs. The aim of such measures is to divert growing social anger over these attacks against the most oppressed section of the working class, undocumented immigrants.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact