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Surprising Immigration Crackdown Advances



Gretchen Ertl for The New York Times

Members of the Student Immigrant Movement have been on the Statehouse steps since Sunday.

By [ABBY GOODNOUGH](#)
Published: June 10, 2010

BOSTON — Lawmakers were tangled in budget talks inside the Massachusetts Statehouse this week, but a 19-year-old college student spent even more time at the [gold-domed building](#) on Beacon Hill.

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Gretchen Ertl for The New York Times
Renata Teodoro at a vigil protesting the Massachusetts immigration measure, which gained support after Arizona passed its tough law.

Andres Del Castillo, who just finished his freshman year at Suffolk University in Boston, is holding a vigil on the Statehouse steps to protest what could be the state's harshest crackdown on illegal immigrants in decades. The plan, already [approved by the Senate](#), must survive budget negotiations with the House to become law.

And while Arizona's tough new [immigration](#) policy seemed largely irrelevant here when it passed in April — both legislative chambers are controlled by Democrats who typically pay scant attention to the issue, and [Bill O'Reilly](#) of Fox News has derided Massachusetts as a "sanctuary state" for illegal immigrants — ripple effects hit almost immediately.

Five days after the Arizona measure became law, the Massachusetts House came close to passing a Republican proposal to block public benefits for illegal immigrants. A similar bill failed overwhelmingly just a year earlier. But supporters said the Arizona law — and pockets of anger here over the case of [President Obama's Kenyan aunt](#), who had been living in public housing in Boston while fighting a deportation order — turned the tide.

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"It's all part of the same stew we're in," said Representative Denise Provost, a Democrat from Somerville who said her office was inundated with hostile calls after she voted against the crackdown in April. "It's partly Arizona, partly the economy, partly radio show hosts being obsessed with these issues."

By the time the Senate moved to tighten restrictions on illegal immigrants last month, a Suffolk University/7 News poll had bolstered the position of Republican lawmakers like Representative Jeffrey Perry, who is running for Congress on a platform of curbing illegal immigration. The poll of 500 registered Massachusetts voters found that more than half supported the Arizona law.

The poll, which had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points, also found that 84 percent want the state to require proof of citizenship before approving benefits like public assistance.

Mr. Perry said news accounts about Mr. Obama's aunt, and about a person suspected of being an illegal immigrant who rear-ended another state lawmaker last month, helped ignite the issue here. He also pointed to last month's [arrest of two Pakistani men](#) here on immigration charges in connection with the [attempted bombing](#) in Times Square.

"How much more egregious can it be than the president of the United States' relative, who happens to be illegal, getting a housing subsidy?" Mr. Perry said. "All these stories go against the contention of folks on the other side of the issue that we don't have a problem."

The Senate measure passed 28 to 10, as an amendment to the chamber's budget bill, a day after the poll was released. It would strengthen or expand existing rules that block illegal immigrants from public health care, housing and higher education benefits.

The measure would also require the state attorney general to set up a telephone line for people to anonymously report people suspected of being illegal immigrants and businesses that hire them, and to investigate any such reports. And it would require companies doing business with the state to confirm that their workers were here legally.

"We never expected to have to be on the lookout for something like this in Massachusetts," said Mr. Del Castillo, who has barely left the Statehouse since Sunday and said he would stay until the Senate withdrew its legislation. "It's creating anti-immigrant sentiment within our communities, our schools and our work environments."

Mr. Del Castillo and a small group of others conducting the vigil are especially concerned with a provision that would codify into law an existing policy that bars illegal immigrants from qualifying for resident tuition rates at state colleges. Most of them are students themselves, and their group, the [Student Immigrant Movement](#), has also rallied for federal legislation that would allow illegal immigrants who arrived here before they turned 15 to apply for legal residency.

Most drivers sped past the group Wednesday as it huddled on the rain-slicked Statehouse steps. A few honked in support, and one leaned out the window of his pickup truck to shout "Get 'em out of the country!"

"Someone walked by today and said they were going to call ICE," said Renata Teodoro, 22, referring to [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#).

The six lawmakers charged with budget negotiations are meeting privately, and while the three senators involved all voted for the new restrictions last month, no clues have emerged about their fate.

Gov. [Deval Patrick](#), a Democrat seeking re-election, has refused to say whether he would veto the measure. And but for the group on the steps with their signs, candles and blankets, there appeared to be little focus on the issue this week; a banner across the Statehouse facade cheered on the Boston Celtics, who are facing the Los Angeles Lakers in the [National Basketball Association](#) finals and are dominating public attention here.

Jose Palma, 22, said he felt obliged to camp out at the Statehouse and buttonhole



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passers-by about the crackdown to dispel a perception that it would only strengthen existing rules.

“It’s not just reinforcing what already exists,” said Mr. Palma, who left El Salvador in 1998 and has temporary protected status. “That’s why some of us are sacrificing to be here 24/7 — because we want everybody to understand what it is.”

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