

California's alarming demographic trends

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For the past eight years, California has simultaneously experienced negative migration, low birth rates and a record number of retiring workers—demographic trends that point to a staggering level of social distress in the Golden State.

Statistical analysis from the California State Department of Finance (DOF) shows that for 18 out of the 20 years from 1991 to 2011, the rate of domestic migration—people moving out of California to other states—surpassed the influx of residents into the state. Until 2005, foreign-born immigrants, especially from Mexico, made up for the domestic migration loss in the state. In recent years, however, Mexico's unemployment rate has been roughly half that of California, prompting Mexicans to stay in their home country.

The statewide birthrate has also dramatically declined over the past decade. Data from the 2010 US Census Bureau show that in Los Angeles the population of residents under the age of 15 declined 15.6 percent, which was double the national average of 7.4 percent.

These demographic trends correspond to the staggering rate of poverty in the state. According to “Prosperity Threatened,” California’s official poverty rate is 16.6 percent (6.1 million people), while another measure developed by the Census Bureau puts the rate at 23.5 percent (8.7 million people). According to the Census numbers, California is the most impoverished state in the US, ahead of Hawaii and the District of Columbia.

The data indicate that nearly one half of California’s children live in poverty or “perilously close” to poverty. Between 2006 and 2011, the childhood poverty rate rose 4 percentage points, bringing the childhood poverty rate to 21 percent when those just above the poverty line are excluded. These data are based on the unrealistic federal poverty threshold of \$23,021 for a family of four, or \$11,484 for an individual.

Between 2008 and 2011, poverty has jumped dramatically in many of the state’s counties: Imperial County: 31.2 percent (up 13.2 percent); Los Angeles County: 24.3 percent (up 12 percent); Orange County:

16.3 percent (up 28.5 percent); Riverside County: 21.8 percent (up 34.3 percent); San Bernardino County: 24.9 percent (up 32.1 percent); San Diego County: 18.3 percent (up 19.3 percent); Ventura County: 14.9 percent (up 22.4 percent.)

Historically, California’s robust domestic and international migration constituted the basis for the strength of its economy. The current negative trends reveal that domestic and foreign workers no longer consider California a viable place to live and work.

The hourly wage required to support the basic family budget by single parents, employed parents in a family where both parents work, and the employed parent in a two-parent family where only one parent works exceeds the 2012 median hourly wage (\$25.17) for California workers, which is more than three times the state’s minimum wage of \$8.00 an hour.

Many Californians are forced to support their families on much less. Some are forced to cut costs by leaving their children with family or friends, working two jobs, moving back in with family members or simply going without. And with public programs such as food stamps, Medi-Cal, and Healthy Families coming under attack, both at the federal and state level, economic desperation has driven working families to take other options: go deeper into debt to pay for basic needs or flee the state.

The Golden State’s immigrants are typically paid the lowest wages and are not entitled to even the most basic social services. With a prevalence of Latino immigrants, who provide a large portion of the state’s labor force, negative international immigration points to the stark decline in the living standards of the most impoverished layers of California society. It’s not a coincidence that economists often refer to immigrants as the “canaries in the coal mine.”

While more and more Californians are pushed into destitution, the state’s nearly 100 billionaires are wealthier than ever. The explosion of poverty has occurred simultaneously with the spectacular enrichment of the most privileged layers. This puts paid to the

capitalist refrain that if you work hard you can live the American Dream. In reality, California's social inequality resembles that of Latin American countries.

As poverty spreads and workers leave the state, retirement benefits are being threatened. California governor Jerry Brown and both parties in the capital, Sacramento, are attacking pensions and Medicaid. Last September, Brown signed a draconian pension reform bill that creates a two-tier system requiring state workers to contribute 50 percent of their pension fund out of their salaries and increasing the retirement age from 55 to 67.

Brown also plans to implement President Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA requires all individuals to purchase health insurance or pay a fine, thereby ensuring a massive, captive customer base for America's insurance behemoths. Those who fail to purchase insurance will pay a steep fine, rising to \$700 by 2016. As Brown's 2013-2014 budget report acknowledges, this requirement will lead to "large rate increases," causing great strain for working class household budgets that are already at the breaking point.

Negative immigration has led to serious shortages in farm labor. California farms employ at least 450,000 people at the peak of the harvest. Growers estimate the state fell short this harvest season by 70,000 workers.

Joe Bautista, a Stockton, California, labor contractor told the *New York Times* that this year nearly one third of his regular workers opted to stay home in Mexico or were prevented from re-entering the United States by Border Patrol agents. As a result, the harvest was late to market and some of the crop was even left to rot unharvested.

The pressure on contractors is to continue to hire poorly paid immigrant labor to work the crops. Rather than raise wages to attract new workers to the field, they leave the food to rot unpicked in order to realize a profit.

Immigration has long been a hot-button issue and a political tool for Democrats and Republicans alike. The two parties agree entirely that immigrants should be used as a divisive element and disagree only tactically. While the Republicans blame immigrants for welfare abuses and crime, the Democrats welcome reactionary immigration "reforms" because they ensure labor resources to be exploited.

Under conditions of mass joblessness and increasing poverty, the Obama administration's plans to strengthen border security, crack down on undocumented immigrants and streamline the path to legal immigration and naturalization serve as a pretext for a vast expansion of the police power of the state. At the same time, immigrant

workers are singled out in an effort to divide the working class.

Since taking office, President Obama has intensified the federal prosecution of immigrants, with a record 400,000 deportations in fiscal year 2012. Although the administration claims to be targeting criminals, the government's own statistics show that the majority of those deported have committed no crime other than entering the country without documents, or misdemeanors like traffic violations.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports that there are even numerous cases of immigrant women facing domestic violence being arrested and deported after seeking help from the police. Through cases like these, it is clear that the main targets of anti-immigrant legislation are foreign workers who have done nothing more than look for work and struggle to raise a family since coming to the country. The ruling class is committed to a concerted effort to divide foreign and native-born workers by blaming high health care costs and budget shortfalls on undocumented immigrants.

European governments are pursuing similar brutal policies toward immigrants and minorities by raiding immigrant encampments, building mass prisons, and militarizing the Mediterranean Sea. They have increasingly attempted to scapegoat Muslim residents, with France pushing for a total ban of the wearing of the burqa, or full-face veil, in public.



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