

Bush's immigration speech—an appeal to militarism and reaction

Socialist Equality Party
16 May 2006

The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally condemns the vicious anti-immigrant policy put forward by President George W. Bush in his speech from the White House Oval Office Monday night. We condemn as well the craven response of the Democratic Party, which embraced in all essentials the administration's attacks on millions of immigrant workers living and working in the US.

Bush's speech was ignorant, short-sighted and reactionary. While crafted with the short-term goal of satisfying both the prejudices of the Republican Party's extreme right-wing base and the profit interests of the US Chamber of Commerce, the proposals outlined by the US president have far-reaching and ominous implications.

The plan unveiled by Bush—the deployment of 6,000 National Guard troops on the Mexican border, the drafting of state and local police to hunt down undocumented immigrants, the issuance of new national ID cards and the setting up of massive detention camps for those caught crossing the border—goes a long way in accelerating the drive to create a police state in America.

Bush began his speech by acknowledging that millions upon millions of immigrant workers have taken to the streets of cities throughout the United States over the past two months to demand their rights as workers and as human beings. He quickly drew an equals sign, however, between this mass democratic and social movement and the activities of a handful of armed fascist vigilantes known as the Minutemen, who have taken it upon themselves to hunt down migrants along the US-Mexican border.

The president then promised to "make it clear where I stand," which, not surprisingly, is with the Minutemen, insisting that the principal issue is for the US to "control its borders." That the activities of a group of armed goons on the border counts for more than the social movement of millions speaks volumes about the narrowness and the nature of the political constituency upon which the US administration relies.

This was the first speech delivered by Bush from the Oval Office since he assumed office more than five years ago that did not deal with either the "global war on terrorism" or the US occupation of Iraq. Yet it employed the same appeals to fear and political backwardness that have been the hallmark of the "terror" campaign.

This is a president whose popular support has now sunk to the lowest level recorded for a US president since Richard Nixon was on the verge of being driven from the White House by the threat of impeachment. Bush's reaction to this massive popular opposition is to attempt to rally the ultra-right and to turn once again to the military.

His solution to the immigration question, despite his protests to the contrary, is precisely the militarization of the US-Mexican border. In addition to the deployment of 6,000 federalized National Guard troops, Bush promised to appropriate billions of dollars for the erection of a "high-tech" wall separating the two countries, equipped with "motion sensors, ... infrared cameras... and unmanned aerial vehicles" to hunt down immigrants seeking to enter the US.

This proposal has aroused such hostility in Mexico that even the

country's right-wing President Vicente Fox, perhaps the most servile head of state in regards to Washington in the country's history, felt compelled to call Bush personally to protest the plan.

The deployment of the US military along the frontier with Mexico has grave implications. This, after all, is an international border that was redrawn through a bloody nineteenth century war that robbed Mexico of half of its national territory. In 1916-1917, it was again a war zone with the punitive expedition led by Gen. John Pershing in pursuit of Pancho Villa. Bush's assurances notwithstanding, the deployment of US troops in close to division strength carries with it the threat of reigniting these historic conflicts.

The prospect for an exchange of gunfire is more than hypothetical. The Pentagon removed US military units from a support role on the border in 1997, after a Marine commando unit stalked and then shot to death 18-year-old Esequiel Hernandez, who was herding goats in the Rio Grande in Texas.

Moreover, the militarization of the border has profound domestic implications. As in the response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the US military is once again being called up to enforce domestic laws. Whatever the alibis about their being used for "logistical support," this is the objective significance of the deployment of federalized guard troops. It is one more step in the militarization of American society and the legitimization of the methods of military repression and dictatorship.

Combined with this unprecedented use of the military to enforce immigration policy is Bush's proposal to enlist state and local police for the same purpose. "We will increase federal funding for state and local authorities assisting the Border Patrol on targeted enforcement missions," Bush declared. "And we will give state and local authorities the specialized training they need to help federal officers apprehend and detain illegal immigrants."

The prospect of enlisting local cops for the purpose of rounding up undocumented workers has ominous implications. In many areas of the country, local and state police agencies have rejected such proposals—insisting on a strict separation between federal immigration and local criminal enforcement—on the grounds that they would only fuel tensions with immigrant communities.

A federal mandate for local and state police departments to join in a crackdown on the undocumented would revive the kind of odious practices identified with the fugitive slave act of pre-Civil War America. Cops would be encouraged to stop and demand papers from anyone who looks or sounds "foreign," creating a climate of fear and intimidation for millions of Americans, undocumented immigrants and citizens alike.

Then there is the Bush's proposal for a "new identification card for every legal foreign worker" utilizing "biometric technology, such as digital fingerprints, to make it tamper-proof." It is not hard to see that such a proposal carries with it the inevitable demand for the introduction of national identification cards for citizens as well, submitting the entire population to ever greater surveillance and control.

