

Arizona: Grassroots Organizing to Repeal All Anti-Immigrant Laws

Joel Olson Interviewed by Ashley Smith

Joel Olson is a member of the Repeal Coalition in Flagstaff, Arizona. Repeal spearheaded the grassroots mobilization that successfully pressured the Flagstaff City Council to pass an injunction threatening a lawsuit against the state for its anti-immigrant law SB 1070.

SB 1070 has clearly reignited the immigrant rights movement. What is SB 1070 and what forces organized to get it passed in Arizona?

SB 1070 is an all-star anti-immigrant bill. It's a combination of nativist legislation that state senator Russell Pearce and some of his allies like state senator John Kavanagh have been trying to pass for at least three years now.

Approximately 12 percent of Arizona's workers are undocumented according to official statistics. A large percentage of our economy, which is based in construction, tourism, and agriculture, is heavily dependent on undocumented labor.

This sits well with the business wing of the Republican Party that is happy to exploit the workers. But it does not sit well with other sections of the party -- the small business owners who don't rely on undocumented labor; many of the elderly, white conservatives who live in retirement communities; and a section of the white working class. So there has been a rift among conservatives over the question of undocumented labor that has been heating up since 2005.

Up until recently we had a Democrat, Janet Napolitano, as governor. She blocked the most extreme legislation from passing. Every time the legislature pushed these bills they either got killed in committee or Napolitano vetoed them.

But ironically, when Obama got elected, Arizona elected a much more conservative state legislature. Obama appointed Napolitano to the Department of Homeland Security, and the staunch conservative Jan Brewer, who was secretary of state, then became governor.

As a result, there was nothing blocking the nativists from passing their legislation. Pearce's strategy was to put all their anti-immigrant ideas in one big grab bag bill -- SB 1070. He threatened that if the legislature didn't pass it he would put it up as a referendum. The legislature voted for it and Brewer signed it.

Have the protests against SB 1070 both nationally and within the state impacted public opinion in Arizona about the bill?

Initially there was majority support for the bill. A lot of people have cited a somewhat sketchy poll, which relied on some questionable methods that showed 70 percent of Arizona backed the bill.

After the outcry against the bill nationally, the call for a boycott, and protests here in Arizona, support for the bill has dropped. The latest poll that I read revealed that there was just over 50 percent support for the bill. But there is a big gap between an older generation that is overwhelmingly white and a younger generation that is multiracial with a large percent of youth of color. Among those 34 or younger, support drops to 45 percent or less.

	FAVOR	OPPOSE	NOT SURE
ALL	53	36	11
MEN	61	32	7
WOMEN	45	40	15
DEMOCRATS	12	79	9
REPUBLICANS	89	7	4
INDEPENDENTS	46	28	26
WHITE	63	26	11
HISPANIC	15	76	9
BLACK	8	80	12

"Daily Kos/Research 2000 Arizona Poll" (MoE 4%, 3-5 May 2010)

	FAVOR	OPPOSE	NOT SURE
Overall	52%	39%	9%
Republicans	76%	15%	9%
Caucasian	65	28	7
Age 55+	62	31	7
Independents	60	30	10
Men	56	40	4
All registered voters	56	34	10
Age 35 to 54	53	41	6
Women	49	38	13
Age under 35	45	43	12
Democrats	30	58	12
Non-Hispanic minorities	29	63	8
Hispanics	21	69	10

"Attitudes on Recent Immigration Law Divides Arizona on Partisan and Ethnic Grounds; Support Now Only 52%" (Rocky Mountain Poll, Behavior Research Center, 5 May 2010)

The youth of color have grown up with immigrants both documented and undocumented. They don't particularly recognize any legal distinction between them. Compare that to the Baby Boomers. When they were coming up in the 1960s and

1970s, the U.S. had the lowest percentage of immigrants -- 5 percent -- since before the civil war. Now immigrants are about 12 or 13 percent of the population. That is now close to the early twentieth century when it was 15 percent.

The older, white generation folks who were not used to seeing immigrants in their daily lives for most of their adulthood are now seeing signs in Spanish. The younger generation, however, has grown up with immigrants. So SB 1070 has much less support among young folks. But remember it's the older folks that tend to vote.

How did the Repeal Coalition come into being and what has it demanded?

