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Arizona's immigration law: aimed at criminals or at workers?

It all depends on whether one equates 'illegal immigrant' with evil-doers or with laborers.

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Some people look at an impoverished immigrant laborer and immediately think "illegal," with all the stigma that word carries.

Others see that same person and think: There goes a worker.

Betty Madden, a 65-year-old costume designer, told me that when she thinks of immigrants, she thinks about their labor — the folding of linens, the cleaning of bathrooms. Once she was arrested in a Los Angeles protest supporting mostly immigrant hotel workers who perform those tasks. She stood up for them because she's a member of the stage crafts union and loyal to the labor movement.

"In a union, any time you feel you're being attacked or singled out in some way, you have a community to stand up for you," she said.

Along with nearly 600 other union workers and leaders, Madden planned to travel to Phoenix on Thursday, the day SB 1070 was scheduled to take effect.

A federal judge this week blocked most of the law's provisions. But Madden and the activists went anyway, symbolically carrying no documents.

To some, it might seem odd that union workers would protest a law designed to speed the removal of undocumented immigrants. After all, those immigrants are supposedly lowering our wages and busting our state and local budgets.

But the bus riders didn't see it that way. They were more worried about the potential of the law to intimidate legal immigrants, who happen to make up a big chunk of the union workforce in L.A., Phoenix and other cities of the Southwest.

"It's important for white folks like myself who have a little bit of privilege to stand up and say this is wrong," said Dan Barnhart, an L.A. teacher and native of Tempe, Ariz., who also went on the ride.

Barnhart is one of the legions of Angelenos who don't believe illegal immigrant equals criminal. When he thinks of illegal immigrants, he thinks of people who need his help.

He thinks of a girl he knows, of elementary school age, who is just starting to become aware that the border crossing she made when she was a baby will cast a pall over her future. And a brilliant, English-speaking teenage girl he knows whose future education is in doubt because [college financial aid](#) is largely unavailable to her.

"She's a brilliant person who did everything right in her life," Barnhart said of the teenager. "And yet there are people willing to say, 'Sorry, you broke the law when you were 18 months old.'" Barnhart thinks such an attitude violates basic American notions of fairness.

Of course, I agree with Barnhart. So do a lot of other people. That's why most Americans back the notion that we should give most illegal immigrants a path to citizenship — a whopping 81% of Americans, according to a [CNN poll](#) released Wednesday.

And yet, the same poll shows a majority of Americans — 55%— backed the Arizona immigration law.

It seems to me that Americans are of two minds about the immigration question. They like the immigrants they know personally and are willing to extend this generosity of spirit to many of those who've entered the country illegally. At the same time, they believe the United States is a country of laws and want a system where those laws are respected.

But I'm certain it's only a small minority of Americans that truly believes, as one reader put it to me, that illegal immigrants are an "invading criminal army" bent on destroying America. Unfortunately, that minority put its stamp on SB 1070 — even though stats show crime is actually down in Arizona in recent years and [numerous studies](#) show that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than the native-born.

"There's a lot of fear out there, and when there's fear it leads to prejudice and anger," said Shahe Keshishian, a 39-year-old home healthcare worker, and another member of the bus caravan.

Keshishian said he worried that SB 1070 was liable to lead to the same kind of racial profiling he's suffered at the airport at the hands of Homeland Security.

"People, they think I'm Arab or Muslim," said Keshishian, an evangelical Christian and U.S. citizen of Armenian descent.

Depending on your point of view, what Keshishian suffers at the airport is either racial profiling or a mere inconvenience suffered by a few in the name of keeping us all safe. Whatever it is, a small minority of very angry Americans is willing to force legal immigrants and many Latinos to pay a similar price if it will rid the country of illegal immigrants.

They feel this way, it seems to me, because they've embraced a mythology that equates the

undocumented with inherent criminality. In their eyes, people are crossing the border not to be gardeners and nannies, but rather to work for the drug cartels, live off the public dime and steal Americans' identities.

A number of shameless politicians are pandering to this way of thinking and fueling the flames of prejudice.

Last month, the Washington Post's Dana Milbank did a wonderful job of dissecting Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer's and Sen. John McCain's [exaggerations and falsehoods](#) about the alleged illegal immigrant threat. Brewer, for instance, spoke of beheadings in the Arizona desert that have never taken place.

And last year, I dedicated a column to dispelling [10 statistics](#) circulating on the Internet about the cost of illegal immigration to California. I discovered that many of those "facts" were pure fiction.

Thankfully, most Americans can see hysteria about the "illegals" for what it really is.

Madden told me one of the reasons she went to Arizona is precisely because she can't stand all the "radical" rhetoric she's hearing.

"People spew misinformation and misguided values," she told me. "They get a sympathetic ear because there are so many misinformed people. You have to get on board the fantasy."

It's wrong to blame undocumented immigrants for all that ails America. But it's not a pipe dream to work toward an orderly immigration system in which the law is respected by all and we recognize the labor of those who've worked hard and risked much to be here.