

Competing protests over immigration turn ugly

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Byline: Lisa Fernandez, Mercury News

Body

The national debate on illegal **immigration** has erupted into fistcuffs and legal trouble in an unlikely seat of political activism: a suburban street corner in Fremont.

For the past three months, a group of seniors, war veterans, blue-collar workers and students has taken to Fremont Boulevard and Mowry Avenue every other Friday night to decry illegal **immigration**. But the rallies of the East Bay Coalition for Border Security, as the 30 or so people are called, have drawn ire from members of the International Socialist Organization and Green Party -- mostly idealistic 20-somethings who drive in from San Francisco, Berkeley and Santa Cruz to the counter **protest**.

On a recent Friday, a fight broke out between the two groups. Four men on the border security side ended up with black eyes, chipped teeth and other injuries. A police officer's ear was split and started bleeding. Six people were arrested.

Members of the two groups are now engaged in a war of words about who should be blamed for the incident and why. But their clash has broader resonance, too, as a reminder of just how emotional the **immigration** debate remains, even though it has slipped at least temporarily from public attention.

"We are out there, a small group of middle-class Americans, carrying signs that say, 'Wake Up America,' and 'No Amnesty,' and this international group of socialists just comes and attacks us," said Mary Washington, 60, of Union City and spokeswoman for the border security group, which formed in May.

Clash of ideas

Michael Smith, 27, an ISO spokesman studying geography at UC-Berkeley, says the border security group is not simply a collection of "old, hapless elderly Republicans out there **protesting** illegal **immigration**."

"Part of the reason we're going down to Fremont is to expose that," he said.

Months after the **protests** that drew hundreds of thousands of people across the country this spring, the **immigration** debate has changed course -- and demonstrations are infrequent. Aside from a small **protest** recently in Santa Cruz, Fremont is the only Bay Area city where the border coalition has campaigned -- and drawn counter-protesters.

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In some ways, it is a logical battleground. With 210,000 residents, Fremont is a quiet and family-oriented city, home to immigrants from all over the world, including populations from India, Pakistan, Taiwan, Afghanistan and Mexico. It also has pockets of old-timers, mostly white, some who resist change.

Because of the clash, the pro-border group now either wants to make secret future rallies -- or stop rallying altogether. The ISO -- which supports the anti-war movement in Iraq and the rights of all workers -- is now emboldened to help legally defend those arrested.

Fremont police detective Bill Veteran, who witnessed the scene, said a small group of pro-immigrant Fremont teens started the trouble, egged on by chants from ISO members. Police say at least four of the group were gang members.

David Anaya, 18, Tony Rounds, 18, and two teenage boys -- a 16- and 17-year-old --were arrested on misdemeanor battery charges. Michael Perry, 28, was arrested, too, on an unrelated \$1,000 traffic violation. His wife, Priscilla Perez-Perry, 26, was arrested on accusations of making threats and resisting arrest. All are Fremont residents and have been released on bail.

Perez-Perry, who has three children ages 5 to 9, doesn't defend the violence, but she says she understands why the clash got heated. She is a fourth-generation Mexican-American, born and raised in Fremont. She said she wasn't interested in the immigration issue until recently, when she began researching it, and then joined up when the rallies were happening in her hometown.

Fighting words

"I just wish none of this would have happened," she said. "Both parties have the right to say what they feel, but when you walk into a Latino neighborhood and make racial slurs, like 'Wetbacks go home,' just hearing that is really sad."

Perez-Perry said it may not have been prudent for her husband and his acquaintances to protest on the same side of the street as the border security people, but she also said her friends were being kicked and hit, too. Her husband was hit on the head, she said, and the border security people laughed.

She said her husband was in a gang 18 or 19 years ago, but is not active now. She doesn't know if the others are in gangs.

For her part, Washington, who describes herself as a Christian grandmother, said the emotion comes from the threat that illegal immigration represents.

"I feel and think that strongly about the destruction of our nation, and the life of its people," she said.

Washington said she's worried that Muslim proselytizing will enter this country and convert people to "radical Islam" -- even among the predominantly Catholic Mexicans who compose most of the nation's illegal immigrants.

Washington said she's been interested in the Middle East, and Islam, for more than 50 years and has many Muslim friends.

"At the same time, special groups are given a pass for all sorts of differences," Washington said. Some of those passes, she said, include: "Slamming doors in my face, telling me I was a racist because I have blue eyes and white skin, eating food out of the bins at the grocery store, running red lights, driving badly, not speaking the language of the country, and getting Fanny Mae loans interest-free because their religion forbids usury," because Islam forbids the paying or receiving of interest.

The Fremont debate stems directly from what's happening in Washington, D.C. A House immigration bill, passed in December, calls for building a 700-mile fence, and hiring more Border Patrol agents. It also would make illegal-immigrant status a felony. A competing immigration-reform bill in the Senate also calls for increased enforcement,

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but would provide a path to citizenship for some undocumented immigrants and for a closely monitored guest-worker program. A compromise bill has not been reached.

Contact Lisa Fernandez at lfernandez@mercurynews.com or (510) 790-7313.

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