We emerged in January 2008 when some of us saw these bills working their way through the legislature, several of which eventually got bundled in SB 1070. We saw this coming and we thought the debate over immigration in Arizona and the U.S. was stifled between two very narrow positions. On the one side we have the nativist view, which is "kick them all out" and is represented by SB 1070. On the other hand, we have the business wing that says, "let a few of them work, deny them rights, and kick the rest out." So you are stuck between nativism and bracero [guest-worker] programs.

We thought that what was missing from that was the voice of undocumented workers, their loved ones and supporters. Our goal was to insert a third pole into the debate. We believe that all human beings in a global economy have the right to live, love, and work wherever they please.

We knew that the nativists had control of the state legislature. So we knew that lobbying wouldn't work and we weren't particularly interested in lobbying anyway.

We believe instead that power comes from the grassroots. Therefore we need to focus on the local level rather than the state legislature. Our strategy was to build at the grassroots and then put pressure on the cities to declare themselves sanctuary cities and declare themselves opposed to all anti-immigrant legislation as a way to put a wedge between city and state governments.

So we developed a grassroots municipal strategy as opposed to an interest group, lobbying strategy. Events, I think, have proven our strategy to be a wise one.

What kind of forces came together in the coalition?

We had imagined it becoming a coalition. But that in fact didn't happen. We went to a lot of organizations to get them to sign on to our repeal resolution that calls for the repeal of all anti-immigrant laws and declares each city that endorses it a sanctuary city. We went to plenty of groups and no one was interested except for undocumented folks in the working-class neighborhoods as well as Latinos, Black folks, and indigenous people who feared racial profiling. So we became more of an organization who found

members among those groups.

We started knocking on doors and holding meetings called "juntas" in people's homes. We use many of the same tactics that union organizers use. We built ourselves up in Flagstaff and Phoenix.

Then, when SB 1070 became news, people said, "Holy shit what do we do about this?" We were right there and broader forces gave us the time of day for the first time.

How did you get the Flagstaff City Council to sue the state over SB 1070?

We have been working in the neighborhoods building a base of support by holding meetings and organizing rallies. Other forces like Northern Arizona Interfaith Council (NAIC), which does grassroots work as well as engaging with politicians, lobbied politicians against SB 1070, especially City Councilwoman Coral Evans.

Evans' constituency is based in the neighborhood called Sunnyside, where we have been doing most of our organizing. Ms. Evans, to her credit, recognized how devastating this law would be to her community.

Our pressure from below and NAIC lobbying as well as Evans' own political savvy and moral conscience led her to believe that Flagstaff needed to do something about SB 1070. She put the issue on the City Council agenda about three weeks ago. We packed that meeting and insisted that the City Council take some action. They realized that they needed to do something, especially since that there was an election coming up and their constituency was mobilized with expectation that they would act to defend their rights.

The following week, Evans came in with a proposal to file an injunction. We pulled out all the stops to pack that meeting. We outnumbered the Tea Party people six to one. We had 200 people in the chambers, we had 100 people in an overflow room watching the deliberations on a live television feed, and we had 200 people out protesting in the streets. We also had undocumented folks, who were afraid to go into the city hall, sending us messages to read to the City Council.

The meeting started at 5:30 p.m. and didn't get out until 10:00 p.m. Everyone wanted to speak. Evans had a five-to-two majority by the time of the meeting, but under the pressure of the massive community turnout, it turned into a unanimous vote.

Has the precedent of Flagstaff led other cities in Arizona to pass similar injunctions?

The same afternoon that Flagstaff voted, Tucson voted five-to-one to file an injunction. The Mayor of Phoenix tried and failed.

Towns like Nogales have passed resolutions condemning SB 1070 but they have not voted to sue. They don't have the resources. There are other forces working on councils elsewhere. I think you can see a groundswell at the municipal level, but Tucson and Flagstaff are the two cities promising to sue and they have the best chance of overturning SB 1070.

The municipalities in reality are in a lose-lose situation. If they don't enforce the law, they can get sued. If they do enforce the law, they're going to get sued for racial profiling. They are going to get sued no matter what they do. From a strict self-interested perspective, these city governments were compelled to do something.

It seems like the nativist Republicans show no sign of stopping. For example, Brewer just signed a law banning ethnic studies from the public education. Why are they pushing this so hard?

HB 2281 is a law that Brewer signed at the end of April that bans the teaching of ethnic studies in the public schools, but not in the universities. It targeted the Tucson Unified School District, which taught some Chicano history courses.

While it might seem incredible that they could pass this law in the middle of a national outcry against SB 1070, you have to look at this from the perspective of Republican primary politics. Brewer was appointed for governor after Napolitano left. She is running for governor in 2010 and is being challenged by the hard right wing. McCain is also up for re-election this November and is being challenged by an extreme nativist, petty bourgeois SOB.

