

ARIZ. LIKELY CENTER STAGE FOR PRESSING FOR CHANGE

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Body

In the spring of 2006, some 5 million people, most of them Latinos, filled the streets of America's cities in the biggest immigrant rights protests the nation has ever seen.

The huge marches, hundreds of walkouts by high school students and blue-collar workers and a symbolic nationwide May Day strike achieved a stunning victory. They derailed a bill in Congress that would have made it a felony for anyone to be in the country illegally.

Ever since that fleeting victory, the country's 11 million undocumented have come under increased attack.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress have shunned immigration reform. They rush to throw money at militarizing the border, but dare not fashion a humane process for legalizing those who have lived and worked in the shadows for years.

Even the DREAM Act, a bill to grant legal status to undocumented children who complete college or join the Army, failed to win congressional approval.

Instead, federal raids in immigrant communities have spiraled under President Obama. The number of annual deportations is greater than it was under President George W. Bush, and individual states keep enacting tough new laws aimed at the undocumented.

Each year since 2006, immigrant groups have gathered in big May Day rallies - as they will this Sunday at Union Square and Foley Square. They keep asking themselves: When will Congress finally act?

In the absence of federal action, one state has led the way in hostility and intolerance toward immigrants.

Arizona, with its "show me your papers" law, is what Alabama was at the height of the civil rights movement. Joe Arpaio, the infamous sheriff of **Arizona's** Maricopa County, is the new Bull Connor.

It is long overdue for someone to challenge Arpaio's brazen violations of human rights.

This is a man who routinely seals off and intimidates entire Latino neighborhoods with his dragnets, even recruiting posses of hundreds of armed civilians to assist him.

Three weeks ago, he announced the creation of an air force of 30 private planes and helicopters to assist in his searches for illegal immigrants.

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On Monday, a federal judge ruled Arpaio's deputies violated the constitutional rights of a Hispanic father and son taken into custody in 2009 for no justifiable reason in one such raid.

This month, Arpaio began posting grotesque mug shots of new inmates at the Maricopa County Jail. He then callously called for the public to vote for "mug shot of the day."

No wonder some immigrant advocates are saying the key to immigration reform - as the country heads into a presidential election year - is in Arizona, not in Washington.

"Obama's done nothing except worsen the terror in the Latino communities," said Roberto Lovato, co-founder of Presente.org, the Internet group that successfully organized a boycott campaign to force Lou Dobbs off CNN.

"Then the Democrats ask Latinos to vote for him. Well, that's not going to happen so easily."

Some are urging that tens of thousands of Latino college students and their supporters head for Phoenix next summer, just like the Freedom Riders headed South in the 1960s.

They are already dubbing it "Dream Summer 2012."

As the Republicans and Democrats prepare for their national conventions, the big news could instead be massive student sit-ins paralyzing downtown Phoenix, standing up to the toughest sheriff in America, and demanding that he stop the terror in their communities.

One way or another, the activists say, Democrats and Republicans alike in Washington will have to face the immigration issue.

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