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Unlikely allies in welcoming the stranger

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

In April of this past year, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed Arizona Senate Bill 1070 into law, due to go in effect this week. This bill is more commonly known as SB 1070, or in some circles, as the most draconian immigration law introduced in decades. Analogies are being made to Japanese internment camps, the harsh treatment that Chinese people received in the 1800s while they built our railroad system, and so many other groups of people who look different than the majority of those in power.

There have been multiple lawsuits filed against the State of Arizona, including one by a police officer who says that enforcing the law would violate the human rights of Latinos. Another has been filed in the US District Court by several organizations, including the ACLU, NAACP, National Day Labor Organizing Network, and the National Immigration Law Center. This lawsuit is saying that Arizona is trying to illegally circumvent federal immigration law, and is in violation of the First Amendment for profiling based on a presumed accent, among other constitutional amendments. The US Department of Justice has thrown its hat in the ring by filing a lawsuit that claims that the state is interfering with immigration policies exclusively vested in the federal government.

A Phoenix federal judge issued a temporary court injunction yesterday, halting the requirement that police check the immigration status of suspected illegal immigrants. But the judge left intact the law's prohibition on stopping a motor vehicle to pick up day laborers and knowingly employing illegal workers.

The law goes into effect just today -- though at least some of its provisions are stalled -- but it is already impacting Arizona. Some Latino congregations in Arizona have seen spikes in attendance of 30%. The prevalence of yard sales leads people to believe that brown-skinned people are either leaving for other states or returning to Mexico, giving up on the opportunity to live the American dream. (See As SB1070 takes effect, Mexicans say 'Adios, Arizona').

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has come out against the law, as has the National Council of Churches. Interfaith Worker Justice has created a toolkit for how people of faith can respond to the law, including rallying people to go to Arizona to work with like-minded organizations who are working for justice for immigrants. These are the sorts of groups I would expect to come out against this law.

What took me by surprise was when the owner of the Phoenix Suns professional basketball team came out against the law. The Suns wore their "Los Suns" jerseys in a playoff game and many players came out vocally against the law. It was a rare showing of taking a political stance in American professional sports.

The Major League Baseball Players Association has also come out against the law, saying it could affect many of their players' ability to play games in Phoenix against the Arizona Diamondbacks. There have been calls for Commissioner Bud Selig to move the Major League Baseball All-Star Game out of Phoenix in July 2011, but so far he hasn't budged. Several players have said they will not participate in a game in Arizona, including White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen, who managed the American League All-Star team in 2006 and would do so again in 2011 if his Sox advance to the World Series this year. San Diego Padres first baseman and perennial all-star Adrian Gonzalez has also said that he would not participate in an all-star game in Arizona.

This is a time of unprecedented legal action against immigrants for this "Yes We Can" generation. It's a time of unmeasured hatred against people who primarily want a shot to make it and to support their loved ones. However, it's also a time for great amounts of hope. It's a time for the usual suspects - great organizations like Interfaith Worker Justice, the NAACP, and ACLU - to be coming together with an unlikely cast of characters: the MLBPA, Colombian pop singer Shakira and Arizona desert-raised Linda Ronstadt. It's a time to collaborate like never before and broaden what it means to be church in order to stand up for our darker-skinned brothers and sisters.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultholics-blog.com.]

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