

Washington's persecution of immigrant children

Bill Van Auken**24 June 2014**

From 1903, ships carrying a generation of immigrants entered New York City harbor, passing the iconic Statue of Liberty. At its base, a sonnet written by the poet Emma Lazarus was inscribed, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of those many millions to find in the New World a refuge from the oppression of the Old. It states, in part:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Today, Lazarus's lines read like a stinging indictment of the brutal and inhuman immigration policy the Obama administration is enforcing against immigrant workers attempting to enter the United States—in particular, tens of thousands of children arriving from the impoverished and strife-torn countries of Central America.

In many cases, those being detained and thrown into makeshift detention camps are unaccompanied minors attempting to reunite with mothers or fathers living in the US.

Washington's policy of criminalizing and persecuting immigrants found its most horrific expression over the past week with the discovery in south Texas of mass graves into which the bodies of immigrants who died trying to make their way into the US had been dumped. The corpses were packed three to a body bag or crammed into garbage, biohazard and even shopping bags, treated worse than animals and in a fashion that ironically and hideously recalls Lazarus's line about “wretched refuse.”

One can only imagine the response of the American corporate media if similar mass graves were found in Russia, China or Iran. The discovery of such a gruesome site in the US itself, however, was largely ignored.

Meanwhile, by the government's count some 52,000 unaccompanied minors have arrived in the US since last October (together with 39,000 adults with children). The immigrants are being held in the most outrageous conditions, packed into windowless warehouses encircled by razor-wire fences, lacking adequate sanitation, medical care or bed space. One Arizona newspaper commented that the detention center in Nogales had “the look and feel of the livestock areas at the State Fair.”

This national disgrace is being treated as a major security crisis. Republican lawmakers have called for the deployment of National Guard troops on the Mexican border, while the state of Texas has announced plans for a “surge” of state troopers into the state's border areas to pursue the child immigrants.

As for the Obama White House, it has responded to a humanitarian crisis of its own making with the methods of police repression. The White House has vowed to set up new detention centers for children and “enhance our enforcement and removal proceedings” with its own “surge” of agents, judges and prosecutors to speed up deportations.

The other side of the Obama administration's response has been to intensify police measures in Central America, largely in the form of over \$200 million in aid proposed for the security forces of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

In each country, these forces of domestic repression were forged under the direction of the Pentagon, as Washington pursued bloody civil wars against the working class and rural poor that claimed a quarter of a million lives in Guatemala and around 75,000 in El Salvador. In Honduras, CIA-backed death squads killed those opposing a series of military regimes. These death squads have been revived in the aftermath of the

2009 US-backed coup that ousted President José Manuel Zelaya, contributing to Honduras ranking first in homicides in the world.

The abysmal conditions of poverty, oppression and violence in these countries are the end product of close to a century of uninterrupted oppression by US imperialism. This has taken the form not only of wars and dictatorships, but also the subordination of their economies to US capitalism, leaving them with among the highest levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality in the hemisphere.

The Obama White House already has the ignominious distinction of having deported more people—over 2 million—than any other administration. In the last fiscal year alone, it deported 106,000 people to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, in many cases tearing families apart and inflicting serious economic and emotional hardship on children.

Now its solution is to escalate these repressive measures. It is combining beefed-up security and deportations with calls for “comprehensive immigration reform”—a bipartisan proposal that would militarize the border while providing the most onerous conditions to establish a “path to citizenship” for a small section of immigrant workers. Even this reactionary measure may be politically impossible after House Majority Leader Eric Cantor’s Republican primary defeat by an even more anti-immigrant challenger.

The policy of America’s financial oligarchy toward immigrants is one expression of its attitude toward the working class as a whole, of which immigrant workers constitute among the most oppressed sectors. The ruling class exploits immigrant workers as a source of cheap labor, while seeking to scapegoat immigrants for falling wages and layoffs that are the product of the profit system.

Its brutal immigration policy is of a piece with a foreign policy based on militarist violence, and with the ever-expanding measures of police state surveillance and repression at home.

The defense of the rights of immigrant workers to live and work in whatever country they choose, without discrimination or persecution, is an inseparable component of the struggle to defend the living standards, jobs and basic rights of the working class as a whole. Workers must demand the freeing of the

imprisoned child immigrants and full citizenship rights for all undocumented workers.

Outside of forging their international unity with the workers of Central America and the entire planet, working people in the US cannot effectively fight corporations and banks that require no passports or visas to shift their capital from one country to another in search of the cheapest labor and greatest profits.



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