Bush's demand for a crackdown on those crossing the border without authorization is combined with a proposal for a "temporary worker program" that would essentially institutionalize a large pool of low-wage immigrant workers without any rights, who would be unable to bring their families with them and would be subject to forced repatriation to their own countries once their labor is no longer needed. It would, in short, constitute a malleable and disposable work force well suited to the profit interests of American big business.

"This program would match willing foreign workers with willing American employers for jobs Americans are not doing," Bush declared. This ugly euphemism merely serves to justify the super-exploitation of a layer of immigrant workers by employers who exploit their legal status to intimidate and oppress them. Under Bush's plan, this practice would receive state sanction and enforcement. Those workers who sought to better their conditions through collective struggle and organization could be swiftly deported and blacklisted, never to be admitted again.

As for the estimated 12 million undocumented workers already living and working in the US, Bush argued for "a rational middle ground between granting an automatic path to citizenship for every illegal immigrant, and a program of mass deportation." This amounts to a call for splitting the difference between a humane and democratic policy and one that would require methods on a par with those of Nazi Germany.

Bush respectfully acknowledged the Republican-led House of Representatives for having passed an "immigration reform" bill last December that would convert all 12 million undocumented immigrants into criminal felons, while threatening anyone who offers them assistance—medical personnel, teachers, social workers—with criminal prosecution. He called upon the Senate to swiftly approve legislation and then for the two houses to reach a compromise.

Clearly, he and the rest of the US political establishment envision any such compromise measure entailing punitive measures against one of the poorest and most exploited layers of American society. These workers, Bush insisted, would be subjected to a "meaningful penalty for breaking the law," would have "to work in a job for a number of years," would "have to wait in line behind" those given legal entry by the US government and would otherwise be compelled to "pay their debt to society."

Then, in the sanctimonious tone of America's hypocrite-in-chief, Bush proclaimed that "every human being has dignity and value no matter what their citizenship papers say." Yet, clearly some have less dignity and value than others.

The president went out of his way, once again, to stress the English language as a pillar of American society, appealing to the proponents of "English-only" legislation. Once again, proceeding from its extreme crisis and isolation from the sentiments of broad masses of the population, the administration pursues a policy based upon stupidity and pigheaded reaction with the sole aim of assuring the loyalty of a thin layer of the ultra-right.

Following in the wake of his ignorant denunciations of a group of Latino pop artists for recording a Spanish-language version of the "Star-Spangled Banner," Bush's remarks represent a drive to elevate English to the status of an official language, something that was never introduced in the US Constitution and was explicitly rejected by the founders of the American republic as undemocratic.

Proceeding like a band of political pyromaniacs, those in the White House do not bother to contemplate the far-reaching consequences of such political agitation in a country where tens of millions speak Spanish as their first language. The attempt to elevate English to an official status carries with it the threat of splitting the country along language lines, with demands for equal status for Spanish. In more than a few instances, such battles over language rights have brought countries to the point of national division and even civil war.

As could only be expected, Bush's ostensible political opposition within the Democratic Party offered no alternative to this reactionary policy and, if anything, criticized the administration from the right.

Speaking for the Democrats, Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois began by declaring, "We must act now to secure our borders." He added, "Democrats are willing to support any reasonable plan that will secure our borders, including the deployment of National Guard troops."

Much as in the party's response to the war in Iraq, the criticism is directed not at the aims of the administration, but rather the execution, and over much the same issues. Durbin lamented the National Guard's lack of manpower and equipment and voiced concern that it would be diverted from other interventions "at home or abroad."

Like Bush, Durbin stressed that the Democrats upheld a punitive attitude towards the undocumented. "People who have broken our laws should not and will not be rewarded with amnesty," he declared.

Of course, what none of the big business politicians ever address are the international economic and social forces that drive immigration. What propels millions of people, particularly from Mexico and Latin America as a whole, to seek employment in the US are desperate economic conditions that are themselves the product of more than a century of exploitation and oppression of these countries at the hands of US-based banks and corporations.

These conditions—in which more than half of Mexico's population subsists on less than \$2 a day—have only been exacerbated by the increasing global integration of world capitalism, which allows transnational corporations to shift their production from one country to another in search of ever-cheaper labor.

While these corporations, the international banks and world financial institutions all demand the absolute right of capital to cross borders without any restrictions, workers seeking to provide for themselves and their families are confronted with the ever greater militarization of these same borders.

The result is a steadily escalating death toll. According to official statistics gathered by 13 Mexican consulates covering the US border region, 2,104 Mexican migrants have lost their lives attempting to cross the border into the US between January 2001 and April 2006. US government attempts to crack down on border crossers have only driven up the death rate as immigrant workers are pushed to take more isolated and dangerous routes. Thus, while 391 died in 2001, by 2005 the number had climbed to 443.

It is only the working people of the US who can advance a genuinely humane and democratic response to the problems confronting the millions of immigrants in America. They must reject the anti-immigrant policies of both the Democrats and Republicans and uphold the right of workers everywhere to live and work in the country of their choice with full equality. It is only on this basis of uniting the working class—immigrant and native-born alike—across national boundaries that a successful struggle can be waged against global capitalism.



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