United States ends “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy for Cuban migrants

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On January 12, President Barack Obama announced that, effective immediately, the US government would end the so-called “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy, as well as the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program. In a joint statement detailing the changes in migration policy, the Cuban government agreed to accept Cuban nationals deported or returned by the US.

Through these programs, Cubans were extended preferential immigration status and a continued incentive to leave the country, which contributed to a “brain drain” of trained professionals and provided Washington and right-wing Cuban exiles the fodder for propaganda about state repression in Cuba fueling a constant stream of refugees.

Cubans will now be treated just as brutally as all other migrants and refugees to the United States, subject to an inhuman regime of incarceration and deportation built up by the Obama administration and soon to be administered by the even more virulently anti-immigrant Donald Trump.

Under the previous policy, Cubans who made it to dry land in US territory were permitted to enter the country and take advantage of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which allowed Cubans to claim permanent US residency after one year in the country. Cubans who were interdicted at sea by the US Coast Guard, on the other hand, were returned to Cuba.

The policy was introduced by Bill Clinton in 1994 to restrict Cuban immigration in the wake of the so-called *balsero* (rafter) crisis, which saw tens of thousands of Cubans leave the island during the economic collapse following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Prior to this, Cubans making it either to the US or into the hands of the Coast Guard were allowed entry and a fast-track to residency and citizenship. In exchange for getting the Cuban government to accept its returned nationals, the US opened up an immigration lottery program giving 20,000 residency visas a year to Cubans.

The much newer but related program, the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, was put in place in 2006 by George W. Bush. It allowed doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to present themselves at any US embassy or consulate and receive a fast-track to US residency and citizenship. It was largely intended to undermine the Cuban economy and health care system by depriving it of personnel that are among the most expensive to train, and was taken advantage of by over 7,000 professionals. Much of the anger directed at the Obama administration by right-wing exiles in Miami is over the termination of this program.

A great deal of Cuba’s export earnings are derived from its medical professionals, with over 40,000 deployed around the world. Until recently, over 30,000 were in Venezuela providing medical care and training, for which the Cuban government received subsidized oil. Doctors and other professionals working abroad were paid more than their counterparts on the island itself—although still low by international standards—about $180 per month instead of about $23 per month.

While the sending of skilled Cuban doctors to impoverished countries served to boost the country’s image on the world stage, the program also provided a source of earnings for medical services. This was particularly the case in Venezuela, where the employment of doctors in the government’s medical programs for the poor was compensated with cheap oil. Groups like the Cuban American National Foundation hysterically denounced this program as a form of “slavery” or “indentured servitude.”

The end of these preferential immigration programs is

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the logical outcome of the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. Indeed, since the announcement of a rapprochement in December 2014, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of Cuban immigrants and refugees reaching the United States. Since 2012, around 118,000 Cubans have entered the US, with over 55,000 reaching the country in 2016 alone.

The sudden shift in policy has stranded thousands of Cuban migrants who were making their way to the US borders, particularly through Central America and Mexico, many with the aim of reuniting with family members residing in the US.

The restriction of Cuban immigration is of a piece with Obama's anti-immigrant policies that have earned him the moniker of "deporter-in-chief" in immigrant communities. Obama's statement ominously notes, "By taking this step, we are treating Cuban migrants the same way we treat migrants from other countries." In other words, Cubans will now be subject to the same monstrous policies as other immigrants and refugees, which have seen around three million deported since 2008 and hundreds of thousands per year incarcerated in a vast network of over 200 detention centers.

Although Cubans will formally be able to apply for humanitarian asylum, as is the case with refugees from other countries, this is notoriously hard to prove. Additionally, once detained by immigration authorities, immigrants—even children—are routinely denied adequate legal representation.

Obama has created a system that can be seamlessly taken over by Donald Trump, who has promised to vastly expand the scale of deportations. In fact, though Trump has criticized Obama's normalization of relations with Cuba, it is precisely because of its anti-immigrant stance that Trump is unlikely to reverse this latest measure by his predecessor.

For decades, US immigration policy provided preferential treatment to Cuban immigrants as part of Washington's protracted campaign to undermine the Cuban government and as a means by both major parties to curry favor with the right-wing Cuban lobby in Miami. This policy grated particularly upon immigrants from Central America and Haiti, who have been summarily sent back to countries where they face real threats of persecution.

Nonetheless, there is nothing progressive in the Obama administration's decision to now subject Cubans to the same terrible conditions facing other immigrants and refugees. The policy of the working class must be to uphold the rights of workers to live where they choose.

As stated in the program of the Socialist Equality Party, *The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States*:

> The SEP fights for the repeal of all anti-immigrant laws and the disbanding of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the US Border Patrol. It calls for all undocumented workers to be guaranteed full legal rights, including the right to work and the right to travel to their home countries without the threat of being barred from returning and torn from their families. Against the attempt to militarize borders and persecute immigrants, not only in the US but all over the globe, the working class must uphold the principle of open borders—the right of workers to live and work in whatever country they choose with full citizenship rights.

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