

Sanders and Clinton posture as defenders of immigrants in Miami debate

Andre Damon
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Seeking to appeal to Hispanic voters prior to the March 15 Florida Democratic Party presidential primary, Senator Bernie Sanders and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton postured as defenders of undocumented immigrants in Wednesday's debate in Miami.

Confronted by a Spanish-speaking audience member who, through tears, asked what they would do to prevent the deportation of her family members, who she said were "hardworking men in the field," the candidates declared they would do "everything" in their power to "protect" the woman and her family.

But any look at the candidates' records reveals the cynicism of these claims. Clinton was a central figure in the Obama administration as it presided over a mass deportation policy that saw undocumented immigrants deported at the fastest rate in American history.

Sanders, for his part, is a staunch economic nationalist, who—before his presidential aspirations forced him to use more guarded language—made a regular practice of scapegoating Mexican workers for the lowering of US workers' wages.

Both candidates are intimately tied to the Obama administration, referring to the man known as the "deporter-in-chief" as their personal friend. Sanders said Obama had done a "great job" as president, while adding that he "disagreed" on the deportation of children.

The debate, co-hosted by Spanish language television network Univision, could hardly have come at a more inconvenient time for the two Democratic Party candidates to posture as defenders of immigrant rights.

On Sunday, a senior official in the White House's Justice Department declared that he saw nothing wrong with the White House's current policy of forcing three-year-old children to appear in deportation hearings

without a lawyer or guardian, arguing that they could learn immigration law to do so.

"I've taught immigration law literally to 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds," said immigration judge Jack H. Weil. "They get it. It's not the most efficient, but it can be done."

Attorney General Loretta Lynch failed to repudiate these comments in a congressional hearing Wednesday. While noting she was "puzzled" by Weil's statements, she defended the White House's policy by declaring, "The current law does not provide the right to counsel" for children in deportation hearings.

Just a few hours before the debate, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson issued a statement in which he boasted that since the beginning of the year US Immigration and Customs Enforcement had arrested 336 people in raids at their homes as part of Operation Border Guardian.

He stated bluntly, "The focus of this operation are those who came here illegally as unaccompanied children." He further noted that the raids were "at my direction." Given that Johnson reports to the White House, his statement made clear that the raids were the deliberate policy of the Obama administration.

During the debate, Moderator Jorge Ramos called out Clinton for her support for the White House's line on immigration by playing a video clip of a 2014 interview in which she refused to say she would not deport children, instead declaring that she would give them "due process," a phrase interpreted by the White House to mean allowing children to represent themselves in court.

When Ramos pressed Clinton on these claims, she declared, "I will not deport children."

In fact, Clinton flatly contradicted her posture as a friend of undocumented immigrants in her unapologetic

support for a crackdown on the border. She declared, “Well, I think both of us, both Senator Sanders and I, voted numerous times to enhance border security along our border. We increased the number of border security agents. We did vote for money to build a fence... And the result is that we have the most secure border we’ve ever had.” These measures have led migrants to seek ever more dangerous border crossing paths, leading to hundreds of deaths every year.

Clinton played a central role in the 2009 coup that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, setting the stage for a brutal crackdown that has led countless thousands of children and adults to flee the country, including to the United States. In her autobiography, Clinton unapologetically defended her role, declaring, “We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras... which would render the question of Zelaya moot.” No one questioned Clinton for her role in that political crime, even as she denounced Sanders for comments favorable to left-wing political movements in Latin America, including Cuba.

Both Sanders and Clinton spoke in favor of “comprehensive immigration reform.” They did not clarify of the actual content of such measures, but the proposals previously put forward by the White House and congressional Democrats include vast spending increases for militarized border security, while making it easier to deport “criminals” and “national security and public safety threats.”

Such proposals have been tied to plans to create a “provisional legal status” for undocumented immigrants, which, according to a White House fact sheet, would require that they “come forward and register, submit biometric data, pass criminal background and national security checks, and pay fees and penalties”—in effect forcing them to admit to the “crime” of entering the United States, before they would be granted “provisional legal status,” without “welfare or other federal benefits.”

Later on in the debate, moderator María Elena Salinas of Univision called out Sanders for scapegoating immigrants as the cause of falling wages in the United States, playing a 2007 clip in which Sanders declared, “If wages are going down, I don’t know why we need millions of people to be coming into this country... who will work for lower wages than American workers and drive wages down even lower than they are right now.”

Seeking to defend himself, Sanders voiced his support for the Obama administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), tweaks to its program of mass deportation that would provide a temporary reprieve for undocumented immigrants, providing they register with the government. But even these measures, reactionary as they are, have been blocked by right-wing judges, giving the Obama administration a pretense to keep its deportation program in place.

In an interview last July, Sanders specifically opposed a policy of open borders, calling it a “Koch brothers proposal... a right-wing proposal, which says essentially there is no United States.”

Sanders’ position on immigration is closely aligned with his economic nationalism, which has become more and more of a dominant theme of his campaign in recent weeks, particularly prior to the Michigan primary this week. He has focused his criticisms of Clinton on her support for free trade agreements, rather than on the profit interests of the corporations themselves.

Behind their rhetoric, both Sanders and Clinton support of the interests of big business, which is divided between the benefits of having a super-exploited caste of immigrant workers that can be terrorized by the threat of deportation into working for poverty wages, and creating a “guest worker” program in which immigrant workers can be turned into low-wage, second-class citizens within the framework of a “legal” process.



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