

Obama's cynical gesture to immigrant youth

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President Obama on Friday announced a new policy under which the Department of Homeland Security will carry out on an interim basis a more lenient deportation regime against undocumented young people who were brought to the United States by their parents.

The announcement was both cynical and self-serving, aimed at boosting the stock of the Democratic Party in the 2012 elections without seriously addressing the fundamental issue of democratic rights for undocumented workers and their families. Coming amid worsening job figures, it was part of an attempt by the Obama administration to change the subject from the economic devastation facing millions of Americans.

The new directive applies to undocumented immigrants who were under 16 when they came to the United States and who meet other specific conditions: they must be enrolled in school or graduated from high school, or honorably discharged from the military, and they must have no criminal record, even misdemeanors. Those who meet these requirements will be allowed on a case-by-case basis to register with the government to avoid deportation and obtain a work permit. Ultimately, only 800,000 of the estimated 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the US are expected to qualify.

The announcement produced scenes of rejoicing in some immigrant neighborhoods, but workers and young people must beware of the false posture of the administration. This supposed boon to young immigrants has the potential to become a Trojan horse.

To receive the two-year relief from the threat of deportation, young undocumented immigrants must register with the Department of Homeland Security, effectively declaring themselves to be "illegal" and making them easier targets if and when a new directive comes from the White House, either from Obama himself or from his Republican opponent Mitt Romney, should Romney win the November election.

Once registered, immigrants still have no path to citizenship and their legal status is only temporary. Even if there is no immediate double-cross, the condition of the newly registered would represent only the regularization of their status as an exploited underclass. Obama is declaring these immigrant youth good enough to work for the minimum wage or less, but not entitled to basic democratic rights, let alone full citizenship.

In the course of his 2008 election campaign, Obama fostered hopes among immigrant workers and youth of a more humane immigration policy. Once in office, however, his administration has driven immigration enforcement to new heights of brutality. By 2011, the Department of Homeland Security was deporting 400,000 immigrants a year, an all-time record. Since Obama entered the White House, his administration has deported an estimated 1.2 million immigrants.

In his statement Friday, Obama claimed that he changed the policy because, "It's the right thing to do." To encourage illusions that he was willing to fight for comprehensive reform, he called it "a temporary, stopgap measure that lets us focus our resources wisely while giving a degree of relief." This couldn't be farther from the truth.

On immigration, as on countless other issues, Obama dropped his election promises and pursued a policy just as right-wing as that of the Bush administration, if not even more reactionary. In 2008, Obama won two-thirds of the Latino vote, but polls now show that 59 percent of Hispanic voters disapprove of the administration's merciless deportation policy.

Thus, after three years of devoting massive federal resources to enforcing immigration laws and deporting undocumented workers, Obama has now dusted off his "moral" compass and declared his sympathy for undocumented immigrant youth. Where was this sympathy before June 15, 2012? The executive order

Obama announced that day could have been issued on January 20, 2009, when he took office.

The order to temporarily halt certain types of deportation is one of a series of actions, like Obama's supposed "evolving" position in support of gay marriage, in which the White House has made a conveniently timed embrace of a policy appealing to part of the electoral base of the Democratic Party in an effort to disguise its consistently reactionary and anti-working-class record.

For their part, the Republicans have pandered openly to racist and anti-immigrant bigotry. During the Republican primary campaign, Romney and his rivals denounced any lessening of the repression of immigrants and sought to outdo each other in demanding higher and longer fences along the US-Mexico border.

In fact, there are no significant or principled differences between the two big business parties on the question of immigration. Both uphold the persecution of immigrants and oppose any extension of democratic and citizenship rights. Both parties do the bidding of the financial aristocracy, which profits financially from the super-exploitation of immigrant workers and profits politically from dividing the working class along ethnic and language lines.

The Socialist Equality Party upholds the principle of the international unity of the working class. The working class is the only social force whose interests are not tied to the maintenance of national borders. We reject the "America First" chauvinism of the Democrats, Republicans and trade unions. We call for full democratic rights for all undocumented workers, including citizenship for those who want it. Workers must have the right to live and work in whatever country they choose, without discrimination or persecution.

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