

Indiana immigration crackdown targets Burmese refugees as protests erupt in Fort Wayne and Indianapolis

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Burmese immigrants and refugees in Indiana face an escalating campaign of repression as state lawmakers move to expand cooperation with federal immigration enforcement, even as courts temporarily block deportations and mass protests erupt across the state.

Fort Wayne—home to one of the largest Burmese refugee populations in the Midwest—has become a focal point of both the human consequences of immigration enforcement and growing popular opposition to it.

For more than three decades, refugees from Myanmar (formerly Burma) have been resettled in the city, many fleeing military dictatorship, ethnic persecution and civil war. Now thousands face renewed uncertainty following the Trump administration's attempt to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Burmese nationals, a move only narrowly halted this week by a federal judge.

On January 26, U.S. District Court Judge Matthew F. Kennelly blocked the Department of Homeland Security's plan to begin deportations, calling the decision to end TPS "arbitrary and capricious." The administration had justified its action by citing planned elections in Myanmar later this year—an assertion belied by the ongoing civil war, military repression and mass displacement following the 2021 coup. The court's ruling provides only temporary relief, with a status hearing scheduled for February 6, leaving tens of thousands in legal limbo.

The precarious situation of Burmese refugees is being deliberately exploited by Indiana's Republican-controlled legislature. On January 27, the Indiana Senate passed Senate Bill 76, a sweeping immigration enforcement measure requiring local law enforcement and county jails to comply with ICE detainer requests

and authorizing the state to punish noncompliant local governments by withholding funding.

Authored by State Senator Liz Brown, a Republican from Fort Wayne, the bill mandates that judges be notified when detainees are subject to ICE holds, establishes statewide jail standards for cooperation with federal immigration authorities, and shields police officers from civil liability when enforcing detainers. Despite claims that the bill merely enforces existing law, its purpose is clear: to integrate state and local law enforcement more fully into the machinery of deportation and repression.

The bill passed along strict party lines, with Democrats casting symbolic "no" votes while offering no serious strategy to oppose its implementation or defend immigrant communities. Expressing the passivity and complicity of the Democrats, State Senator Greg Taylor of Indianapolis declared, "We have a responsibility as legislators to put forward public policy that protects against those things," referencing recent ICE-related killings in Minnesota.

Democratic Senator Shelli Yoder warned that county jails are already overcrowded and described the bill as "virtue signaling with real and devastating consequences." Senator Fady Qaddoura cited opposition from local police unions, noting that enforcement would "break the trust between law enforcement and our communities."

These remarks, however, amount to little more than handwringing. Democrats have advanced no concrete plan to block deportations or defund ICE. At the national level, Democratic leaders continue to support increased funding for border enforcement and policing, even as they posture as critics of Republican

“excesses.”

As one protester put it bluntly, “They’re all letting us down, every single one of them... even on the Democrat side. They’re talking about funding ICE even more.”

Opposition to immigration enforcement is increasingly emerging from below, particularly among young people and workers. On January 25, more than 150 protesters marched through downtown Fort Wayne in subzero temperatures at a rally organized by Indivisible Indiana, chanting slogans against ICE terror and state repression.

Days earlier, hundreds of students at Carmel High School walked out of classes and marched to city hall, denouncing deportations, family separations and the militarization of immigration enforcement.

The student protests were part of a nationwide “Free America” walkout marking one year since Trump’s second inauguration and responding to the January 7 killing of Renee Nicole Good by a federal immigration officer in Minneapolis. While the administration has claimed self-defense, state and local officials dispute the account, further inflaming public anger.

Students articulated a growing recognition that appeals to the political establishment are insufficient. “We will not accept or allow fear, corruption and secrecy to go on any longer,” said Carmel student Maaike Alejandra Mora. Another student organizer emphasized the need to move beyond party labels, declaring, “Doing nothing is the greatest danger.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by a FedEx worker interviewed during a protest on January 20, who called openly for mass disruption and a general strike. “We’ve gotta have disruptions ... They’re all letting us down, every single one of them. They’re not hearing our voice and we’re losing democracy on a daily basis.

“We’ve got to get a change in leadership and get rid of this administration. They’re all criminal; that’s why they won’t give up power, because they’re all complicit, even on the Democrat side. They’re talking about funding ICE even more.” When asked what happens if they refuse, the answer was unequivocal: “Then we shut it down. We have the power now to start making change.”

The growing wave of protests underscores a fundamental reality ignored by both Republicans and Democrats: immigration enforcement is not a matter of “policy balance” but a core component of the capitalist

state’s assault on the working class. Immigrants—particularly refugees—are scapegoated to divide workers, suppress wages and expand police powers that are ultimately directed against all workers.

The defense of Burmese immigrants in Fort Wayne, and of immigrant workers nationwide, cannot be entrusted to the Democratic Party, which remains committed to the preservation of ICE, the border regime and the profit system they serve. What is required is the independent political mobilization of the working class—immigrant and native-born alike—against deportations, repression and the capitalist system that produces them.



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