

Obama orders troops to Mexican border

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President Barack Obama's order deploying 1,200 National Guard troops to the Mexican border marks another reactionary turn in his immigration policy and a threat of intensified violence against immigrant workers.

The order will more than quadruple the National Guard force presently operating in the four southern border states—California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Besides the added troops, the administration is asking Congress to appropriate an additional \$500 million to step up operations by the US Border Patrol.

The action came on Tuesday, the same day that Obama met with the Senate Republican caucus, and appeared to be a gesture aimed at deflecting criticism from the Republican right that Washington has not done enough to “control the border.”

The White House did not issue any formal announcement of the military deployment. Rather, an Arizona Democratic member of Congress, Gabrielle Giffords, revealed the decision to send more troops. Running for reelection against a Republican challenger who is campaigning on the immigration issue, Giffords hailed the move. Administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, later confirmed the decision.

The source of the announcement suggested that Obama acted largely on the basis of such short-term political calculations, attempting to give Democrats a right-wing platform on which to run against Republican opponents seeking to whip up anti-immigrant sentiments.

The government of Mexico reacted cautiously to the new US military deployment on its border. It expressed the hope that the troops would be utilized to “combat organized crime which operates on both sides of the border,” and that they would not “carry out activities directly linked to the enforcement of immigration laws.”

The deployment comes just a week after Mexican President Felipe Calderón made a state visit to Washington, where he condemned, including in a speech before Congress, a new Arizona law that calls upon local police to detain individuals on “reasonable suspicion” that they are undocumented immigrants. The law also makes it a crime for anyone to offer shelter or aid to the undocumented.

Calderón's statements on the Arizona law evoked a storm of condemnation from the anti-immigrant right. Critics denounced him for daring to condemn a US law in a speech to

Congress—as if US officials do not make a regular practice during visits to other countries of denouncing and demanding changes in policies that have nothing to do with the immediate welfare of US citizens.

It is unclear from the statements from the Mexican government whether it was given any advance notice of the troop deployment. Its statements would suggest that it was not. Obama's use of the military may in part be a means of distancing himself from Calderón's criticisms.

On Wednesday afternoon, a State Department spokesman appeared to reassure Mexico on the mission of the troops being sent to the border. The spokesman, Philip Crowley, told reporters that the deployment was “fully consistent with our efforts to do our part to stem, you know, violence, to interdict the flow of dangerous people and dangerous goods—drugs, guns, people.” He added, “It's not about immigration.”

Such formal claims are belied by the statements of Obama himself, who linked the further militarization of the border to his efforts to placate the Republicans and assume a “get tough on immigration” posture.

Speaking at a Democratic Party fundraiser in California Tuesday night after ordering the deployment, Obama described his meeting with the Senate Republicans: “I said to them, look, I disagree with this Arizona law. I think it's a bad idea. But I also said I understand the frustration of folks in Arizona. I understand they're feeling that somehow the federal government can't control the border effectively, and I'm willing to work with my Republican colleagues to create a stronger border here in California, New Mexico and in Arizona.”

Obama linked this buildup on the border to a broader immigration “reform,” spelling out the punitive measures that such legislation would include. As for “the millions of folks who are already here,” he said, “we've got to say to them, you've got to take responsibility. You broke the law, you've got to pay a fine. You've got to pay your back taxes. You've got to learn English. You've got to go to the back of the line ...”

These conditions—pleading guilty to committing a crime, paying onerous fines and taxes, and getting “to the back of the line,” which in many cases means waiting up to a decade to get papers—assures that only a fraction of the 12 million or more undocumented immigrants in the US would be able to obtain legal status.

Obama's military action met with sharp criticism from immigrant rights organizations. "As we have seen time and time again, efforts to overhaul our broken immigration system have taken a back seat to dramatic escalations of border enforcement, including placing troops on the US border to serve in a function for which they have not been trained," said Rosa Rosales, the national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

"We are on a collision course of enforcement-only policies and, as experience shows, this will not solve the problem," added Janet Murguía, the president of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR).

Obama won faint praise from the Republicans. "I am pleased that President Obama has now, apparently, agreed that our nation must secure the border to address rampant border violence and illegal immigration without other preconditions, such as passage of 'comprehensive immigration reform,'" said Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, one of the main supporters of the reactionary legislation ordering Arizona police to pursue anyone suspected of being an undocumented immigrant.

Other Republicans, led by Senator John McCain of Arizona, have demanded that 6,000 troops be deployed on the border and that border enforcement funding be increased by \$2 billion. They have proposed this escalation in the form of an amendment to a \$59 billion supplemental funding bill, the majority of which is directed to supporting the US war in Afghanistan.

Top White House aides have opposed the Republican amendment on the grounds that it infringes on Obama's prerogatives as commander-in-chief.

Other Republicans have demanded that the government announce specific "rules of engagement" that would ensure that National Guard troops have the authority to shoot down immigrants trying to cross the border.

Typical was a statement from California Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter, who distinguished himself recently by calling for the deportation of US-born children of undocumented immigrants. Such children, under the US Constitution, are American citizens.

"While the National Guard troops involved in this deployment appear to be taking more of a support role, it is still important that they are provided with clear rules of engagement to appropriately defend themselves under any circumstance," Hunter said.

Obama's action largely parallels that taken by his predecessor, George W. Bush, in 2006, when 6,000 troops were sent to the border. Like Obama, Bush ordered the deployment to appease the Republican right, while tying his escalation of the US military presence to an immigration "reform" proposal that includes many of the draconian conditions included in the present Democratic proposal.

In answering his Republican critics, Obama has pointed to the increased funding for border enforcement and a more

aggressive persecution of immigrant workers launched under his administration.

Given present trends, the Obama administration is expected to deport a record 400,000 people in 2010—70 percent of them immigrants who have broken no law outside of entering the US in search of work. This represents a substantial increase over the 358,000 deported during 2008, the last year of the Bush administration. It reflects the Democratic administration's increased use of police-state style raids of immigrant workers' neighborhoods, workplaces and homes.

Obama's latest actions are based on the most cynical political calculations. They represent an attempt to balance between conflicting constituencies within the Democratic Party and appease the most virulent anti-immigrant forces within the Republican right.

However, more fundamental interests are reflected in this political maneuvering. Under conditions of sustained mass unemployment, deepening poverty and drastic cuts to basic social services, the scape-goating of immigrants is a tried and tested means of diverting popular anger from the source of these conditions—the capitalist profit system.

At the same time, the measures being prepared against immigrants—including the proposal for a national biometric identification card as a condition for gaining employment in the US—can be utilized as means of repression against the working class as a whole.

The further militarization of the border, moreover, has the potential of unleashing a new round of killings and a major international crisis. Armed National Guard troops will be standing across the border from Mexico, which has itself become militarized in the US-backed drug war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives over the past four years. There is a danger not only of immigrant workers being shot by American soldiers, but of US and Mexican military forces coming into armed conflict.



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