

Deporter-in-Chief: The legacy of Obama

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Over the past six years the United States and Mexican governments have collectively apprehended nearly 1 million refugees fleeing to the United States from the Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—deporting more than 800,000, including more than 40,000 children. Nearly 10 percent of the Northern Triangle countries' total population have reportedly left the region.

The unceasing flow of refugees has compelled the political establishment to take a series of measures in an attempt to contain the crisis. More recently, the strategy of the Obama administration has been to shift the dirty work of apprehensions and deportations to its southern neighbor, Mexico.

Under heavy pressure from Washington, Mexico implemented Programa Frontera Sur in July 2014. The plan, likely crafted by officials within the Obama administration itself, means that those refugees who previously would have reached the US border are now being intercepted by Mexican authorities.

Under the Programa Frontera Sur, Mexico has relocated over 300 immigration agents to its southern border with Guatemala to carry out the ruthless dictates of Washington. The program has included setting up mobile checkpoints and conducting regular raids on trains and migrant hostels. The Obama administration has directly supported this campaign with training, technology and intelligence. For migrants, the consequences have been devastating.

A year after its implementation in July 2014, apprehensions by the Mexican government increased by 71 percent over the same period the previous year. Likewise, apprehensions of Central Americans by the US border patrol decreased. This shift created the illusion of some measure of effective immigration reform in the US. In reality, even more migrants are being deported than previously; the only change has been in the location of apprehension. Furthermore, due to the absence or deliberate disregard of laws of due process and humanitarian norms, the migrants are often no longer even considered for temporary visas. Instead, they are forced to return, in massive numbers, to some of the most violent and desperate social conditions on the planet.

The program has taken a particularly aggressive approach to operations aimed at preventing migrants from riding north on cargo trains, known collectively as La Bestia. Migration authorities have blocked migrants from boarding trains,

forcibly removed migrants from trains mid-ride, and raided establishments that migrants are known to frequent, detaining thousands in the process. There have been many reports of excessive use of force and other abuses by the authorities, including a recent shooting of a 15-year-old boy traveling from Guatemala. The government has denied all of the charges.

No longer able to board the train in Chiapas, migrants, because of the disruption of the usual route, are forced to rely on different and dangerous modes of transportation, often traveling incredible distances by foot. Without access to the networks of resources and shelters long established on the previous train route, migrants suffer immensely from vulnerabilities on their new path.

The Mexican government has turned these methods of repression, forged initially to be used against migrants, towards its own population. Earlier this year the *Guardian* found that an increasing number of indigenous Mexicans had been detained for possible deportation in Chiapas for not having a valid identification—despite the Mexican Constitution stating that individuals are able to move freely throughout the country “without necessity of a letter of security, passport, safe-conduct or any other similar requirement.” It is quite common for babies who are born in indigenous communities in Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca to be born without a record of birth. Some reports estimate that as many as 7 million Mexicans do not have a registered name, identity, or nationality. Earlier this year, the WSWS learned of a woman who gave birth to a child in Chiapas and then, en route to the US, became entangled in an immigration web in which the baby became stranded without citizenship in either country.

As the tenure of the 44th United States president comes to a close, a balance sheet of the administration's “accomplishments” regarding immigration should be drawn. Despite grand promises of immigration reform in his first 100 days of office, the Obama administration proceeded to enact draconian immigration legislation and speed up deportations. Obama's actions become all the more significant when one considers that these policies were carried out while the Democratic Party, which continues to posture as a defender of working people and the poor, gained a majority in both houses of Congress after the 2008 elections.

In immigrant communities, Obama has become infamously known as “deporter-in-chief.” Since 2008 there have been over

2.5 million deportations, an average of more than 1,000 per day. This is roughly double the rate that occurred under Republican president George Bush, and totals more than under any other president in US history. In 2013, there were 435,498 removals, an all-time high for a single year. In addition, the administration has prioritized using a more formal removal process, which carries greater consequences if re-entry is attempted by the immigrant. Considering that the most recent statistics only include deportations that have taken place through October 2014, it is quite possible that over 3 million immigrants have been deported to date.

After coming to office, Obama vastly expanded a program begun under Bush called Secure Communities. The program united federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in an effort to deport immigrants who were already living in communities, as opposed to those attempting to cross the border. A political scientist at the University of Iowa, Rene Rocha, recently told the *Christian Science Monitor* that, “Prior to the Obama administration, there was very little interior enforcement, it was almost all near the border. By the end of 2011, arrests near the border and interior were equal.”

The program faced extensive criticism for ripping up communities and the lack of regulation of the program’s implementation. A study by UC Berkeley found that only 52 percent of individuals arrested through the program were slated to have a hearing before an immigration judge and that 39 percent of individuals arrested had a spouse or children who were US citizens, causing an impact on 88,000 families that included US citizens.

In many cases, immigrants who have temporary legal status through programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are held in poorly regulated detention centers throughout the country with few rights. Although these individuals have received temporary legal immunity from deportation, in many states they are not eligible for Medicaid programs, nor are they eligible for the tax subsidies of the Affordable Care Act. In select states that have provided a state-funded waiver to assist the poorest sections of immigrants, such as California with Medicaid, this vulnerable section of the population is often scapegoated by the right wing for their “abuse of social programs,” in a further effort to divide the working class.

The administration’s “reform” measures did not only focus on immigrants already residing in the country but have also focused on strengthening Fortress America at the border. In 2010, Obama signed into legislation a bill that granted \$600 million to further militarize the US-Mexico border through the buildup of thousands of border agents and the use of Predator drones to patrol from the sky.

The most recent manifestation of Obama “reform” came in September when his administration announced that it would begin the forced removal of Haitian refugees, an act only

briefly postponed in the wake of Hurricane Matthew and the massing of thousands of Haitian immigrants at the US border in cities such as Tijuana, Mexico. Many of these immigrants, who fled Haiti to Brazil following the 2010 earthquake, are now being forced out of economic necessity to make the dangerous journey north from Brazil to the United States. Much like the migrants fleeing the war-torn Northern Triangle region, the Haitian migrants have now become double victims of US imperialism: first, from the devastating situation they faced in their home countries brought on by US imperialism, and later during their perilous journey in search of livable conditions.

The criminal immigration policies of the Obama administration carried out over the last eight years are yet another indictment of the increasingly Orwellian nature of the US political establishment. The great “anti-war” candidate became the first president in history to keep the US at war throughout two full terms in office. Universal health care has turned out to be nothing short of a restructuring of the system to benefit big business. The alleged candidate of working people has overseen the largest transfer of wealth to the top 1 percent in history. As his presidency comes to a close, we should add to the balance sheet immigration “reform” that has turned out to mean the ruthless deportation of more immigrants than any other administration in US history.

For all intents and purposes, Hillary Clinton can be expected to continue the same harsh policies as the Obama administration if she is voted into the White House on November 8. While Clinton demagogically harangues Donald Trump for his plans to build more walls, she has been a firm supporter of deportations, and voted for the increased securing of the border through building a 700-mile barrier between the US and Mexico in the Secure Fence Act of 2006 (a bill also approved by Obama as a senator). Clinton is on record in January of this year trying to distance herself from Trump by dishonestly quibbling over semantics and stating that she supported the building of a “fence” and not a “wall.” Based on the Obama experience, it should be clear that whatever rhetoric is decided upon, the reality will be increased attacks on defenseless migrants.



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