

California's immigration program: A smokescreen for the interests of big business

By Dorota Niemitz
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The failure of the federal immigration reform bill, Obama's stalled executive amnesty proposal, and his infamous deportation measures against child refugees have prompted California Democrats to seek to recoup some degree of credibility among their Latino constituency in the run-up to the 2016 election.

To this end, they have introduced a series of purportedly "progressive" immigration measures. This "California package," it is claimed, will create a "state-level citizenship" for millions of undocumented workers residing in the state.

Through the Safe Driver and Responsibility Act (AB 60), which went into effect last January, close to 400,000 undocumented immigrants were already able to obtain a California driver's license. At this point, the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) is not allowed to share information with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which would lead to applicants' deportation, but there is no guarantee that this rule will be sustained in the future.

Another piece of legislation, bill SB 4, introduced by Senator Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens), aims to ensure that all Californians are eligible to receive health care coverage through the Covered California Exchange, regardless of their immigration status.

Presently, in accordance with the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), non-citizens do not qualify for health plans offered through the exchange.

SB 4 would require that, after the waiver from federal authorities has been granted, individuals eligible to purchase California qualified health plans would pay the cost of coverage without federal assistance. Children and youth under 19 years of age would be eligible to receive coverage through Medi-Cal, the state-subsidized health insurance program, but those over 19 would lose their Medi-Cal coverage even if their income is below the

poverty line.

At present, individuals without legal immigration status making less than 138 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$21,707 per year) may qualify for a restricted-scope Medi-Cal coverage that includes emergency and pregnancy-related services. These meager medical benefits will be denied to adults if SB 4 is signed into law.

The recently reached California 2015-2016 budget deal allows for the allocation of \$40 million for health care coverage for qualifying immigrant children while preserving one of the lowest reimbursement rates among similar programs in the United States. Released in June 2015, the state auditor's report questions whether Medi-Cal can meet the demands of its 12.2 million beneficiaries. Due to implementation of Obamacare, Medi-Cal applications have soared, and it is predicted that roughly a third of the state's population will need to rely on Medi-Cal coverage, shocking evidence of the sharply growing economic gap between rich and poor.

California is home to approximately 2.6 million undocumented immigrants, and, according to the Migration Policy Institute, it is estimated that about 1.85 million of them are uninsured. The real motivation behind both SB 4 and AB 60 lies not in any genuine concern about the immigrant workers, but rather in making sure that immigrants are enrolled into Obamacare and auto-insurance programs to support the multimillion-dollar insurance exchange.

Both bills have been presented by Democrats as progressive state-level initiatives that stand in stark contrast to the regressive anti-immigrant measures of neighboring Republican-run Arizona, as well as to the obstructions created by Washington.

These measures are designed to create the illusion that California is a safe haven for immigrants when nothing could be further from the truth. The Obama

administration is deporting undocumented immigrants at a record nine times the rate of a few decades ago, with police and the ICE tracking down migrants and raiding workplaces to check for undocumented workers, expelling laborers and splitting up families. Under these conditions, such a rosy portrayal of the Golden State is hardly credible.

Expansion of many detention facilities—such as the privately operated federal prison in Adelanto, San Bernardino County, which will receive an additional 640 beds to accommodate women with criminal records, immigrants with medical needs and asylum seekers—indicates that, against its promises, the current administration plans to detain an even greater number of migrants.

Lack of proper access to medical care has been a pervasive problem at the detention centers across the country, and it is unknown how many detainees have suffered irreparable damage to their health or even death as a result of lack of medical response, since the ICE has no obligation to report such cases.

In June, 35 of California's most rural counties, such as Sonoma, Solano, Marin, Yolo and Imperial, agreed to extend basic health care to the undocumented poor. Geographically located in the rural parts of the state, these counties are home to many migrant farm workers who perform, under often ferociously exploitative and unsanitary conditions, the toughest and most dangerous jobs in agriculture.

The newly proposed program will offer insultingly inadequate health care services to California immigrant farm workers with the goals of preventing communicable diseases from spreading and reducing the cost of expensive emergency room services for routine care. Behind the introduction of such pitiful welfare measures is the realization on the part of agribusiness that it needs to provide the minimally necessary level of care in order to keep workers productive enough for labor exploitation.

Another ostensibly "progressive" measure awaiting Governor Jerry Brown's approval, the California Agricultural Act (AB 20), proposed by Assembly member Luis Alejo (D-Salinas), would establish a work permit program allowing for undocumented workers already living in California to work lawfully in the agricultural industry. Persisting labor force shortages lie behind the bill's introduction.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the US government has been allowing millions of undocumented immigrants, primarily from Mexico, to work in the

agricultural sector in order to meet the demands of the industry. After the failure of the controversial Bracero Program (the Labor Importation Program of 1942-1964)—allowing Mexican citizens to work temporarily in US agricultural industry under conditions of extreme abuses of civil and labor rights—the same type of program is being reintroduced under a cloak of a state-level initiative granting undocumented workers a pseudo-legal status.

The legislature is supported by the United Food & Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), which claims to represent about 4,500 farm workers and which in the past shamefully betrayed striking grocery workers across California and supported the 2014 cuts to retirees' pensions and health benefits.

As all of the proposed measures require undocumented immigrants to come forward and reveal their identities and addresses, many immigrants will inevitably fear that signing up for one of these programs will expose them to state action and ultimately future deportation. With the ICE relentlessly cross-checking information from multiple databases, it is only a matter of time before all the records targeting the undocumented population in the US will be consolidated and integrated with the FBI's Next Generation Identification biometric database collection project.

Neither the "California package" nor the notion of "state-level citizenship" will guarantee immigrant workers basic rights. They will continue to be denied the elementary rights to vote and to travel freely. They will continue to be denied the rights to unemployment, disability insurance or Social Security benefits, bank loans, and any form of security or stability.

The proposed "reforms" expose the Democratic Party's support for big business in fulfilling its need to keep in place the current, barbaric revolving door immigration policies allowing for the extreme exploitation of low-cost immigrant labor under conditions amounting to modern-day slavery.

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