

Driver's license bills attack immigrants

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News Analysis

Under the guise of fighting terrorism, a wide-ranging attack on immigrants has been launched nation wide. Spearheading this attack is state legislation denying driver's licenses to immigrants. This emotionally charged issue has become a major battle in the current legislative session in Connecticut.

Hundreds of protesters turned out last year when the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) proposed tying eligibility for driver's licenses to immigration status. At a public hearing in Waterbury, two busloads of immigrant workers, many members of SEIU, were barred from entering the building and sprayed with tear gas in front of television cameras.

The scandal resulted in a quickly-called, packed evening hearing at the state capitol in Hartford. A wide range of testimony, from immigrant workers to labor leaders and elected officials, argued that the DMV is not trained in complex immigration laws. They called on the State Legislature to limit the DMV's authority to determining driver's license eligibility on the basis of the driving test.

However, in February, under cover of an intensive state budget battle and the war on Iraq, the Legislature's transportation committee voted to send Senate Bill 926 forward, allowing the DMV to revoke immigrants' driver's licenses the day their visas expire. Immigration attorneys have testified that it often takes months of paperwork before visa extensions are completed.

In response, a coalition including the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union (CCLU), United Church of Christ, Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, SEIU, ACORN and the NAACP formed to strongly oppose SB-926 and any amendments to it on the basis that "one's immigration status bears no rational relationship to whether one is qualified to drive."

In a statement to the Legislature they emphasized, "Instead of addressing terrorism, the restrictive measures prevent families from driving to work, school, or the doctor. This regulation change is discriminatory to non-citizens and seems to equate 'immigrant' with 'terrorist.' This is irrational, inaccurate, and morally wrong."

As a result of the coalition's efforts, SB-926 was killed in the Legislature's finance committee. But the original sponsors immediately attached the language as amendments to at least four other bills now scheduled for vote.

Defeat of this effort would have special significance. Peter Gadiel of Kent, Connecticut, who lost his

son on Sept. 11, has been traveling from state to state, urging laws that would limit the rights of immigrants to have driver's licenses.

Gadiel speaks for 9/11 Families for a Secure America (FSA), which describes itself as a "multi-ethnic coalition of Americans both native born and naturalized," but is linked to the corporate-based Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, and is funded by the multi-million dollar anti-immigrant organization Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FSA is mobilizing throughout the greater New York area to pressure the Connecticut Legislature.

The issue of limiting driver's licenses for immigrants is part of FAIR's 12-page backward legislative agenda, including such items as opposition to any amnesty programs, increase of the Border Patrol, allowing use of the military at the border, and "withholding federal reimbursement to state and local governments that do not bar illegal aliens from non-emergency programs and services."

Addressing a recent conference on the Bill of Rights and the USA Patriot Act, John Wilhelm, international president of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union (HERE), warned against "confusing immigration issues with national security issues." He stressed that the struggle for immigrant rights cannot be separated from the overall struggle for civil liberties.

Wilhelm has been in the forefront of the labor movement's support for the rights of immigrant workers, who constitute one of the fastest growing sections of union members. HERE lost scores of members in the Sept. 11 attack, most of whom were new immigrants, busy at work in the early morning hours at low-wage jobs cooking and cleaning.

Wilhelm's speech was an effective answer to FSA's main argument, that the hijackers used driver's licenses to buy airline tickets. "The Sept. 11 attack was not committed by immigrants," said Wilhelm. "Sept. 11 was committed by criminals."

He pointed out that at the time of the terrorist bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by two native-born white males, there was no effort to discriminate against that group as a class of people.

Restricting driver's licenses to immigrants, he said, will not deter terrorism. Rather, it will discriminate against thousands of immigrants who are an important part of our nation's economy and well-being, and will make our roads and communities less safe.

"Repressive techniques against immigrants today will be used on everyone tomorrow," he concluded, urging participation in the Immigrant Workers' Freedom Ride final rally on Saturday, Oct. 4 in Flushing Meadows Park, New York.

In the name of all those who were killed on Sept. 11, native born and immigrant alike, restrictive driver's license and other measures do a great disservice. Calls, meetings, postcards and e-mails are being organized to send that message to the State Legislature. All those who are democratic-minded are urged to make their voices heard.

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