

Bowling to Senate Democrats

Obama reneges on pledge to ease deportations

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9 September 2014

After a month of intensive lobbying by a large group of Senate Democrats, President Obama announced Saturday that he was reneging on a pledge to ease the deportation of immigrants and would take no executive action on immigration before the November 4 elections.

The Obama administration has been the worst in US history in terms of its mass expulsion of people for the “crime” of coming to America to find work and support their families. In less than six years in office, Obama has overseen the deportation of two million immigrants, more than in the entire eight of George W. Bush.

Last year the White House backed a bipartisan immigration bill that was thoroughly reactionary, providing billions for militarization of the US-Mexico and a draconian, 14-year path to citizenship for some undocumented workers, together with special provisions to supply agribusiness with low-wage superexploited labor in a modern version of the notorious “bracero” program.

That bill was blocked by House Republicans, gripped by the nativist frenzy of the ultra-right Tea Party faction. They demanded an enforcement-only program, in effect, the systematic roundup and deportation of every undocumented worker, a program that could only be carried out by police-state methods.

The White House proposed smaller-scale action on immigration during the summer, after a political furor erupted over tens of thousands of child immigrants from Central America who flooded across the Texas border, fleeing poverty, violence and right-wing US-backed dictatorial regimes.

Obama offered significant concessions to the far right, including dispatch of the National Guard to the border, more funds for detention camps and immigration judges to speed the deportation process, and the repeal of a legislative provision making it more difficult to deport child immigrants. But the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled House again could reach no agreement.

If House Republicans blocked legislative action on immigration, Obama declared June 30, he would take executive action on the issue by Labor Day. This was followed by a series of meetings with immigrant advocacy groups as well as corporate lobbyists seeking expansion of visas for highly-

skilled technical workers, in which White House officials discussed various types of action that could be taken to expand legal immigration and give relief from the threat of deportation to large groups of undocumented workers.

There was a drumbeat of media publicity, based on leaks from the White House, aimed at creating illusions among immigrants and their families, and the vast majority of the American people who oppose mass deportations, that there would be a significant relaxation of enforcement measures.

Two major categories of immigrants were under consideration for relief, according to the administration: the parents of children who have been exempted from deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, so-called “Dreamers”, numbering 550,000 to 1.1 million; and an even larger group, some 4.4 million, who are the undocumented parents of children born in the United States and hence US citizens.

The fact that as many as half of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants are the parents of children born in the United States or granted residence under DACA is a staggering exposure of the deeply reactionary and anti-democratic character of the policies demanded by anti-immigrant groups.

In the end, however, all the numbers thrown around by White House spokesmen, and their apologists in the Hispanic American civil rights groups and AFL-CIO unions, turned out to be a round zero: that is how many immigrants will benefit from the policies of the Obama administration.

In the interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press” program where he confirmed the climbdown on mass deportations, Obama conceded that the right-wing campaign whipped up over Central American child immigrants had altered the policies of his administration. “The politics did shift midsummer because of that problem,” he said.

However, he blamed the American population, rather than the Democratic Party, for the shift to the right. “I also want to make sure that the public understands why we’re doing this,” he said, “why it’s the right thing for the American people, why it’s the right thing for the American economy.”

There is in fact no evidence of any major shift in public opinion on immigration. A sizeable majority, according to

polls, sympathized with the plight of the Central American children and believed they should be treated humanely. Most Americans were appalled by the fascistic protests by handfuls of anti-immigrant activists outside of collection and detention centers.

The real shift to the right took place, not among the American people, but in the ranks of Senate Democrats and Democratic candidates.

Throughout August, however, a group of Democratic senators, mainly more conservative Democrats seeking reelection in states Obama lost in the 2012 presidential election, issued statements opposing any executive action, in order to curry favor with anti-immigrant groups, and insulate themselves from Republican charges that they favored “amnesty” for “illegal” immigrants.

Kay Hagan of North Carolina, declared, “This is an issue that I believe should be addressed legislatively, and not through executive order.”

Mark Pryor of Arkansas said Republican opposition “doesn’t give the president carte blanche authority to sidestep Congress when he doesn’t get his way.”

Mark Begich of Alaska—a state hardly being overrun by immigrants from Latin America—nonetheless declared, “To me, securing our borders has to be the priority, and that should be the president’s focus.”

In Kentucky, Democratic Senate candidate Alison Lundergan Grimes said Obama would be wrong to use executive orders to set immigration policy.

A spokesman for Senator Jeanne Shahenn of New Hampshire said the candidate “believes Congress must address our broken immigration system with a comprehensive fix, and would not support a piecemeal approach issued by executive order.”

Senator Angus King of Maine called any White House action on immigration a “mistake,” while Senator Al Franken of Minnesota, a liberal from another state on the border with Canada rather than Mexico, declared that he too had “concerns about executive action.”

There are crude and opportunist electoral calculations involved. In all these states, Hispanic and Asian voters are comparatively few, while the states with large concentrations of such voters—California, Nevada, Arizona, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois—do not have Senate contests this year.

But more is at stake. As the WSWs has long pointed out, there is no longer any constituency in any section of the American ruling elite for the defense of basic democratic and constitutional rights. And this includes the rights of immigrants, so fundamental in a country where 99 percent of the population is descended from immigrants—and in the majority of cases, immigrants who were vilified and oppressed, both in their home countries and when they arrived on this continent.

Obama’s cowardly change of course produce a few predictable howls of outrage from Hispanic civil rights groups and the AFL-CIO unions. Mary Kay Henry, head of Service

Employees International Union (SEIU), said her members are “deeply disheartened that the dreams of hard-working immigrant families who have long contributed to the fabric of the American life remain in jeopardy. The White House’s decision to delay executive action forces countless families to continue to wait in the shadows of fear.”

This rhetoric is not worth the paper it was written on. SEIU officials are pouring vast resources into the election campaigns of the same reactionary Democratic Party officeholders in whose interests Obama has decreed that millions of immigrants will “continue to wait in the shadows of fear.”

Obama claimed that he would now take executive action on immigration after the November 4 election, another worthless promise. The real program of the Obama administration is demonstrated in the opening of a huge new “family detention center” in south Texas, a 2,400-bed facility that will “nearly double the current capacity to house immigrant families awaiting deportation,” according to one press account.

The facility will be run by the largest for-profit prison company in the United States, Tennessee-based Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), which already runs more than 60 detention centers and prisons that have been frequently accused of abuse of prisoners and falsification of records.

The secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, issued a statement declaring, “The opening of this additional facility represents our continued commitment to provide temporary facilities for adults with children while they undergo removal proceedings, and it is part of DHS’s sustained and aggressive campaign to stem the tide of illegal migration from Central America.”



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