

# New York's Democratic governor bows to anti-immigrant hysteria over license plan

By Peter Daniels  
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In an unconditional surrender to a nearly two-month-long campaign orchestrated by the Republican right, New York's Democratic Governor Elliott Spitzer announced this week that he is withdrawing his proposal to allow undocumented immigrant workers to obtain driver's licenses in the state.

Spitzer's capitulation was something of an anticlimax, coming after weeks of signals that neither the Democratic Governor nor any major Democratic Party figure was prepared to stand up to the anti-immigrant hysteria triggered by the plan. First announced last September 21, the proposal would have allowed applicants to obtain licenses by passing a driver's test and proving that they live in the state, without the need to prove citizenship or legal residency in the US.

The Governor claimed he did not anticipate serious opposition. Eight other states have similar procedures, and the proposal was couched in terms of security and safety, as a means of bringing the undocumented "out of the shadows" and reducing the number of unlicensed and uninsured drivers on the road. There are at least 12 million "illegal aliens" in the country, with close to one million in New York State. Undoubtedly, hundreds of thousands of these immigrants are driving without legal licenses.

Obscured by the media's braying about Spitzer "giving away licenses to illegals" is the fact that New York State long issued licenses without any requirement for proof of citizenship or legal residence in the US. It was only in 2002 that then-Republican Governor George Pataki issued a ruling that required either a valid Social Security number or proof of immigration status for obtaining a license.

Attempts by the state to suspend the licenses of undocumented immigrants were blocked by a court appeal, which was itself overturned in the summer of 2006, opening the way to a punitive drive to strip hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers of their ability to drive.

Opponents of the Spitzer plan, led by Republican politicians and TV and radio talk show demagogues, focused on the claim that the proposal was a reward for lawbreakers, and sought to equate the licensing of undocumented immigrant workers with aiding terrorism.

Rudolph Giuliani, who as mayor of New York City defended public services for undocumented immigrants but who is now

running for the Republican presidential nomination on a platform to the right of George W. Bush, was among the first to denounce the idea. CNN television anchor Lou Dobbs, one of the loudest of the anti-immigrant demagogues, devoted weeks of his nightly television broadcasts to condemnations of Spitzer. More than a dozen county clerks in New York, who run the Department of Motor Vehicles offices in the upstate area, said they would go to jail rather than carry out the new policy.

Within a few weeks, driver's licenses for immigrants in New York had become a national issue. The reaction of the Democrats ranged from abject fear all the way to enthusiastic joining in the immigrant-bashing. Not a single major figure exposed the anti-immigrant hysteria.

Some local Democrats, like Kathleen Hochul, the Erie County Clerk, tried to outdo their Republican rivals in denouncing the plan. Hochul promised that if anyone came to the clerk's office seeking a license with a foreign passport but not a valid visa stamp, she would pass the name on to the county sheriff.

Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, at one of the recent presidential candidate debates, first suggested she agreed with the proposal and then immediately contradicted herself. Within hours of Spitzer's announcement that he was withdrawing the proposal, Clinton issued a statement that spelled out clearly her complete agreement with the Republicans on the issue: "As president, I will not support driver's licenses for undocumented people and will press for comprehensive immigration reform that deals with all the issues around illegal immigration including border security and fixing our broken system."

At an earlier stage of the process, about three weeks ago, Spitzer met with Michael Chertoff, the Bush Administration's secretary of Homeland Security, to try to strengthen his security bona fides. Out of this came a new proposal, in which the Governor tried to appease his critics with a three-tier license system.

One license would be part of the Real ID system mandated by federal legislation passed two years ago. This would be available only to citizens and legal immigrants, and would be required to board domestic airplane flights and enter federal buildings. Another license would enable citizens to cross the

Canadian border without a passport, and a third license would be available to undocumented immigrants, but would not be valid as federal identification.

The three-tier proposal didn't satisfy right-wing critics and it enraged advocates for immigrants and civil liberties groups. It was pointed out that the license available to the undocumented would almost immediately become a de facto identification of their immigration status. Chung-Wha Hong of the New York Immigration Coalition denounced Spitzer, declaring, "I know I'm speaking for millions of immigrants when I say I just feel so thoroughly betrayed." Ms. Hong said the license would be the equivalent of a "scarlet letter" for illegal immigrants. Immigrants would drive in fear that the document could turn any routine police stop into arrest and deportation by immigration authorities.

Donna Lieberman of the New York Civil Liberties Union said the new plan would have the effect of discouraging undocumented workers from applying for licenses, thus forcing them to drive with fraudulent or no licenses and without insurance. "This flip-flopping is bowing to the fear-mongering of the Bush administration and turns New York into a poster child for policies based on fear rather than public safety," she added.

As for the Real ID legislation, before Spitzer's groveling before Homeland Security, it had been widely regarded as a dead letter. The program has met with increasing criticism since enactment, both on grounds of costs that would be passed on to the states, and also because it amounts to the backdoor establishment of digitalized national identity papers, while setting up of a national database of 245 million driver's licenses that would greatly facilitate government spying on American citizens and legal residents.

Seventeen states have passed their own legislation either rejecting the program or going on record opposing it. Bills opposing the program have been introduced in 21 other states' legislatures.

Spitzer's attempt to salvage his plan by endorsing Real ID—the first governor of a major state to do so—turned a proposal that was supposedly aimed at bringing New York's immigrants "out of the shadows" into a vehicle for reviving repressive legislation and fueling anti-immigrant measures by the federal government.

The conventional explanation for Spitzer's capitulation peddled by the media is that he simply underestimated the grassroots opposition that his plan would provoke. This opposition was supposedly reflected in opinion polls showing two-thirds of the state's population against the plan.

These poll numbers, however, were created by a relentless campaign by the major media, which in turn largely echoed the talk show demagogues and the Republican right, casting the plan as a "reward" to illegal immigrants and an opening for terrorists. As one observer put it, the issue is now being used to "energize" the Republican right wing. Precisely.

There are tens of millions of working people whose anger over the war of aggression in Iraq and the growing economic crisis and inequality in the US far outweighs any concern about licenses for immigrants, but that anger finds no political expression in the media or within the two-party system.

The driver's license uproar is only the latest tempest stirred up as part of an anti-immigrant campaign that has been gathering force for the past several years. It is no accident that this diversionary demagoguery coincides with the Iraq disaster and now with the epidemic of home foreclosures, the growing anger over astronomical CEO pay, and the storm clouds of recession on the horizon.

The issue is tailor-made to "energize" the most diehard chauvinists and jingoists, a relatively small percentage of the population, while at the same time it is aimed at sowing political confusion among broader layers of the population.

Demagogues like Dobbs, while mouthing occasional populist criticisms of big business, seek above all to divert popular anger and direct it against those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Immigrants, and the undocumented in particular, become the convenient scapegoat for economic hard times.

The anti-immigrant demagoguery, like all forms of racism and chauvinism, can only be exposed by appealing to the class interests of the vast majority of the population. The Democratic Party would sooner close up shop entirely than make such an appeal. Part and parcel of the big business political establishment, it bases itself on the interests of Wall Street every bit as much as its Republican rivals.

In any case, multi-millionaire politicians like Spitzer are a million miles away from the lives and concerns of either immigrant or native-born workers, while at the same time utterly impotent in the face of the demagogic appeals of the Republican right.

The New York driver's license fiasco is a telling political episode. It demonstrates, above all, the urgency of uniting all sections of the working class in the fight for a mass workers party based on a socialist program.

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