

Residents of Bell, California mobilize in support of immigrants

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A recent public meeting in Bell, California, to discuss the city council's decision to turn an old Salvation Army storage center into a temporary shelter for immigrants awaiting processing and likely deportation witnessed an overwhelming outpouring of support from residents who wanted to help the new arrivals. In their comments, the majority of residents spoke movingly of "compassion," "empathy," and "human decency."

The response by Bell's residents was also, in part, a rejection of the right-wing xenophobic media-fueled frenzy of anti-immigrant protesters in Murrieta, California, who blocked buses from entering a border patrol facility for processing. Gerry Mayagoitia, a resident of Bell, commented, "What I saw in Murrieta was so vicious, and so hateful, and so intolerant. I hope that America can see today that there's still communities that will embrace."

Large numbers of Central American immigrants continue to seek refuge in the US, fleeing poverty, violence, and extortion. Authorities report that nearly 57,525 unaccompanied children crossed the border from October through June this year.

The immigrants, mostly women and children, are processed in overcrowded border patrol facilities before they are released to await a trial where a judge will determine their eligibility for asylum, refugee status or deportation.

Immigration holding centers are neither comfortable nor welcoming places. They are, in fact, prison holding cells where a wide array of abuses and unsanitary conditions have been documented.

Moreover, measures like the decision by Bell's city council to offer shelters only delay a judge's final determination, often translating into deportation. Nonetheless, the response by Bell residents reflects the overwhelming support in the working class for fellow

immigrant workers.

WSWS reporters recently spoke to workers in Bell about their thoughts on the plan to build the detention center.

Mariano is an undocumented garment worker from Mexico whose life and family are in Bell. "Some of these officials are corrupt and don't really mean what they say," he told our reporters. In 2010, Bell city officials were incriminated in a major corruption scandal.

Regarding the influx of unaccompanied child migrants, Mariano lamented, "I feel terrible about what is happening to all the children that are being deported and put in detention centers. Obama is not uniting families, he is destroying them. I worry about my own children and myself. I worry about what will happen to my family if one day I get deported. Our life here is not very easy, but we continue to try to make a life. We live life day by day."

When asked about the Obama administration's immigration policies and ramped-up militarization of the border, Mariano responded: "What is happening here in the US is very demoralizing. Obama has deported many more people and at the same time expanded the wars. He was elected for 'no more blood, no more violence,' but he still sends more troops to fight, and then he says there's no money for the people. Obama should use the money to put people to work and help people find work."

Janet is an undocumented fast food worker from Guerrero, Mexico, who told our reporters: "Immigrants should be given the same rights. We immigrants work and serve the country. It seems that Obama wants immigrants to be here without any rights. My boss on top of paying me very little also withholds money to pay for income taxes, and I never see that money again.

“It’s horrible what they want to do with undocumented people. My brother-in-law is also undocumented. He was stopped by the police here and arrested. He is now waiting to see if the courts will let him stay. He has two kids and his family depends on him to survive here. The people from Central America are leaving their homes there for similar reasons why my family and I left Mexico. We just want to work and survive in a better environment.”

When asked what life is like for her and her family in Bell, Janet replied, “We live in a two-small-bedroom apartment. Sharing a home with my sister and her kids is the only way we could pay for rent and food. My brother-in-law was working at a pizza place, and it paid very little because they would only give him three days a week to work. I also work for a fast food restaurant as a cook, and it’s almost the same story.”

The WSWs also spoke to Bell’s mayor, Nestor Valencia, who emigrated from Mexico when he was four years old and is in support of the shelter. “I am very much opposed to the way this [immigration] is being handled by the Obama administration,” said Valencia. “I am for putting pressure on the government and on Congress to resolve this humanitarian issue and not forget providing a path to citizenship for the 12 million undocumented immigrants who live in the US.

“Currently, the whole issue is being used as a political football. It should not be so; immigration is a benefit to the United States. Allowing young people into the country means that many more workers will contribute to Social Security and Medicare, helping to stabilize these programs. This country needs them.... Immigrants are blamed for the lack of jobs and lowering of wages. The real blame is with Wall Street and the crisis that they have created,” said Valencia.

His sympathy for the immigrants and nominal criticism of the financial oligarchy notwithstanding, Mayor Valencia continues to support the Democratic Party and an administration that has spearheaded the largest number of deportations in history—more than 2 million in Obama’s six years in office.

The Obama administration’s vow to increase “fast-track deportations” has alarmed immigration advocates and lawyers who doubt that most immigrants would be able to find an affordable lawyer if given less time. This would have an immense impact on their right to due process as well as their abilities to argue, before a

judge, that their crossing was necessary to escape violence, persecution or death.

The fact that many major cities in the US have adopted “sanctuary city” status is in part a reflection of the strong support among working people for the immigrants.

It must also be said, however, that “sanctuary city” status is used by sections of the ruling elite to alleviate social tensions, but is in fact little more than a useless palliative, leaving the immigrants in limbo and continuing to face deportation. It also gives businesses ample and unrestrained access to cheap labor, while the immigrants can also be used, when convenient, as political scapegoats.



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