

# Government reform, immigrant rights and their reformist supporters: the ID view

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The wave of protests that have swept across the country the past several weeks involving up to 2 million participants including legal aliens, students, undocumented persons, unions, immigrant advocates, and their supporters, for an immigration policy that would unite families, provide a clear cut path to citizenship, decent living conditions and healthcare, education, and would ensure workplace and civil rights protections, have failed to convince their representatives in the U.S. Senate.

Senators failed to reach bipartisan agreement on immigration reform, since there are tactical divisions among these ruling elites, despite the fact that all these elites agree on the need for “flexible” labor conditions (i.e. job insecurity) and cheap wages –something that would be helped a lot by controlling immigrants as much as possible to keep them tame and obedient to the bosses. This would create also the sort of competition among workers that would force indigenous American workers to accept any work offered to them at the minimum wage determined by their bosses. This was anyway the idea behind NAFTA, which simply implements neoliberal globalisation in the Northern American hemisphere. However, despite the fact that economic and political elites agree on this basic fact (apart from some racist or close-the-borders Republicans motivated by electoral considerations) there are, as always, divisions among them on tactical matters, i.e. on how exactly to achieve this aim within the existing legal framework. Some think of immigration reform as amnesty for people breaking the law, and others who would grant the 11-12 million undocumented persons legalized status and the opportunity to apply for a green card (legal alien).

All this becomes obvious if we consider briefly the history of this bill. In December 2005 the anti-immigrant demagogues in the House of Representatives led by the reactionary James Sensenbrenner, a Republican from Wisconsin, introduced HR 4437 which reclassifies not only undocumented people as felons, but also criminalizes those citizens who provide any type of aid to undocumented people whether it's food, housing, healthcare or legal advice. This repressive bill also provides for the building of a prophylactic wall 700 miles long at the border of Mexico and the US. It also calls for the beefing up of security patrols along the southern border. With the failure of the Senate bill the xenophobic lawmakers won the day. The Sensenbrenner bill is still viable. So there remains the permanent underclass working for slave wages, sub-housing, no healthcare, and limited education.

In more detail, the proposed legislation called the McCain-Kennedy bill divides undocumented immigrants into 3 divisions (which would satisfy the Republicans' hatred of

amnesty):

- Those who have been in the country five or more years do not have to return to their home country before attaining legal status. They would have to pay fines and back taxes, submit to a background check, take several tests including English proficiency and medical tests.
- Those who have been in the country less than five years and more than two years would be required to go to a border entry, stay for some unspecified time, and then be readmitted into the US.
- Those who have been in the US less than two years would be required to leave the country and try to obtain legal entry.

The details of the bill are not clear and appear to be an immigration enforcement tactic which would be more draconian than the current immigration enforcement which has deported at least 1.5 million people in the past ten years. The bill will allow only 400,000 immigrants into the country per year by showing proof that a job awaits them, and after six years they can apply for legal status. However, when they apply for legal status, they might lose their job and have to start the process all over again.

This would not only control the movement of persons across the borders, but also keep wages compressed to the minimum of \$5.15 per hour which has not changed since 1997. It is impossible to live at minimum wage. Working 60 hours a week will only bring home a net income of about \$1,000/ month.

The bill also includes a 'virtual' fence of surveillance cameras along the 2,000 mile border with Mexico. So this immigration reform is really a 'guest' worker security program in which immigrants will still be exploited and would have to compete for a limited number of visas. This way, the elites could achieve all their objectives as prescribed by NAFTA: on the one hand to have absolute freedom to move capital and commodities across the border to exploit both the Latin America market and the cheap local labor cost and on the other to control as much as they wish the influx of immigrants that the destruction of local industry brought about by the flooding of the local markets by the more competitive US products will inevitably create. In fact, therefore, the undocumented have not crossed the border, but the border has crossed them!

The debate on immigration is as old as this country. This country was built on the backs of slaves, indentured servants and a host of other immigrants who provided cheap labor for increased profits. As the US West opened up immigrants from China and Europe provided the backbone for industry and agriculture. Undocumented workers contribute more to the economy than they receive in healthcare. Undocumented workers are not a drain on society as they pay taxes (unlike 90% of corporations) and contribute to social security. Without low-wage unskilled labor the system wouldn't work. The plight of African-Americans comes to the forefront, since they are suffering from high unemployment and high incarceration rates. African-Americans are out of the job market as they are continually deskilled. The undocumented workers movement has to take an anti-systemic stand. Otherwise these immigrants are doomed to poverty.

The globalization of the market economy has not only extended extreme poverty in the South, but also created a new army of unskilled undocumented workers who are clamoring to leave their impoverished countries. NAFTA and FTAA have failed to provide jobs,

housing, healthcare, etc. to the South. The solution to the immigration problem would be to initiate anti-systemic changes in the South that would improve their living conditions through the equal distribution of political and economic power that would involve them in decision-making for self-determination and social transformation aiming at the satisfaction of community needs and not the profit needs of the market economy.

Some have said that the current debate on immigration has become the great civil rights issue of our time.

Perhaps yes, as another reformist strategy that assumes the government grants rights. But, the people do not need 'rights' but the possibility of self-determination denied by the elites. The US Constitution was a repressive document until it was amended by not only the Bill of Rights, but also a host of other amendments like women's suffrage and abolishing slavery, as a result of the struggle for self-determination by women and slaves respectively.

Perhaps no, as an anti-systemic movement. As pointed out in Newsletter no 29, the issue is that the social/political movements of the 60's were anti-systemic movements whereas this movement takes for granted the market economy and representative democracy. Indeed many immigrants wave the patriotic banner and want to take part in the American Dream. Also, this immigration reform focuses on the people from the South, but we do not hear much about the undocumented people from Eastern Europe or Ireland. As it stands, this bill represents a re-adjustment for a market of immigration labor to the demand of the global market for the free flow of labor and money. The McCain-Kennedy bill failed to garner the Latino/a vote, failed to appease the call for more corporate profits, and failed to create the 'guest' worker program.

It is therefore obvious that what is needed is not the sort of reformist "solutions" proposed by even by self-declared 'anarchists' like Noam Chomsky, i.e. the creation of various Development Funds within Nafta (similar to the ones established in Europe by the EU) to support the South. Such schemes failed to provide any real development in the European South and would also fail in the Americas since the destruction of local economies brought about by globalization could not be matched the 'aspirins' provided by these funds. What is therefore needed is the development of an antisystemic movement that would extend to both the North and the South and would fight to unite peoples in Inclusive Democracy confederations in which they would satisfy locally most of their needs, as they themselves determine them, without having to move around in search for the "jobs" offered by elites keen to exploit the labour of the new wage-slaves in order to expand further their own privileges.