

The assault on immigrants and the specter of a US police state

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In his ultra-right diatribe delivered Friday to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), President Donald Trump reveled in the crackdown his administration has initiated against undocumented immigrant workers, while identifying the repressive forces carrying out this campaign as a key base of his political support.

He declared, “[W]ith the help of our great border police, with the help of ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], with the help of General Kelly and all of the people that are so passionate about this...ICE came and endorsed me. They never endorsed a presidential candidate before, they might not even be allowed to.”

Trump continued, “As we speak today, immigration officers are finding the gang members, the drug dealers and the criminal aliens and throwing them the hell out of our country.”

Earlier in the week, White House spokesman Sean Spicer declared that the administration had taken “the shackles off” of ICE and Border Patrol agents with the issuing of new rules of engagement that essentially target every undocumented immigrant living in the US for apprehension and deportation.

The brutal human cost of this “unshackling” has become manifest from coast to coast since the Department of Homeland Security released two memos spelling out this dramatic escalation. ICE agents have carried out a series of raids supposedly targeting “criminal aliens”—in most cases workers charged with immigration violations, driving offenses and other minor scrapes with the law. In addition to those targeted, others have been swept up in “collateral arrests,” the term used by ICE to describe anyone it encounters in the course of these raids whom it suspects may be undocumented.

The intended effect of these sweeps is to institute a

reign of terror against millions of working-class families living under the threat of mothers and fathers being suddenly and violently torn from their children.

Incidents taking place within days of the new enforcement memos have graphically exposed the police state methods that are being unleashed first upon immigrant workers and being readied for attacks on the working class as whole.

Late last Wednesday in Fort Worth, Texas, ICE agents burst into a hospital and dragged away a critically ill 26-year-old woman from El Salvador who had been brought in for emergency surgery for a brain tumor. Sara Beltran Hernandez, a mother with two young children, was seized by the agents and shackled hands and feet, even though she was unable to walk and had to be removed in a wheelchair.

She was taken back to a privately run, for-profit detention center where her treatment has consisted of doses of Tylenol. The sole “crime” committed by this young woman was to cross the border in search of asylum from the violence in her home country and in the hope of reuniting with her mother, a legal resident in Queens, New York.

A week before in Virginia, ICE agents laid siege to a Methodist church, ambushing six immigrants who had taken shelter there as they stepped out the door in the morning. They were surrounded by ICE agents, shackled and thrown into a white van. Witnesses described the scene as akin to a kidnapping.

In a chilling abuse of police powers, passengers aboard a February 22 Delta flight from San Francisco to New York’s JFK Airport were informed that they would not be let off the plane unless they presented identification papers to Border Patrol agents, who blocked the aircraft’s door to the jetway.

The Customs and Border Protection agency claimed

the action had been taken to seize an immigrant believed to be on the flight who was facing a deportation order. The agency subsequently acknowledged that he was not on the plane.

When asked on what legal grounds Border Agents were detaining an entire planeload of passengers for questioning, the agency cited a statute giving it “the authority to collect passenger name record information on all travelers entering or leaving the United States,” *Rolling Stone* magazine reported. The only problem was that the flight was between two US cities, neither of them anywhere near an international border.

A spokesman for the agency added, “It’s always best to cooperate with law enforcement so as to expedite your exiting the airport in a timely manner.” In other words, anyone exercising his or her constitutional rights can expect illegal detention and abuse.

Such methods, echoing the Gestapo demand of “papers please,” are designed to intimidate the population as a whole and ultimately be used to deny basic democratic rights, including the right to vote.

The Trump administration has demagogically portrayed the crackdown on the undocumented as a blow on behalf of native-born workers. His aim, Trump has said, is to expel a layer of immigrants “who compete directly against vulnerable American workers.”

The reality is that the police state measures now being unleashed on immigrant workers will, sooner rather than later, be turned against the working class as a whole. In fomenting xenophobia, economic nationalism and anti-immigrant hysteria, the aim of the Trump administration, a collection of billionaire financial oligarchs, generals and outright fascists, is to scapegoat immigrants for the economic and social crisis created by capitalism and divide the working class.

The attack on immigrants is part of a social counterrevolution including the slashing of taxes for the corporations and the rich, the removal of regulations on capitalist industries and financial markets, and the destruction of all basic social services, from public education to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

Such measures cannot be carried out either democratically or peacefully. The scale of repression being contemplated was laid bare earlier this month with the release of a Department of Homeland Security memo proposing the mobilization of 100,000 National

Guard troops across 11 states to join in the anti-immigrant dragnet.

While such measures are unprecedented, they have been prepared over a long period by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, from the 1996 anti-immigrant law enacted under President Bill Clinton, streamlining deportations and mandating immigrant detention, to the vast apparatus of state repression created in the name of a “war on terror” under George W. Bush and expanded under Barack Obama, who initiated drone assassinations of American citizens and deported more immigrants than all the presidents who preceded him combined.

In the face of the qualitative escalation of these measures toward open forms of dictatorial rule, the Democratic Party has centered its opposition to Trump on the reactionary campaign to brand him as an agent of the Kremlin, reflecting the opposition of large sections of the military and intelligence apparatus to any shift from the military buildup against Russia.

Underlying all of these measures is the breakdown of democratic forms of rule under the impact of the crisis of American and world capitalism and the uninterrupted growth of social inequality.

The defense of immigrants can be carried out only by the working class itself, fighting for the unbreakable unity of native-born and immigrant workers, along with the working class on both sides of the Rio Grande, in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

This struggle can be waged only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program that intransigently defends the right of workers from every corner of the globe to live and work in the country of their choice with full citizenship rights and without fear of detention, deportation or repression.



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