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IMMIGRATION ADVOCATES SPLIT OVER ARIZONA BOYCOTT

By Marc Lacey
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PHOENIX – The boycott of Arizona is on. No, the boycott of Arizona is off. Deciding whether to visit this state, which may or may not be boycotted, is as disorienting as peering into the depths of the Grand Canyon.

After Arizona's passage of controversial immigration legislation in April 2010, musicians canceled Arizona concerts, tourists canceled Arizona vacations and convention organizers bypassed Arizona in favor of less politically toxic states. But the very activists who put the boycott in place, hurting the state's pocketbook in the process, are now divided over whether it ought to continue.

Some called for the boycott's end last year, after a federal judge blocked the most contentious elements of the immigration law. Others have peeled off more recently, with the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy group, announcing last week that it no longer backed the boycott. Still other activists have dug in their heels, insisting that Arizona ought to remain off limits for the foreseeable future.

"There's been confusion surrounding every aspect of this issue from the start," said Kristen Jarnagin, the spokeswoman for the Arizona Hotel and Lodging Association, whose members were battered by the boycott and want it officially and completely kaput. "We're glad some say it's over. To the others, we'd hope they'd be as quick to retract the boycott as they were to get in line at the start."

Whether it is on or off, studies have pointed to significant drops in convention and hotel business in Arizona since the boycott was declared. Besides that, activists point with pride to the letter that Arizona business leaders, fearing more protests, wrote to state lawmakers this year urging that they back off from even tougher immigration measures they were considering.

But the mixed signals are creating confusion among those who are sympathetic to the cause.

The singer Steve Earle, who joined the boycott last year, scheduled a concert in Tucson in July, thinking the boycott had been lifted. After being criticized, he canceled but expressed frustration as he did so.

Mr. Earle said in a statement that he wanted "to do more research about the boycott and its effects because as someone who supports the immigrants rights movement, I am not convinced that it is useful to continue to stay away from progressive fans in the state."

Other artists have decided to perform in Arizona, boycott or no boycott.

Los Lobos, which initially backed the boycott and canceled its Arizona shows last year, went ahead with a concert in May in Tucson. To show its opposition to the Arizona law, the band

allowed immigrant rights groups to raffle off a signed guitar and to distribute literature to concertgoers in the lobby. Four groups joined in, but not Coalición de Derechos Humanos, an immigrant rights group in Tucson, which issued a statement saying the concert would “diffuse the effect that boycotts and event cancellations have.”

One of the early public officials to back away from the boycott was Representative Raúl M. Grijalva, a Democrat from Tucson, who found his constituents up in arms about the prospect of even more economic suffering.

“I am telling people to come back to Arizona,” Mr. Grijalva said last week. “My opinion is the new strategy ought to be to invite people to come but to urge them to help change the political climate.”

The Service Employees International Union, an influential boycott proponent, ended its support for economic sanctions against Arizona in December. But the Sound Strike, a Los Angeles group that urged entertainers to steer clear of the state after the passage of Senate Bill 1070, said last week that the boycott continued.

Juan Ramos, a pastor at Love International, a large bilingual church in central Phoenix, recently persuaded a national group of evangelicals to hold its convention in Arizona, arguing that the boycott, which he never supported, was hurting the immigrants it was supposed to help.

But Kat Rodriguez, program director for Coalición de Derechos Humanos, continues to recommend that tourists stay away, musicians cancel for-profit concerts and conventions look elsewhere for meeting space.

“Our interest is not boycotting for the sake of boycotting,” Ms. Rodriguez said. “We want the state not to continue with business as usual. People think S. B. 1070 was last year’s news, but immigrants in this state are still suffering.”

The law never fully went into effect. A federal judge blocked the provision that required police officers to check the immigration status of those they stop who are suspected of being in the country illegally. The State of Arizona has appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court. Gov. Jan Brewer, who gained both political traction and scorn by signing the law, has condemned the boycotters as misguided, saying on one occasion, “They’re hurting the people they pretend they want to help.”

As it is, some activists say the boycott is over, others say it is on, and many take an intermediate stance in which they call on visitors to make a difference if they come to the state.

“We’re looking for real actions and not just people coming here to play golf at some convention or go to the Grand Canyon for the views or Sedona to stand in front of the vortexes,” Ms. Rodriguez said.

Many of the municipalities and school districts that joined in the boycott last year have not changed their stances. “We’re just watching the situation,” said John Stiles, spokesman for Mayor R. T. Rybak of Minneapolis, who last year ordered department heads to steer clear of Arizona.

Unsure whether the boycott was still in effect, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, the largest organization of Latino evangelical churches in the country, reached

out to Arizona pastors before deciding to hold its conference in Tucson this month. Those pastors were eager for moral support, said the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the group.

"What prompted us to hold our summit in Arizona is that we don't want people to forget Arizona," Mr. Rodriguez said. "We don't want the immigration issue on the back burner. We want to remind people that this is a state that attempted to incorporate racial profiling into its law."

Javier Gonzalez, the organizer of the Sound Strike, said that the group had been holding concerts in Arizona throughout the boycott but that they were events from which the bulk of the proceeds went to immigrant rights groups.

"We need to look at the next step," Mr. Gonzalez acknowledged. "There is a difference of opinion that exists. Some artists want to never play in Arizona again. Others want to know when they can go back."

Lady Gaga's decision to forgo the boycott, even though she denounced the immigration law from the stage during her July 2010 concert in Phoenix, drew criticism from some activists. A concert planned this month in Phoenix by Manu Chao, a French singer of Spanish heritage, is drawing praise because it is free and in support of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

One reason the boycott has lost its effectiveness, some immigration advocates say, is that the legislation aimed at making life difficult for illegal immigrants has spread from Arizona nationwide.

"With Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina passing similar or more onerous legislation, the point of telling people not to visit Arizona is moot now," Mr. Grijalva, the Tucson Democrat, said. "And I'm not sure it makes sense to have a long list of boycotted states."