All the so-called "respectable" Republicans are running as far to the right as they can in order to win their primaries. Of course, they have to tilt back to the center when they run in the general election. But frankly, the Democratic Party is very weak and not very smart here, and so the Republicans push far to the right and do not need to come back to the center much, even in the general election. So HB 2281 is part of the politics of Republican primaries.

How does the ban on ethnic studies fit into the broader attack on immigrants in Arizona?

This law is part of a concentrated attack on undocumented folks. The stated goal of SB 1070 is "attrition through enforcement." In other words, they want to get rid of undocumented people through strong law enforcement. All of these laws point toward that goal.

HB2281, the anti-ethnic studies law, shows that this is not just an attack on illegal immigrants, but also an attack on Latinos more broadly.

What does the organizing look like for the national day of action for May 29 that the Alto Arizona Coalition has called? Get Me to Arizona!

Most of the organizing for that is taking place in Phoenix. It's being organized by a coalition of established immigration reform groups. Repeal Coalition has been recently invited to join, but we have not played a major role in the organizing in the May 29 rally.

Some of the other groups, Puente and Somos, are the main forces behind the demonstration. They are predicting a bigger turnout than the May 2006 rallies, which drew between 70,000 and 100,000 in Phoenix. That remains to be seen, but I do think it's going to be big.

I think these protests are important. We have our own scheduled this Saturday in Flagstaff. People are very angry and want to protest.

The question is what next after the protests? This law is going to go into effect July 28 unless the courts stop it. There are five or six lawsuits that have been filed. In addition to the Flagstaff and Tucson suits, we also have ones from the ACLU and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and some others.

If the courts grant an injunction between now and the time the law goes into effect at the end of July, I'm not sure what will happen. But if the injunction strategy fails, then the only option is massive disobedience of this law.

Our strategy in Repeal is to push cities, universities, public schools, private schools, churches, and even homes to declare themselves sanctuaries, saying that they will not obey these laws and that every human being regardless of their papers is welcome in our town, our church, our school, our campus, and our homes. After the protests, we have to start organizing this civil disobedience.

How does the battle in Arizona fit into the national fight for immigrant rights?

Arizona is the test case; many more states want to try to pass laws like SB 1070 or at least rally their conservative base with such proposals. Repeal has always recognized this. Arizona has been the center of the debate and if we can change the terms of the debate here we can change it nationwide.

That's why all sorts of organizations have put out a call for people to come to Arizona this summer. Puente is organizing a Freedom Summer. Repeal Coalition can always use people if they want to come down and learn how to do grassroots organizing. We are not a 501C3 nonprofit. We run on an extreme shoestring budget. We don't have money and don't have places to put large numbers of people up. If people come down, we need them to be self-sufficient.

There is a hell of a lot of work to be done here and we could use the help. If people are interested in coming and doing some good work, they should contact us and there will be opportunities.

What are the Democrats doing to stop this legislation in Arizona and nationwide?

In Arizona, with a few notable exceptions, the Democratic Party is far worse than the Democratic Party nationwide. It's extremely weak and has no leadership.

It did the right thing in opposing SB 1070; no Democrat voted for it in the legislature. But you cannot expect leadership from them any time soon. The Democrats here and nationwide think that demographic change will lead them to be victorious in 10 or 15 years.

On the one hand, they are willing to lose for the next 15 years. On the other hand, they believe demographics are destiny. But if you are not fighting for the right politics, I don't care what generation is coming, if you don't fight for their hearts and minds, you can't count on them.

On a national scale, the Democrats are not much better. I think the Schumer Bill is a craven attempt to appease the Latino base that is furious that the Democrats have not done anything about immigrant rights. It's also an attempt to appease Republicans by adding everything from biometric security cards to border enforcement.

The Democrats are under the delusion that they can win over some of the Republican base, but they never will. They probably know that their proposal is dead in the water but they hope they can dangle it to sop up some of the anger of their Latino base. I don't expect any leadership whatsoever from the Democrats on this.

Three months ago, people told me that repeal was an unrealistic demand. They are not saying that any more. I would also say that immigration reform is equally unrealistic given the political dynamics of the country right now. Repeal is just as viable an option. To me, frankly, in an economy in which goods and services move across borders, it's only just that workers are able to move across borders as well.

The demand that we should be making is that all people should have the right to live, love and work wherever they please.

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