11-2-1994

California Governor Pushing Controversial Anti-Immigrant Proposal

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A proposal by the state of California to cut most basic government services to undocumented immigrants has drawn sharp criticism from civic and business groups on both sides of the US-Mexico border. The proposal, which will be voted on during the Nov. 8 elections in the US, has generated a broad debate over the effect it would have on California's economic and trade relations with Mexico if approved.

The proposal, officially known as Proposition 187, will be one of the measures on the California ballot in the upcoming election. The proposition also dubbed "Save Our State" or "S.O.S" is being promoted heavily by California's Republican Gov. Pete Wilson. Wilson is facing a tight reelection campaign against Democrat Kathleen Brown.

In recent months, the proposition has drawn heavy criticism from a coalition of civic and business groups in the US, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens and the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund. Those organizations contend that the proposition would result in human rights violations of undocumented immigrants in California, and could lead to discrimination against legal immigrants and US citizens of Mexican descent.

**Trade, economic concerns**

Beyond the human rights aspect of the proposition, business groups such as the Greater San Diego Chamber of Commerce and the International Chamber of Commerce in San Ysidro, Calif., have also publicly opposed the proposal because of the potential loss of business for the state of California, both in the form of exports to Mexico and a reduction in retail sales to Mexican nationals shopping in San Diego and nearby communities.

While the long-term implications of Proposition 187 for the state of California are not clear, the economic fallout in the short term has been less than encouraging for California officials. For example, Mexican companies completely boycotted the Expo California trade fair in Mexico City in early October. The fair which was intended to showcase products, services, and tourist attractions in California would have normally attracted strong interest, since the state had built strong relations with Mexico even before the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

R.C. Schrader, director of the California trade office in Mexico City, told the El Financiero International newspaper that the Mexican government is also showing its displeasure with California in other subtle ways. For example, he said officials from the Trade Secretariat (Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial, Secofi), who normally would take strong interest in bringing together Mexican and California companies, in recent weeks have been less cooperative. "There has been tension," Schrader told the newspaper. "They are talking about boycotting California products."
Inside Mexico, opponents of California's Proposition 187 organized protests during the last weekend of October at major Mexican border crossings stretching from Baja California to Tamaulipas states. Organizers of the action, dubbed Operation Dignity, passed out flyers discouraging Mexicans from shopping in the US that weekend. The boycotts were deemed successful in Baja California and Sonora states, but attracted minimal participation elsewhere.

According to Alberto Garcia, president of the International Chamber of Commerce in Tijuana, Baja California, the boycott resulted in a 60% decline in retail sales in the California cities of San Ysidro, San Diego, National City, and Chula Vista during the weekend of Oct. 29-31. According to press reports, northbound vehicle traffic at the Tijuana border crossing that weekend was down about 70%.

In an interview with Mexico's official news agency Notimex, Ana Jinich of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce released estimates projecting that merchants in the San Diego area would lose as much as US$14 million as result of the boycott. According to Jinich, Mexican shoppers on average buy about US$250 million of US products per month in San Diego. In Mexicali, Baja California state, protesters also collected signatures for petitions to be sent to United Nations Secretary General Boutros-Boutros Ghali asking the organization to issue a statement condemning Proposition 187.

But despite the success of Operation Dignity in Baja California and Sonora, opponents agreed the boycotts and protests would only have a short-term impact on California. Victor Clarke, president of the Binational Human Rights Commission in Tijuana, noted that many residents in Tijuana, Mexicali, Tecate, and other nearby areas have become accustomed to purchasing certain groceries and other products in the US, which are not readily available in Mexico.

"On Monday, we will all be going to San Diego to buy the things we couldn't get over the weekend," said Clarke. This argument was backed by Schrader of the California trade office in Mexico City, who noted that sales in San Diego surged the week before a planned boycott in November of 1993. That boycott was scheduled the week before the vote on NAFTA in the US House of Representatives.

**Mexican authorities urged to take action**

Meantime, Antonio Garcia Sanchez, a human rights attorney in Baja California, told reporters that Operation Dignity while mainly intended to protest the California initiative also represented an effort to demand greater action from Mexico's federal authorities. Indeed, according to Victor Clarke of the Binational Human Rights Commission, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration has taken no concrete steps on Proposition 187, other than publicly denounce the measure.

"Until now, the Mexican government has presented no global response for the defense of immigrants' rights," Clarke said. In fact, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE) told El Financiero International that the Mexican government has no plans to take official action against California if Proposition 187 is approved by the state's voters. Most political analysts in Mexico blame a growing anti-immigrant sentiment in California directly on Gov. Pete Wilson, who has made Proposition 187 a major plank of his reelection platform.
Some of these analysts have gone as far as to describe Wilson's positions on immigration as "racist" and "fascist." Still, a handful of political columnists attribute the continuing stream of migration to the US to the Mexican economic system, which has failed to create an adequate number of jobs and promoted low wages. "Mexicans are currently crossing illegally into the US by the thousands," writes political analyst Fernando del Paso. "They would cross by the millions in a few weeks if the border were opened totally."

The governors of Chihuahua and Baja California states, both members of the opposition National Action Party (PAN), have been almost as critical of the Mexican government as they have of the US. Chihuahua Governor Francisco Barrio Terrazas, in an interview with Agence France-Presse earlier this month, emphasized that Mexico must do its part to find a solution to the root causes of illegal migration to the US and not "pretend that someone else has responsibility for our problems."

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