New report shows how immigration has transformed US in past half century

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In the 50 years since the liberalization of US immigration policy in 1965, 59 million immigrants have come to the US, a transformation that is detailed in a report issued last week by the Pew Research Center. The lengthy report looks back 50 years as well as forward to 2065, forecasting demographic changes based on current immigration trends.

Foreign-born residents of the US have reached a near-record 14 percent of the population. This is only slightly below the 15 percent level of a century ago, in the midst of the great wave of immigration from 1880-1920. In 1915, however, the population of the US was about 100 million, less than one-third its current level. The 59 million arrivals in the last 50 years far exceed the approximately 32 million who came to the US in the 80 years spanning from 1840 to 1920.

In 1965, there were a total of 9.6 million foreign-born Americans, out of a population of nearly 200 million. Today the number of immigrants has almost quintupled, to 45 million (a figure that includes roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants), while the total population has grown by a much smaller if still substantial 60 percent, to about 320 million. (The difference between the figures of 45 million and 59 million reflects deaths and departures over this five-decade period.)

Looking at it in percentage terms, immigrants accounted for 5 percent of the US 50 years ago compared to 14 today, with a projection of 18 percent by 2065. Immigrants and their American-born children now amount to a whopping 26 percent of the total US population.

A major reason for the relatively small number of immigrants in the decade of the 1960s was the draconian limits on immigration that had been put in place more than 40 years earlier. Congressional action in 1924 essentially rolled up the welcome mat that had seen such large numbers of newcomers in the previous four decades, especially from Southern and Eastern Europe. For Chinese and other Asians, the gate was barred much earlier by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the earlier generation of immigrants left the scene, they were followed by far fewer new arrivals.

The 1965 law changed immigration quotas from ones based on national origin and heavily favoring Northern Europe—quotas that were usually not filled—to a system weighted toward family reunification and the attraction of skilled workers.

The most recent period of mass immigration is the third great wave in US history. The first two took place during the period of the growth and ascendancy of the United States as a capitalist power. From 1840 to 1889 immigrants from Northern Europe (especially Germany, Ireland, England and Scandinavia) predominated. In the next three decades the influx shifted dramatically toward Eastern and Southern Europe, including record numbers of Italians and many from Russia and Austria-Hungary, many of them Jewish.

Immigration patterns in recent decades have been marked by major changes in the countries of origin. Since 1965, a full 51 percent of immigrants to the US have come from Latin America, with Mexico alone accounting for more than half of these. Another 25 percent have come from South and East Asia. The Hispanic population of the United States has grown from 4 to 18 percent in the past 50 years, while the Asian population has grown from 1 to 6 percent, and is projected to rise even more rapidly in the future.

The current wave of immigration has attracted people from every corner of the globe, and has demographically and culturally transformed most urban

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areas and many rural ones as well.

The Pew report also points out that immigration reached a peak just about the time of the 2008 financial crash. The economic crisis was followed—amid continuing wage stagnation during the so-called recovery—by a significant decline, although immigrants are still arriving at the rate of more than 1 million every year.

The immigration report raises important historical questions. The raw data, although fascinating, cannot be fully appreciated, nor can the future implications be understood, apart from the causes of the waves of immigration, its role in US history and its impact on the class struggle.

To say that the US is a nation of immigrants is a truism, and there is certainly no place on Earth with quite the same history.

Behind the immigration numbers is the rise of American capitalism, particularly in the period after the final bloody settling of the question of chattel slavery in the Civil War. The ruling class and its political representatives sought cheap labor, as well as the opportunity to pit immigrant against native-born workers in order to weaken the working class as a whole. Immigrants, of course, sought new opportunities for themselves and their families, and in many cases fled political and religious oppression.

History demonstrated that it was only by resisting the trap laid by the employers, by fighting against anti-immigrant and nativist prejudices to unite immigrant, white and African-American workers, that any of the hard-won gains of the working class were achieved. This fight was led by socialists, from the days of Eugene Debs to the organization of basic industry in the 1930s.

It is critically important to consider the fundamental difference between the first Gilded Age of the decades surrounding 1900—an era of fabulous wealth and the growth of inequality and social struggles—and what various pundits have belatedly acknowledged as the second Gilded Age of today. The America of a century ago, before it entered the First World War and before it took upon itself the task of world policeman for imperialism, was characterized by rising wealth and the possibility of social reform to lessen inequality.

Today’s Gilded Age, based entirely on financial parasitism and imperialist aggression, takes place in the period of US economic decline. Immigrants are attracted in large numbers, despite the economic crisis, because the conditions in their own countries are even worse. The combination of the history of imperialist oppression and aggression that has destroyed entire societies in the past two decades is a major factor in the steady flow of immigrants. In Europe the influx of refugees has become a sudden flood, and the mass of desperate migrants face police violence, concentration camps and deportation.

The 45 million immigrants and their children face conditions in which the next generation, for the first time in US history, will have lower living standards than its parents—indeed it already has. Even more urgently, these tens of millions of first-generation Americans will, alongside the rest of the population, confront the bipartisan program of endless war and the threat of nuclear world war, presided over by whomever is chosen to occupy the White House. The new generation of immigrants, arriving from all corners of the world, demonstrates the potential as well as the challenge of the fight for the international unity of the working class, based on a socialist program and against all forms of racism, anti-immigrant bigotry and every other attempt to divide the working class.

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