

Conflict over DHS funding masks bipartisan attack on immigrants in US

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Political proceedings in Washington over US immigration policy are running on two parallel tracks. One is the highly orchestrated and largely phony conflict between the Republican Congress and the Obama administration that is the focus of US media attention. The other is the vicious US government persecution of immigrants, the real day-to-day substance of immigration policy, on which both the Democrats and Republicans agree.

The battle between Obama and the Republicans has been in what might be called the dress rehearsal stage for a month, with the first full performance Monday night, when Senate Democrats, for the fourth time this year, blocked legislation to fund the Department of Homeland Security past midnight Friday night.

Senate Republicans were meeting behind closed doors Tuesday, and House Republicans were set to conference Wednesday, in efforts to reach an agreement on legislation that could win enough Democratic support to overcome the Senate filibuster before the February 27 deadline.

The DHS funding bill includes a provision rescinding Obama's executive order on immigration, issued last November, to allow about four million undocumented workers to receive work permits without threat of deportation for a three-year period. Senate Democrats have successfully filibustered the House-passed bill, which Obama would veto anyway if it should somehow pass, with no prospect of a veto override in either house.

The outcome of this political furor is entirely predictable: there will not be the slightest disruption in the core functions of the DHS, one of the central elements in the emerging American police-state. The Secret Service, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, TSA, FEMA and a dozen other agencies will continue

running, although paychecks will be delayed.

There will be much finger-pointing, political posturing and media bombast. Both parties will make right-wing appeals. The Democrats will lambaste the Republicans for undermining the nation's security in the face of terrorist threats by disrupting operations of the DHS. The Republicans will denounce Obama for exceeding his authority with his executive order on immigration, and failing to secure the southern border with Mexico.

A likely outcome is that sometime before the February 27 deadline a bipartisan deal will be reached in which Obama's immigration policy will continue, since it has the support of most of corporate America, and DHS funding will be restored, since both corporate-controlled parties support the ongoing buildup of state repression.

A major purpose of this degrading spectacle is to give the Obama administration and the Democratic Party the opportunity to pretend to sympathize with the plight of undocumented workers (a deliberate lie), while they portray their Republican colleagues as hard-hearted and racist (as of course they are).

The real attitude of the White House to undocumented immigrants is indicated in a parallel proceeding in a Washington, DC courtroom, where federal district judge James Boasberg issued an injunction Friday to bar Immigration and Customs Enforcement from holding women and children seeking asylum in detention centers pending much-delayed hearings.

After tens of thousands of immigrants, mainly women and children fleeing violence in Central America, crossed the US border last summer, most of them turning themselves in to the ICE and seeking asylum, the Obama administration reversed its policy of

releasing such refugees into the community pending administrative action, and began locking them up, first in a detention camp in Artesia, New Mexico, then in two new camps opened in Texas. Thousands passed through these camps on their way to deportation back to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

More than one thousand mothers and children are currently imprisoned in these camps, even though immigration hearings have found most had a “credible fear” of persecution if returned to their countries of origin. A recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story, “The Shame of America’s Family Detention Camps”, examined both the nightmarish conditions in the camps and the Orwellian legal procedures used by the Obama administration to keep asylum-seekers, including mothers with their children, locked up indefinitely.

Under the 1997 settlement of a federal court case, *Flores vs. Meese*, the US government agreed not to lock up unaccompanied children simply because of their immigration status, but to place them in the community with relatives or others willing to take them in. This policy was generally applied to children accompanying their parents as well.

The Bush administration abandoned this policy in 2005 and began locking up women and children at the Hutto Detention Center in Austin, Texas, but the Obama administration reversed course and emptied Hutto after it took office in 2009. Last summer the Obama administration resumed jailing mothers and children and built several new prisons for that purpose.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations filed suit on behalf of the detainees, and Judge Boasberg’s ruling granted a preliminary injunction in their favor, ordering the ICE to stop jailing women and children seeking asylum.

Boasberg cited comments by Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, to the effect that the ICE was sending a message to prospective immigrants from Central America by detaining indefinitely those who succeeded in reaching US soil. The “current policy of considering deterrence is likely unlawful,” the judge wrote, and “causes irreparable harm to mothers and children seeking asylum.”

A spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement said that the agency was “considering” whether to appeal the ruling, claiming, “ICE’s family residential centers are used as an effective and humane

alternative to maintain family unity as families go through immigration proceedings or return to their home countries.”

Reports from immigration lawyers suggest that the immigration judges are beginning to release detained families on bond of as little as \$1,500 per family, raised by relatives and supporters in the immigrant communities where those detained will be released.

The savage treatment of innocent women and children at US detention facilities in Texas should be kept in mind throughout the upcoming media blitz about Obama’s executive order, the congressional deadlock over funding the DHS, and the threatened partial shutdown of the agency.

Insofar as there are policy differences between Democrats and Republicans, these concern the best combination of exploitation and repression in dealing with immigrant workers. Both parties do the bidding of those sections of big business—agriculture, construction, clothing sweatshops—dependent on undocumented, super-exploited workers to maximize their profits.



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