

Death toll rises on US-Mexico border

Stop the persecution of immigrant workers!

**Bill Van Auken (SEP presidential candidate)
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Grim figures released this month by a division of the Homeland Security Department underscore the human cost of the US government's crackdown against immigrant workers.

According to US Customs and Border Protection, the number of undocumented workers dying in the attempt to cross the US-Mexico border has risen to 275 since the beginning of the fiscal year last October.

The agency, which has merged US customs, immigration and the Border Patrol into one entity dedicated to the Bush administration's "war on terrorism," said that during the same 11-month period, the number of undocumented workers arrested trying to cross into the United States from Mexico climbed 26 percent, reaching a record of over 1 million people.

The official death toll includes only fatalities recorded by US border agents. Hundreds more deaths—migrants whose bodies end up on the Mexican side of the border and are handled by local authorities or never located—are not counted by the US government.

The number of dead has risen more than tenfold over the last decade, as Washington has increasingly militarized the border. In 1994—the year that the Border Patrol launched Operation Gatekeeper, its first effort to seal the border around San Diego—the official total of migrant fatalities reached only 23. Now, reports of immigrants suffocating in tractor-trailers and railroad cars, dying of thirst in the desert or drowning in the Rio Grande have become so commonplace they barely get a mention in the news.

Washington has erected walls on the border, inundated easier crossing routes with border guards, and brought in sophisticated military equipment such as Black Hawk helicopters and unmanned aerial drones to hunt undocumented migrants.

None of this, however, has stemmed the flow of refugees fleeing the poverty and oppression that American capitalism promotes south of the US border. It has merely driven them into the most dangerous areas of the frontier, in particular, the Arizona desert, where a record number have died in the

past year.

The brutality and abuse inflicted by the Border Patrol upon immigrants have been augmented by heavily armed paramilitary vigilante groups, such as Ranch Rescue, which have proliferated on the border, terrorizing migrant workers with the tacit approval of the US authorities.

Attacks on immigrants already in the US have also escalated in the context of the "war on terrorism." In the wake of September 11, Muslim, South Asian and Arab men were targeted for roundups, lengthy detention without charges and deportation. Now, all those who have entered the country without visas are increasingly treated as potential terrorists, even though not a single terrorist suspect has been netted through this crackdown on undocumented residents.

Over the last several months, special immigration enforcement units have conducted dragnet-style sweeps in immigrant neighborhoods in California, Washington state and a number of other areas far from the border. Teams of agents have picked up people on the street, at bus stops and in supermarkets, terrorizing entire communities.

Increasingly, the federal government has sought to enlist state and local police in the persecution of undocumented workers. The Justice Department has reportedly issued a legal finding that such law-enforcement agencies have the "inherent authority" to enforce immigration law, a break with long-standing legal precedent.

The Justice Department has also announced that it is entering into its criminal data bank the names and descriptions of nearly 300,000 people who are charged with overstaying visas or otherwise staying in the country illegally. Half of those on the list are from Mexico. This information will be available to local police making routine traffic stops.

An amendment to the USA Patriot Act brought before Congress last year sought to explicitly empower local cops to enforce immigration laws. It included an exemption from any liability under federal civil rights law for acts carried out in apprehending the undocumented, giving the police a

license to brutalize these workers.

In a number of areas, local police have been all too willing to oblige, harassing Latino immigrants and others who appear to be foreigners with demands for immigration documents.

A number of states have enacted more restrictive laws governing the issuance of driver's licenses, in many cases depriving undocumented workers of the means to secure a livelihood. In New York State, which has one of the highest concentrations of immigrants in the country, the state government has announced a change in policy, declaring that it will not issue or renew licenses to immigrants who cannot prove they are in the country legally. As a result, some 300,000 people are expected to lose their licenses.

These attacks, carried out under the cover of a war on terrorism, are part and parcel of the assault on the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class as a whole. They serve to maintain a large layer of super-exploited workers, who are denied the protection of minimum wage laws, safety regulations or any other form of protection. These workers are forced into the most backbreaking and dangerous jobs, and their under-paid labor enriches the service sector, the construction industry, meatpacking corporations and other capitalist enterprises.

According to the US Census Bureau, there are approximately 33 million immigrants in the US, between 8 and 14 million of them living in the country without legal status. No amount of immigration sweeps or crackdowns will drive these workers out of the country, and no matter how intense the militarization of the southern border of the US, they will continue coming.

More than 45 percent of all immigrants entering the US are Mexicans, who account for a substantially larger share of the undocumented. Since the 1980s, Mexican workers have seen the real value of their wages fall by more than 70 percent. More than 60 percent of the country's population work outside the formal economy, while the majority earn less than double the minimum wage of approximately \$4 a day.

Living standards have been decimated and millions of jobs destroyed by more than two decades of "structural adjustment" programs dictated by US-based financial institutions in the name of "free markets" and "free trade." The net effect of these programs has been a vast transfer of wealth from the masses of Mexican working people to the multinational banks and corporations and the local oligarchy.

The situation on the US-Mexico border is a powerful expression of the universal tendency of capitalist globalization to virtually eliminate border restrictions for the transnational corporations and for those wealthy enough to buy citizenship, while turning frontiers into militarized

zones against those whose labor creates the wealth of these same companies and individuals.

To oppose the worldwide machinations of the transnational corporations, the Socialist Equality Party fights for the unity of the US, Mexican and international working class based on a common struggle and uniform strategy against global capitalism. We denounce the police measures that are being taken against undocumented workers and reject the anti-immigrant chauvinism that is the stock-in-trade of both big business parties.

Earlier this year, the Bush administration called for an updated version of the infamous Bracero program. Under the pretense of offering partial legalization to the undocumented, the Bush proposal would legalize their ruthless exploitation, while granting them no real rights. Touted as an example of the Republicans' "compassionate conservatism," this reactionary scheme has been shelved in the face of virulent opposition from the party's ultra-right-wing base.

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, for his part, has remained largely silent on immigration policy. Saying he would provide a "path" to citizenship for undocumented workers, Kerry has offered no details. In an interview with the Spanish-language network Telemundo last June, he voiced support for laws denying these workers driver's licenses and defended the immigration raids.

The SEP is running in the election to fight for the unity of immigrant and native-born working people. Ours is the only party that stands for the fundamental principle that all workers must be able to live and work in whichever country they choose.

On this basis, we demand an immediate end to the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants and insist that anyone who works in the US who desires it be granted citizenship, with full legal and social rights.



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