

## USA: DREAM Deferred, Fight Continues

Thursday 13 January 2011, by [STEINER Isaac](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2011).

A NEW YOUTH wing of the immigrant rights movement blossomed over the past year — centered on, but not defined by, the DREAM Act. While this bill was the legislative focal point of many immigrant youth-led actions over the last year, its defeat in the Senate (55-41 in favor, five votes short of stopping the filibuster) is not the end — just the end of the beginning.

Originally introduced in 2001, the Act in its various forms would provide young undocumented immigrants a pathway to U.S. citizenship after two years of college or the military. Many of these youth have lived their whole lives here after their parents entered the country with them.

The bill attracted a following among young immigrants who began to organize in local areas and then across state lines. But the movement really took off in 2010. Led by undocumented organizers, activists spent the spring stopping deportations, rallying and picketing, speaking about the realities of their status, and holding mass meetings. With inspiration from the gay liberation movement, many “came out” as undocumented.

By summer, the stakes were raised: four students finished their walk up the East coast from Florida to the Capitol. Others went on hunger strike. Thousands of miles away, five other students held a sit-in at John McCain’s Arizona office — a dress rehearsal for a larger coordinated sit-in at targeted congressional offices during which 20 undocumented youth were arrested.

At the same time that Dreamers were revving up their activism, the efforts of the moderate-centrist Reform Immigration for America coalition were sputtering out. RIFA’s massive March 21 rally on the National Mall had failed to surface any clear demand or strategy. Even the threat of Arizona’s SB1070 put much of the movement into a defensive posture.

Young activists contrasted “comprehensive” bills, with their increasing tilt toward enforcement and border militarization as a prerequisite for minor favorable reforms, with the DREAM Act.

This bill, despite the limited scope of its legalization provision, surrendered no concession that would further criminalize immigrant communities. A flurry of summer activity targeted Republican and Democratic politicians alike, as well as calling for the major national organizations of the immigrant rights movement and Latino communities to support the DREAM strategy.

By fall the Democrats, however cynically, had been pushed to reintroduce the bill. In September, the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and DREAM were both attached as amendments to the military spending authorization — highlighting existing concerns from some leftists and antiwar activists.

In December, hundreds of thousands of targeted phone calls to congressional offices put the bill back into the debate. This time, adhering to activists’ original demand, it was introduced in a stand-alone form. But the new version also reduced who would qualify, in particular cutting out some Dreamers over 30, who had been fighting for the bill for years. When this weaker version passed the House on December 9, it was the first immigration-related vote at the federal level in over 20 years that did not include heightened border or internal enforcement.

The limitations of the new DREAM drew more criticism and disillusionment, both among Dreamers

and observers of the movement. Despite this, hundreds of Dreamers again descended on Washington in the days before the Senate vote for one final push. At a time when far larger and better resourced social bases — notably organized labor — have fought meekly or not at all, the fight for DREAM stands out as a model of organizing and mobilization.

Many young activists are already discussing next steps to build off the organizational gains of the past year and develop a post-DREAM strategy.

**Isaac Steiner**

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