

# Obama's "reform" and the criminalization of immigrants

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The executive action on immigration issued by the White House Friday is reactionary and anti-democratic. The framework of Obama's plan is based on the premise, shared by the entire political establishment, that all undocumented immigrants are criminals.

"Undocumented workers broke our immigration laws, and I believe that they must be held accountable," Obama declared in a vile and contemptible speech announcing the plan Thursday night. Thus, the minority of these workers who are able, under the plan, to secure a temporary reprieve from the threat of deportation are to be vindictively denied social benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps and forced to pay back taxes.

Who is Obama to preach respect for the law and accountability? His administration has not only shielded the bankers who plunged the American and world economy into the morass with their fraudulent and criminal activities, it has rewarded them with trillions in bailouts and taxpayer subsidies. It has granted de facto immunity to CIA torturers and Bush administration officials who launched illegal wars based on lies. Obama himself operates outside of the law, trampling on the US Constitution in his assertion of unilateral powers to spy on, detain and even assassinate American citizens.

If the full legal penalties are to be waived for a minority of undocumented immigrants, it is only because corporate America wants a more reliable supply of cheap labor, exploiting workers whose availability will now be assured for several years at a time while the terror of deportation and family separation remains in the background to keep them in line.

The document issued by the White House the morning after Obama's nationally televised speech has

three sections, each with a law-and-order title:

- *Cracking Down on Illegal Immigration at the Border*, which outlines Obama's plan for "continuing the surge of resources" to the border and to "centralize border security command-and-control to continue to crack down on illegal immigration."

- *Deporting Felons, Not Families*, under which Obama "has directed immigration enforcement to place anyone suspected of terrorism, violent criminals, gang members, and recent border crossers at the top of the deportation priority list."

- *Accountability—Criminal Background Checks and Taxes*, which declares that those immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than five years and have children who are US citizens or legal resident aliens may gain three years of permission to work without the threat of deportation if they register with the Department of Homeland Security.

All three sections bristle with repressive language, demonstrating the president's intention to treat the undocumented immigrant population entirely as a law enforcement issue, not one of democratic and human rights.

During his first two years in office, when Obama had top-heavy Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, his administration took no action on immigration, legislative or executive, except to accelerate the mass deportations undertaken by the Bush administration, reaching an annual total of nearly 400,000.

After the Republicans took control of the House, the Democratic-controlled Senate still took no action on immigration for three more years. Throughout this period, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) continued its record-breaking pace of deportations.

The vast majority of the nearly three million people

deported during the Obama administration were ordinary workers, swept up in ICE dragnets or stopped by local police on minor charges—frequently as trivial as traffic offenses—and turned over to immigration.

The principal measure now being hailed by the Obama administration’s political supporters in the media and the Democratic Party, lifting the threat of deportation for those who register with the ICE, pass a background check, and are eligible for the temporary three-year waiver, turns out to be far less than meets the eye.

According to a Reuters dispatch based on interviews with immigration lawyers, barely 40 percent of the 1.2 million youth eligible for the 2012 waiver of deportation for so-called “Dreamers,” immigrants brought to the United States as children, registered with the ICE. “High application costs, extensive documentation requirements and lengthy waiting periods for approval sharply reduced participation,” Reuters reported, “and the process is expected to be even more arduous this time around, the lawyers said.”

Many of the 3.7 million immigrants eligible for the new deportation waiver will hesitate to apply for it, some because their employers don’t know of their undocumented status and they fear losing their jobs, others for fear of registering with the agency that could round them up for deportation in three years’ time if the executive order is overturned by the next president.

The influx of immigrant workers is not unique to the United States. It is an international phenomenon, affecting Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Australia—the entire world. In great measure, as documented in UN reports on the record numbers of refugees, displaced persons and immigrants, these mass population movements are the product of imperialist depredations around the world.

Imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other countries are the single largest cause of mass movement of people. Add to that the endemic poverty in the countries long exploited by imperialism, like Mexico and in Central America, or previously enslaved as direct colonies in Africa and much of Asia.

Nor is the witch-hunting of immigrants merely an American phenomenon. Throughout Europe and increasingly in Asia, capitalist governments carrying out relentless attacks on the living standards of the working class seek to divert workers’ anger by blaming

immigrants for the destruction of jobs and wages. This divide-and-rule policy is an attack on the working class as a whole. It must be answered by workers uniting as a class and resolutely defending the rights of their immigrant brothers and sisters.

The Socialist Equality Party denounces all attacks on immigrant workers. At its Third National Congress in August, the Socialist Equality Party in the US adopted a resolution calling for the defense of immigrant workers and denouncing the Obama administration’s policy of repression and mass deportation. The resolution concluded:

“The SEP upholds the right of workers from every corner of the globe to live and work in whatever country they choose with full citizenship rights, including the right to return to their home countries without the threat of being barred from re-entry to the US and being separated from their families. The SEP fights for the repeal of all anti-immigrant laws and the disbanding of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Border Patrol.”

The SEP fights intransigently for this perspective, against all efforts to scapegoat immigrant workers for the decline in wages and living conditions of all workers in the United States. We fight for the international unity of American workers, white, black, Hispanic, Asian and immigrant, in a common struggle with the working class of the entire world on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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