

Socialist internationalism and the defense of immigrant workers

Bill Van Auken

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The state of Arizona's enactment last month of a law targeting immigrants for police persecution has reignited a debate within the media and establishment political circles over the status of over 12 million undocumented workers living in the United States.

Much of this debate has centered on a deliberate attempt to scapegoat immigrants, one of the most oppressed sections of the working class, for the rise in unemployment, falling real wages and sharply deteriorating living conditions confronting working people throughout the US.

The Obama administration and leading Congressional Democrats, while publicly disavowing the Arizona law, have used it to shift their own policy on immigration even further to the right, demanding the intensified militarization of the US-Mexican border and the increased penalization of undocumented workers residing in the US, forcing them to admit to criminal acts and pay exorbitant fines before taking their place at the "back of the line" of those applying for legal status.

In addition, the Democrats demand the introduction of a national biometric ID card as a condition for obtaining work, giving the government a powerful police-state weapon for use in monitoring every section of the working class, native-born and immigrant alike.

This reactionary turn by both parties has provoked popular anger, with hundreds of thousands pouring into the streets in cities across the country on May 1 to demand an end to anti-immigrant repression and full and equal rights for all.

Anti-immigrant chauvinism is a political weapon in the hands of the ruling elite and the right-wing demagogues who defend its interests, not only in the US, but in every country in the world. The French government has attempted to turn the population against Muslim immigrants through the promotion of a

total ban on the wearing of the burqa, or full face veil, in public. Belgium has already implemented a ban. In Britain, trade unions have organized strikes against foreign labor. There have been anti-immigrant riots in Italy, and Hungary has seen attempts to whip up pogroms against the gypsy minority.

A particularly insidious form of this anti-immigrant agitation is the attempt to promote a crackdown on immigrants and tightening of the border in the name of defending the conditions of the native-born worker against low-wage competition.

In recent weeks, the *World Socialist Web Site* has received a number of emails responding to our statements on the Arizona law and the May 1 demonstrations that reflect precisely this position.

"You're not for the working class of America," comments one reader. "With an economy that's rapidly shrinking—perhaps collapsing—and multiple impending resource crises on the horizon, something must be done to stem the glut of population growth and slave-wage labor."

"The huge influx of undocumented workers is going to destroy all the gains made by the US working class in the 20th century," comments another reader.

And another writes: "While I sympathize with the plight of poverty-stricken people in Latin America, no nation on earth simply opens its doors to an unrestricted flood of aliens—11 million 'illegals' by most conservative estimates. The US has failed to enforce its laws because big businesses and industries can pay illegal aliens low wages (often below minimum wage), offer no insurance or other benefits and get away with it."

What unites all of these comments, their differing degrees of professed sympathy for undocumented immigrants notwithstanding, is the conception that the

conditions of the working class in the US can be defended by increasing the power of the state to fortify the US border, keep immigrants out and thereby supposedly uphold national labor standards. This is joined with the undeniable charge that US big business is at the very least deeply torn over the immigration question because of its ability to exploit immigrant workers as cheap labor.

Anti-immigrant agitation has a long and ugly history in the US, including campaigns against Irish and German workers in the 19th century and Italian, Eastern European and Chinese workers in the early 20th century. In every instance, these campaigns were aimed at dividing the working class, suppressing its most militant layers—often composed of immigrants themselves—and containing and repressing social struggles.

The nationalist outlook expressed in these letters to the WSWS and the appeal to the US government to defend the conditions of American workers against a supposed “foreign” threat correspond closely to the “America first” politics of the US labor bureaucracy and the various middle class groups that gravitate around it.

These arguments begin with the assumption that nothing can be done to alter the scarcities created by the monopolization of global wealth by a tiny financial elite; they appear to advance the belief that the resulting misery can be ameliorated by driving out immigrant workers.

The chauvinist policies advanced by the AFL-CIO have proven nothing more than a means of imposing the destruction of jobs, wages and working conditions. The union bureaucrats vowed to defend “American jobs” by imposing wage cuts, mass layoffs and concessions aimed at making labor costs in the US more competitive with those existing in China, Eastern Europe, Mexico and other parts of the globe to which US transnational corporations have shifted production.

The idea that the influx of low-wage immigrant labor is responsible for the decline in the position of the American working class is belied by the actual history of this process. The unprecedented global integration of capitalism made possible a rationalization of production and the driving down of wages and conditions in the US and all over the world. The surge in immigration at the end of the 20th century was a

product—not the cause—of this process and its particular impact on the more oppressed countries, not least of which was the destruction of peasant agriculture in Mexico.

It is not immigrant workers—who are forced to risk their lives crossing an increasingly dangerous and militarized border—who have destroyed jobs and working conditions in the US. Rather, it is the capitalist system, in which the world economy is subordinate to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite, and in which capital needs no passport to travel almost instantaneously from one country to another in search of cheap labor.

Only by uniting with the working class internationally can workers in the US or any other country successfully struggle against globally mobile capitalist corporations and advance their own independent solution to the world economic crisis: the reorganization of global economy to meet social need, not private profit. This unity must begin with the rejection of all attempts to divide native-born and immigrant workers, regardless of their legal status, and upholding the freedom of all workers to live and work in the country of their choice with full and equal rights.

The reliance on strong national borders, economic protectionism and tighter immigration laws to create some kind of “fortress America” will only intensify the attacks on the working class at home, while paving the way toward a new eruption of global imperialist war.

Workers in the US and every country can avoid such a catastrophe only through a common struggle for the revolutionary socialist reorganization of the world economy. This requires the building of the world party of socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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