

Fear Among Undocumented Immigrants

Moving quickly on campaign promises to tighten U.S. borders and crack down on “sanctuary cities,” President Trump is spreading fear among communities where many undocumented immigrants live, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The new mayor of the “People’s Republic of Berkeley,” Jesse Arreguin, is facing a trial by fire. The son and grandson of farmworkers and the first Latino to ever be elected mayor of Berkeley, California, Arreguin finds himself on the frontlines of the “sanctuary city” movement and in the cross hairs of President Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant policies.

I spoke with Mayor Arreguin on Wednesday after Trump signed several executive orders aimed at undocumented immigrants and challenging so-called “sanctuary cities.” Arreguin said he had spoken to many immigrant students in city schools who are not sure what is coming next.

Dennis Bernstein: I wanted to begin, first, by asking you to give us your own response, sort of to the overall, what’s going on. And then we’re going to talk about the implications and how you feel in terms of continuing Berkeley as a sanctuary city.

Jesse Arreguin: Well, in just two days, Donald Trump has not only set us on a course of ruining our planet, by fast tracking the approval of the Keystone Pipeline and the Dakota Access Pipeline, but also stripped the civil rights and civil liberties of our citizens, has pushed a divisive wall, [and] is now threatening cities which had the courage to stand up for being a city refuge for all people, regardless of their citizenship status. And Berkeley is one of those cities.

And so, I’m angry. And I’m concerned about what the executive order the President signed today [Jan. 25] means for the people of Berkeley, and undocumented people throughout our country. And, now, more than ever, we’re going to stand up, and protect everyone, regardless of their national origin, their religion. And, I think, now more than ever, Berkeley needs to be a leader in the resistance against the Trump administration.

DB: I was going to ask you that; People have always looked to Berkeley. You know, they refer to it as the “People’s Republic of Berkeley.” [...] We’ve been on the cutting edge when it comes to conscience and action, so I’m sure the whole world is watching.

Have you been hearing from some of your constituents? ... Is there fear in the

community? Are the kids...we're right across the street from Berkeley High School. There's a good number of kids in there who are probably feeling like maybe they should go into hiding. How's that coming to you?

JA: Absolutely, there's a great deal of fear in the community. And actually, after the election, I visited a number of our schools, including some of our middle-schools and elementary schools. And there are a lot of students who were very concerned about what the election of Trump means for not just them but their classmates. Including their classmates who are undocumented. You know, being uprooted from their schools, from their families, dividing families, dividing communities. And I spoke to these students to try to reassure them that Berkeley will remain a sanctuary city. And "we're here to support you."

So, we're actually going to be working with the University of California, with the Berkeley Unified School District, to try to... sort of coordinate our resources, our legal resources, and our other resources for undocumented residents. Because we need to help people defend against deportations. We need to help people... families are being divided. But there's a great deal of fear.

But, I want to say that the City of Berkeley stands with everyone, regardless of their citizenship status. And we will protect our residents, and ... our city employees are instructed to not, in any way, cooperate with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. We refuse to cooperate with ICE, but we do need to be prepared, for what if ICE comes in our community. What are we going to do?

DB: What are you going to do? Are there preparations, is there a lot of planning?

JA: So, we're beginning to think about that, and plan for that. It happened before, in 2007, ICE came onto the Berkeley High campus to try to identify and detain students. And that's actually where our sanctuary policy came out of. So, it's happened before. Sadly, it is likely to happen again. But we will fight back.

DB: And what about the threats? Is there a concern that this could really take an economic toll? That they can do things to hurt you, to really make it difficult for various constituencies that you represent to get the things that they need?

JA: Absolutely. So, my understanding of the executive order the President has signed [on January 25] would strip cities that are sanctuary cities of federal funds. And in Berkeley, that's around \$11.5 million in federal funding. And that's funding for our most vulnerable. You know, these are housing programs, programs for our homeless, public health programs.

And so, we need to make sure we maintain the safety net, even in the wake of cuts in federal funding. It's going to be difficult, but we need to make sure that we can serve our most vulnerable, but also not cave into the fear and the divisiveness that's coming out of Washington.

DB: Do you think, yourself, a person of color... do you feel that you bring a special sensitivity, do you see this as being quite a personal thing, as well as a political action?

JA: Absolutely. I mean, I'm the son and grandson of farm workers. I'm the first Latino mayor of Berkeley. Probably one of the only Latino mayors in the Bay Area. And so, for me, this is personal. This is real. My grandparents immigrated illegally, to this country. I have friends who are undocumented, this is a real issue.

And friends I know who are undocumented are living in fear now, not knowing what's going to happen. And so, for me, as not only the mayor of the city, but as a Latino, it makes me angry, but it also motivates me, even more, to speak out and to fight back.

And one of the things that's most inspiring, I think ... in the wake of the election... (there's not a lot to be inspired about but, well, it's been inspiring) is just the overwhelming—in this community and throughout the country—the overwhelming desire to fight back. And to stand for the values that make Berkeley, and make our country, such an equitable and inclusive society.

And that was evidenced by the hundreds of thousands or maybe millions of people that participated in the women's marches. And we've got to keep that momentum going. And so, what we're doing in Berkeley, we're remaining a sanctuary city and the policies we will set, and speaking out against, the right-wing agenda from Washington, hopefully we'll work collectively with other cities to lead the resistance that will hopefully change this country in four years.

DB: And, just finally, in the broader view of things, there are many things happening in communities of color, under attack, in many ways. Yesterday [January 24] it was Standing Rock and the pipelines. Now, I'm wondering how you integrate or see these sort of parallel attacks playing into the attacks on immigrants. How does that work for you? How do you see the overall picture, both in the negative and perhaps in the way that it can unite?

JA: Well, I think communities of color and poor people, working class people are under attack by the new administration in Washington, whether it's, you know, desecrating the sacred land, the sacred rights of our indigenous communities, whether it's mass deportation, for us, or building walls to divide our

communities, whether it's pushing the prison industrial complex. I'm assuming we'll see more of a militarized approach to law enforcement across our country, and we've seen how that has played out in communities of color.

So there are real, serious challenges at a time where ... our country is divided. But I think the struggles, the collective struggles that we're all experiencing, provide an opportunity. I think it was evidenced by the very diverse crowds that we saw at the women's march: people coming together to fight back, and to work collectively to stand for a core of progressive values and to also work collectively to bring about real change. And that's inspiring.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
