

Racist campaign against Somali immigrants in Maine

By Peter Daniels
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Hundreds of people from throughout the state of Maine are expected to protest a January 11 rally that has been scheduled in Lewiston, the state's second largest city, by a white supremacist group calling itself the World Church of the Creator.

The racist group, which is based in East Peoria, Illinois and claims to be the fastest-growing white supremacist organization in the US, is calling for the expulsion of all Somalis from the Lewiston area. More than 1,000 Somali refugees have settled in the city over the last two years.

Fleeing civil war and economic and political chaos in their home country, the Somalis have come to Maine by way of Kenya, where they were placed in refugee camps. They began immigrating to the US in the mid-1990s, many settling in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Unhappy with conditions there, they sought a smaller community.

The first Somalis arrived in Lewiston in February 2001. There are now over 400 Somali adults in the city, and the Somali population, including children, may be as high as 1,500, a little more than 4 percent of city's 36,000 inhabitants.

Lewiston is an old industrial city facing persistent unemployment and declining population. When the Somalis first began to arrive, they were welcomed. Soon, however, there was talk of property tax increases and baseless rumors of refugees receiving free cars and apartments.

The racists of the World Church of the Creator see an opportunity for recruitment and publicity. They are scapegoating the Somalis to capitalize on the fears of local residents who face high levels of unemployment and cutbacks in social services. Like Hitler, whom they openly hail as a hero, their aim is to whip up racial and religious hatred in order to destroy democratic rights won over generations of struggle.

The white supremacists do not act in a vacuum, however. They found ammunition for their campaign in the recent actions of the city's mayor, Larry Raymond. Raymond issued a three-page public letter in early October, calling for a moratorium on new Somali arrivals and claiming that the city could not absorb more refugees "without negative results for all."

Seeking to shift blame for the city's social crisis on the newcomers from Africa while appealing to the most backward and reactionary impulses, Raymond's letter declared: "It is time for the Somali community to exercise discipline. We have been overwhelmed ... our city is maxed out financially, physically and emotionally."

Many of the Somalis had been forced to turn to public assistance, but about half of the adult refugees have found jobs. The number of Somalis receiving welfare has dropped substantially, and the city has spent \$450,000 to assist the refugees, a modest percentage of the local budget of \$70 million. Greater sums are undoubtedly spent on tax breaks and other windfalls for corporate interests and the rich.

When the mayor issued his letter, Somali community leaders denounced it as "inflammatory and disturbing," and said Raymond was

an "ill-informed leader who is bent toward bigotry." Local residents joined in this response, expressing solidarity with the immigrants. A march of some 300 people, mostly long-time residents of Lewiston and neighboring Auburn, proceeded from a Methodist church to a mosque where many of the Somalis worship, to express support.

In order to fight anti-immigrant racism, however, it is necessary to expose the demagoguery behind it and offer an alternative that can unite native-born and immigrant workers. As local press reports point out, this is not the first time that immigrants have faced attacks in Lewiston. Irish workers began arriving in the 1850s and French Canadians followed soon after. As the textile and shoe industries developed, these workers were absorbed into the local economy, and the same process took place on a vast scale throughout the US.

Today, however, almost all of the old factories have closed. The vast changes in the global economy in the past quarter-century have produced a level of immigration unprecedented in the US for the last century, but the current wave of immigration takes place under conditions of stagnation and economic crisis. The immigrants are pitted against native-born workers in competition for low-wage jobs in the service sector of the economy. The fascists emerge from their holes because the profit system cannot provide jobs and a decent future for all.

The Somalis are primarily political refugees. Though they are now told they are not welcome in the US, it is the policies of the US government that are directly implicated in their refugee status. Washington's cynical intervention in Somalia, leading to the disastrous UN-backed US intervention with 30,000 troops in 1992, created the conditions which have produced one of the world's largest refugee populations—about 500,000 Somalis living in exile as of 1999, compared to 9 million inside the country.

In the last decade the US has been largely free of the widespread anti-immigrant sentiment whipped up by fascistic elements in European countries—in France, Norway, Austria and elsewhere—as a means of winning votes and gaining political influence. Anti-immigrant rhetoric has generally been played down by most establishment politicians in the US, but as the current economic crisis deepens this will change. Local officials in Holyoke, Massachusetts, for example, recently moved to scuttle a plan for the resettlement of Somali refugees.

As cities and towns face an influx of immigrants, the issue of how to provide jobs and public services for all is posed with greater urgency. The Democratic and Republican politicians in the US, like their counterparts in Europe, will pander to anti-immigrant prejudice and open the doors to openly fascist elements because they have no answer to unemployment and social decay.

The unity of the international working class, against the racial and ethnic divisions produced and encouraged by the profit system, is the only way to answer the forces that employ racism and xenophobia to attack the democratic rights of all working people. In the US, this means breaking from both parties of the financial oligarchy and fighting for the development of an independent mass socialist party of the working class.