

Statement by New York SEP candidate Bill Van Auken

Hillary Clinton's immigration policy and the death of Daniel Basilio

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The death of 29-year-old immigrant construction worker Daniel Basilio in a New York City building collapse on the morning of Saturday, October 7 is a tragic expression of the vast social and economic divide that exists in New York and nationwide. It also stands as an indictment of the role of both Democratic and Republican politicians, including my opponent Senator Hillary Clinton, in cynically scapegoating foreign-born workers.

The incident took place at around 10 a.m. in the heavily immigrant neighborhood of Corona, Queens as at least five workers were pouring concrete from the top of a multi-story structure. The top (fourth) floor pancaked onto the third floor and the scaffolding on the front of the building caved in, injuring several of the workers.

Two workers on the roof managed to escape death or serious injury by jumping onto the roof of an adjacent building. After escaping the collapsing structure, they pulled the three others, including Basilio, to safety. One of the workers, a 16-year-old, suffered a crushed chest.

Basilio, despite frantic efforts of fellow workers and rescue workers to revive him, was pronounced dead on arrival at about 10:30 a.m. at the New York Hospital Medical Center of Queens. Authorities reported that his head was partially crushed from the collapsing structure, and he went into cardiac arrest, causing his death.

Daniel Basilio was an immigrant from the central Mexican state of Hidalgo. He had been traveling back and forth between his native land and the US for the last 13 years, working and sending money home to support his wife and a 3-year-old daughter, as well as his extended family in Mexico.

Within hours after his violent death in Queens, his wife in Mexico gave birth to his second daughter, unaware that her husband had been killed. Family members in New York said that they had not wanted to tell her about Basilio's death for fear that the stress might cause her to lose her baby.

Basilio is typical of the growing army of underpaid workers—an ever-increasing percentage of them immigrants—whose labor provides an essential foundation for the vast fortunes that are made and spent in a city that is the

center of world finance capital.

While profits for the Wall Street banks and major corporations as well as the personal income of New York's wealthy elite have soared, real wages for the vast majority of working people in the city have stagnated or fallen. The most precipitous decline is at the bottom of the social ladder, with the city's poverty rate now standing at twice the national average. The share of New Yorkers living below the absurdly low official poverty line climbed from 17.9 percent in 2000 to 25.5 percent in 2004.

This increased poverty rate affects native-born and immigrant workers alike. All those who depend upon an hourly wage are struggling to make ends meet as the cost of housing and other basic necessities continues to rise astronomically.

Media reports indicated that besides photographs of his family, Mr. Basilio's wallet contained just \$18 and about 300 Mexican pesos.

In New York and elsewhere throughout the country, immigrant workers like Basilio take the hardest, lowest-paying, and most dangerous jobs. In neighborhoods not far from the accident in Queens, as well as in urban and suburban areas throughout New York, these workers gather on street corners seeking temporary work from contractors looking for cheap labor.

Employers exploit the undocumented status of many of these workers to keep wages low and intimidate any who might think of organizing or informing the authorities of safety violations or other abuses on the job.

Many of the construction contractors in New York City routinely violate building codes and cut corners on safety in order to boost profits. Fines, to the extent that they are even issued by the city's woefully understaffed Buildings Department, are considered a cost of doing business.

The company involved in last week's fatal accident has been issued three violations for not having a permit for work on the weekends, not having approved construction plans, and failing to protect public property. The fines for these violations, which cost a man's life, carry a maximum penalty of merely \$5,000. The building has been under construction for seven months,

presumably in violation of these regulations, yet city authorities did nothing until a worker was killed.

Government figures indicate that while the total number of workplace fatalities dropped 16 percent between 1992 and 2005, the number of Latino workers killed on the job soared by 72 percent in the same period. Two out of three of these workers are undocumented.

While the same figures indicate that the number of Latino workers injured on the job has fallen in recent years, most experts believe that this contradictory data only indicates that the undocumented do not report injuries and are dissuaded from filing for workers compensation or seeking employer medical benefits by the threat that they will be fired or turned over to the immigration authorities.

This is the brutal social reality that underlies the fraudulent debate conducted by the Democrats and Republicans on the immigration question. At the end of the current congressional session earlier this month, my opponent, Hillary Clinton, joined with House and Senate Republicans and 25 other Democratic senators in voting to build an anti-immigrant fortified fence along large stretches of the US-Mexican border.

Even some of the right-wing proponents of this reactionary, xenophobic project acknowledge that it will do little or nothing to stem the tide of immigrant workers, driven from their own countries by the chronic poverty and unemployment created by globally mobile capitalism. At an estimated cost of up to \$7 billion, the wall serves primarily as a political device for Republican and Democratic politicians to appear “tough” on immigrants like Daniel Basilio. Its principal practical implications, should construction on this monstrosity ever begin, will be to drive immigrants to more and more dangerous crossing points, thereby further elevating the already record death rate on the border.

The politics of Hillary Clinton, who in an interview three years ago declared herself “adamantly against illegal immigrants,” contributes directly to these deaths on the border, as well as those of workers like Daniel Basilio, which occur on an alarmingly regular basis at construction sites and sweatshops throughout the US.

Her support for the anti-immigrant wall is driven in the immediate sense by her presidential aspirations for 2008 and the thinking of her political handlers that the position will undercut the Republican Party’s appeal to anti-immigrant sentiments.

On a deeper level, however, these politics reflect the interests of the corporations and America’s richest 1 percent, of which Hillary Clinton and her husband are a part. They serve to reinforce the oppression of immigrants, assuring American capitalism a supply of low-wage and highly exploitable labor. This is the hypocritical essence of Washington’s loud debate about immigration and the border. It is really a matter of how best to calibrate this oppression, in order not to cut off this flow of cheap labor, while maintaining enough legal sanctions

against immigrants to ensure that they remain under the employers’ boot.

The Socialist Equality Party and I as its candidate for Senate from New York categorically reject the entire framework of this debate. As our name suggests, we stand for equality for all and we base ourselves on the bedrock principle of internationalism.

Instead of spending \$7 billion to build a wall, we propose that billions be spent to eradicate poverty wages, unsafe working conditions, and employer intimidation of all workers—native-born and immigrant alike. The economy must be fundamentally reorganized so as to meet the needs of average working people, rather than to serve the profit interests of big business and fatten the bank accounts of multi-millionaires like Clinton.

Immigrant workers, who produce immense amounts of wealth for the US economy, are not to blame for the relentless decline in living standards and working conditions of the American working class. Rather, it is the profit system and the two big business parties that defend it.

We stand for the unconditional right of workers of every country to live and work where they choose. We call for full democratic and citizenship rights for all immigrants, including the 12 million or more now classified as undocumented or “illegal.” We also call for the implementation of a socialist foreign policy, based not on promoting the exploitation of workers throughout the Americas and across the planet by US-based transnational corporations and banks, but rather on the cooperative and planned development of the world economy to meet the needs of all.

Putting an end to the deaths of workers like Daniel Basilio and halting the decline in the living standards and working conditions for working people as a whole requires the development of a new independent political movement based on a program that unites the American and international working class on the basis of their common interests.

I urge workers, students and young people to join the fight for this program by supporting our campaign, voting for our candidates in November and, above all, making the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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