

Two California killings used as pretext for attack on immigrants

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Two unrelated crimes allegedly committed in California by undocumented immigrants have become the pretext for a new wave of hysterical anti-immigrant propaganda and demands to tighten immigration laws and speed up deportations.

The first incident was the shooting July 1 of a 32-year-old San Francisco woman, Kathryn Steinle. Mexican citizen Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez was accused. Another crime was allegedly committed on July 24 by Victor Aureliano Martinez Ramirez, also a Mexican citizen. Along with a US resident, he assaulted 64-year-old Santa Maria resident Marylyn Pharis, causing her death a week later.

Lopez-Sanchez had a history of seven prior nonviolent felony convictions, including marijuana and heroin possession, spent several years in prison and was deported five times. He confessed to the shooting of Steinle, describing it as accidental.

According to his testimony, he found the gun, which was wrapped in a T-shirt, while he was high on sleeping pills and marijuana, and it went off three times after he picked it up. The bullet that killed Steinle was fired into the pavement and ricocheted 90 feet before striking her.

The gun had been stolen four days before from the car of a federal agent working for the Bureau of Land Management.

Ramirez, one of the two alleged assailants of Marylyn Pharis, was previously charged with felony assault with intent to commit sexual assault, although charge was eventually reduced to a misdemeanor. He also pleaded no contest to a weapons charge earlier this year.

Both accused men were the subjects of an immigration detainer, a document requesting local officials to notify the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) when the “criminal alien” is being

released from jail, to facilitate deportation. This gave rise to questions as to why such requests are being ignored by the authorities of the so-called “sanctuary cities,” putting the blame on local authorities for not cooperating with federal immigration enforcement agencies.

More than 300 counties and cities across the US have adopted policies limiting their response to honoring immigration detainers or the scope of cooperation with the federal agencies. Some “sanctuary” jurisdictions implemented measures prohibiting police from making arrests for civil violations of federal immigration law, such as “unlawful” presence.

Both July killings became a pretext for right-wing politicians to finger-point and blame California authorities for not preventing felonies committed undocumented immigrants.

California State Senator Jeff Stone (R-Murrieta) proposed introducing a new bill that would require local authorities to cooperate on deportation proceedings when an undocumented immigrant is released from prison regardless of the seriousness of the felony committed.

“This has got to stop,” Stone said. “If someone is in this country illegally, has a history of committing a felony, and is in the custody of local law enforcement, we should hold them for at least 48 additional hours to make sure ICE has an opportunity to take custody of them or deport them... We have seen too many murders, rapes and other crimes committed by felons in this country illegally.”

Former Florida Governor and Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush called for the federal government to punish sanctuary city jurisdictions by denying them certain federal funds.

Billionaire Donald Trump denounced Lopez-Sanchez

as “an animal” that shot “that wonderful, that beautiful woman in San Francisco.” He seized on the case as proof of his racist claims that Mexico is deliberately sending “rapists and other criminals” across the border into the US.

Recurrent outbreaks of xenophobic populism like that espoused by Trump or Stone have their ugly history and are historically tied to periods of economic crisis.

Scapegoating immigrants for socio-economic problems aims at intimidating the working class and diverting popular anger caused by the worsening conditions from the real cause of the impasse: the historic crisis of world capitalism and the crimes committed by the ruling elite. The two murders in California, however tragic, are dwarfed by the mass killings of civilians by US military operations abroad and the daily police killings of US residents at home.

Such incidents are seized upon for strictly political purposes, to tighten immigration control, to divide workers along ethnic lines and to blur the class division of the American population.

The Obama administration is directly responsible for such xenophobic attacks, through its pursuit of an anti-immigrant policy characterized by record mass deportations and the militarization of borders. Its policies help create the conditions for Trump-style demagoguery, and sections of the Democratic Party and trade unions have also engaged in chauvinist attacks on immigrants for allegedly “stealing American jobs.”

While reactionary politicians attempt to tie crime to immigration, numerous studies have shown that, in fact, the opposite is true, namely that immigrants commit far less crimes than their American-born counterparts, as shown by studies going back to the 1920s. Data collected over the several decennial censuses found a consistent pattern of lower crime rate among immigrants regardless of their country of origin, legal status or educational level.

Immigrants also have much lower incarceration rates. According to data from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS), 1.6 percent of immigrant males age 18-39 are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. “The foreign-born, who make up roughly 35 percent of California’s adult population, constitute 17 percent of the state prison population”, the report declares.



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