NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Thousands protest immigration measures in Ga.

Andrew Nelson Catholic News Service | Apr. 6, 2011
Immigration and the Church

ATLANTA -- Catholics were among the thousands of people who filled the streets surrounding the state Capitol to oppose legislation that targets illegal immigrants in Georgia.

Critics say the proposals will weaken the state's economy and lead to racial profiling.

The crowd railed against a measure in the state House and one in the Senate, holding signs with messages such as "The pilgrims were undocumented" and "No human being is illegal." Throughout the rally, the crowd chanted in Spanish: "Yes, we can!"

Nora Soto, 35, who is in school to learn hairdressing, spent March 24 on Washington Street in the shadow of the Capitol's gold dome. She worships at Our Lady of the Americas Mission in Lilburn.

"It's going to separate families. It's not fair. We came here to work and find a better life," said Soto, who has lived in the United States for 20 years.

Soto was one of a reported 6,000 people at the rally, which featured musicians, priests, political leaders and activists.

The proposals would broaden the powers of local police to enforce immigration laws and would require businesses to use an online verification system when hiring. The bills would also create criminal penalties for assisting people who are in the country illegally.

Each bill passed in the chamber where it originated. A compromise measure was expected to take shape in the final days of the legislative session.

Georgia isn't alone in trying to deal with illegal immigration. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, in 2010, 46 states and the District of Columbia enacted 208 laws dealing with immigration and refugees.

Meanwhile, the American Immigration Council, which also monitors state legislative efforts listed nine other states where legislative efforts to copy Arizona's S.B. 1070 of last year have gone by the wayside. The Arizona law itself is still hung up by court challenges.

Mississippi's Legislature killed more than 30 immigration-related bills, the council reported. Those included bills that would have required people to speak English before receiving a state license, denied public benefits to anyone without legal immigration status and required police to investigate the status of people they suspect of being in the country illegally.

The council also listed Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Virginia and Wyoming as having killed Arizona-style enforcement bills.

An upswing in Latino immigrants -- both legal residents and undocumented workers -- has kept the immigration issue alive.

In Georgia, the 2009 American Community Survey counted more than 735,000 Hispanic residents in Georgia, which is a 69 percent increase since the 2000 census. But overall, Latinos make up a small percentage of all residents, about 8 percent of the state's population of more than 9 million.

At the same time, the state has the seventh-largest population of illegal immigrants in the country, numbering some 425,000, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Heidi M. Tauscher, director of parish and social justice ministries for the Atlanta Archdiocese, called the bills proposed in Georgia "harsh."

"The bill adversely impacts all of us because of the way immigrants here today serve our interests, economically, physically," she told the Georgia Bulletin, the archdiocesan newspaper. "They perform valuable service. They harvest our crops. They clean our buildings; they service our equipment. If they are discouraged from staying or forced to leave, we are the ones that are going to suffer," she said.

Parishioners and ministries that care for the poor and the marginalized may face obstacles if the new law is enacted, she said. The proposed law penalizes people who "transport," "harbor" or "entice" illegal immigrants, which ministries may unknowingly do, she said.

"They have to now worry they could be caught up in the net," she said.

Despite a provision that says otherwise, some people will be impacted more than others, Tauscher said.

"If you are an immigrant, or if you look like an immigrant, you are most likely going to be impacted much more severely than somebody that doesn't share the same appearance," she said.

Georgia lawmakers sponsoring the House version of the bill issued a statement after the rally that read: "There are millions of Georgia citizens working and raising their families who no longer are willing to accept the loss of job opportunities to the nearly 500,000 illegal aliens in our state or to subsidize their presence with their hard-earned tax dollars."

A broad number of groups oppose the legislation, from human rights groups to business leaders, the Georgia Farm Bureau and religious organizations.

Georgia's Catholic bishops issued a statement in early March that urged state lawmakers to "be part of the solution to (immigration) challenges, not create more division."

They called on "Georgia state representatives to resist the imposition of harsh and unnecessary legislation affecting all residents of Georgia, further tearing apart the fabric of our communities and jeopardizing our future."

Frank Mulcahy, executive director of the Georgia Catholic Conference, said state legislators would likely debate the proposals soon. In the end, the decision may come down to Gov. Nathan Deal, who endorsed strong immigration controls during last November's election, he said.

"He's coming to realize the issue is not that simple. There can be costs to the state of Georgia if the legislation passes," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/21/2014 - 01:00*): http://ncronline.org/news/thousands-protest-immigration-measures-ga