

Deportation of New York City immigrant rights activist delayed as ICE crackdown continues

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New York City immigrant rights activist Ravi Ragbir secured a delay to his impending deportation last week, as his legal team filed suit against the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency for retaliatory targeting of political opponents. Ragbir, who has lived in the United States for 27 years, was scheduled to be expelled to Trinidad on February 10. Federal officials agreed to accept a delay until a judge can evaluate the case, which could be as early as mid-March.

Ragbir, the executive director of the New Sanctuary Coalition, is one of several prominent activists recently snatched up by ICE. He was held from January 11 until January 29, when a federal judge ordered his release, expressing “grave concern” that ICE’s abrupt detention and cruel treatment may have violated the Constitution.

A week before Ragbir’s detention, a fellow leader of the New Sanctuary Coalition, Jean Montrevil, was abducted by ICE agents outside his home in Queens, New York. Montrevil was hurried away in secret to a detention center in Miami where a judge ordered him deported to his native Haiti. He was denied access to a lawyer or even a witness and removed despite an open appeal with the Board of Immigration Appeals—a status which legally entitled him to stay in the country.

The deliberate preparations for Montrevil’s deportation were revealed in a January 19 article in the *Intercept*. Montrevil’s lawyer questioned ICE officials as to why his client was apprehended at home rather than wait for his scheduled check-in. ICE’s deputy office director Scott Mechkowski responded that “we war-gamed this over and over. This was the best time and place to take him.”

ICE agents prepared the same fate for Ragbir. The *Intercept* report detailed the apparent surveillance by

agents at the headquarters of the New Sanctuary Coalition at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village.

Following Montrevil’s disappearance, coalition members began noticing suspicious individuals asking questions about meetings at the church. Idling vehicles with dark tinted windows and distinctive antennas appeared curbside. Upon investigating one of these vehicles, a member caught view of a license plate from the Department of Homeland Security, of which ICE is a part, on the floorboard inside the car. New York plates were displayed on the exterior of the vehicle.

The surveillance at the Judson Church is not an isolated event. Two other local churches, St. Peter’s in midtown Manhattan and St. Jacobi in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, reported ICE officials attempting to enter church grounds during gatherings attended by immigrants.

ICE officials decided to apprehend Ragbir during his scheduled check-in on January 11, despite hundreds of supporters protesting outside the Manhattan office. They detained Ragbir under highly unusual circumstances, without presenting a warrant and despite reassuring him just one day prior that his administrative stay, which should have prevented deportation, remained valid.

As detailed in the lawsuit, ICE officials conspired to isolate Ragbir and remove him as quickly as possible from the country. Rather than process him in local facilities, they shipped him off to the same Miami detention center as Montrevil, where his movement and contacts were restricted and monitored.

Even as the judge ordered his release, ICE attempted to intimidate Ragbir into silence, keeping the 53-year-

old shackled for the duration of the trip back to New York City and ordering him to report again for deportation in less than two weeks.

The pretexts for targeting Ragbir and Montrevil, who both entered the country legally and held permanent resident visas, were non-violent crimes committed more than a decade ago. Ragbir was convicted of wire fraud in 2000, a conviction he is seeking to get overturned. Montrevil served time for a drug possession as a teenager, more than 30 years ago. Both have remained clean since, raising families and building lives in New York—and vocally opposing unjust immigration policies.

Ragbir and Montrevil are not alone. The lawsuit cites a dozen individuals and organizations targeted by ICE for their political activism. Among them is Daniela Vargas, a 22-year-old DACA recipient who was apprehended following a press conference in Mississippi. Immigration authorities, the suit charges, “have investigated, surveilled, harassed, raided, arrested, detained, and even deported these activists in order to silence them.” Further, ICE’s actions “specifically targeting the most vulnerable immigration activists is intended to stifle dissent.”

New York City mayor Bill de Blasio and other local Democratic Party politicians have postured as opponents of the immigration crackdown on activists. De Blasio called on Federal officials to allow Ragbir to remain in the country, citing his “significant contributions to the city’s civic life.” Yet these protestations and the declaration of New York as a “sanctuary city” have not stopped city officials from assisting ICE in the roundup of immigrants.

As Ragbir was detained by ICE, the New York Police Department joined with their Federal counterparts to provide “security.” Ragbir noted that during his detention, eight to ten NYPD officers accompanied ICE officers to the hospital where he received medical treatment, all the while he remained shackled to a hospital bed.

Meanwhile, ICE raids at workplaces, homes and elsewhere continue unabated. Immigration agents now camp out in front of courthouses throughout the city, waiting for an opportunity to detain immigrants caught in the system.

When a 27-year-old immigrant who has lived in the country since the age of three was ambushed by ICE

outside a Bronx court last week, 75 public defenders walked out in protest. “The presence of ICE officers in our courthouses,” Bronx Defenders and Legal Aid said in a joint statement, “is threatening to upend our entire legal process and the principles upon which it stands.”



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