

Immigration under capitalism: Life and death along the US-Mexico border

Part One

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The US government is rapidly moving forward with a plan to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants from the US. If realized, this will be the world's largest forced migration program since the Nazis forced millions of Jews and other "undesirables" into ghettos and concentration camps. In terms of its sheer scale, the Trump administration's plan overshadows even the most shameful events in American history, including the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, Japanese internment and the Palmer raids.

The many millions whose lives will be uprooted by Trump's immigration policies are the victims of the capitalist system and of policies enacted by both political parties of the American ruling class. Immigrants confront an administration whose xenophobia, nationalism and barbarity express the social outlook of a ruling class that has amassed its wealth through decades of financial parasitism, international corporate exploitation and imperialist war. The US financial aristocracy has laid waste to the societies from which working class immigrants escape and then slanders them as "rapists" and "criminals."

The WSWWS spoke to Victoria, a mother in her 30s who was released days ago from a detention center in Texas after traveling from El Salvador with two of her four children, including her 14-year-old daughter, Gabriela, and her one-year-old son, Edwin Jr.

Three weeks ago, a pre-dawn glow cracked the night sky in the family's small Salvadoran village. Victoria woke Gabriela and told her to get dressed. Each had filled a single small bag with key belongings and baby formula. Edwin Jr.'s infant chatter was the only sound that accompanied them down the dirt road to the town's bus stop.

Victoria's husband, Edwin Sr., is a farmworker and makes just over USD \$200 each month in El Salvador. He had previously lived in the United States and worked for months in the fields to save up the USD \$5,000 required to pay a human smuggler (known as a "coyote") to send his wife and two of their children to the United States. The trip north was the financial

gamble of a lifetime—when Victoria and her children were captured, many months worth of labor were lost.

"In the town where we are from, there is a church but the hospital nearby is barely functioning," she said. "My children have to walk an hour to and from school each day, and they are getting regularly threatened by the gangs."

Victoria has relatives who own a small shop in El Salvador and are forced to pay an extortion fee to the gangs, who manufacture and ship drugs to American consumers and control large swaths of Central American and Mexican territory. The family has paid the fee for years, but can no longer afford it, and the parents regularly go hungry to avoid being killed by gangs. Recently, gang members murdered Edwin Sr.'s father, beating him to death with metal pipes. Since Victoria and the children were captured, Edwin Sr. is now at heightened risk of meeting the same fate.

"After the gang members killed my husband's father, they said they would kill us. They left written messages at my door telling me they would kill my children. They were horrible messages." Victoria began to cry. Each time she thinks of the messages she begins to panic. She is certain that if she returns, she will be killed. "The police did nothing, they are corrupt, they are often the ones who help the gangsters."

Immigration judges will almost always deny asylum to someone in Victoria's position, claiming that extortion is not legally sufficient to qualify as a refugee.

According to a 2015 report by San Diego State University social scientist Elizabeth Kennedy, the Obama administration deported 83 people to their deaths in 2014 and the first half of 2015. The *Guardian* reported one such story: "Juan Francisco Diaz was deported back to his hometown Choloma in Honduras in March, having lived under the radar in the US for three years. Four months after deportation he was found lying dead in an alleyway in his parents neighborhood." Countless women have been deported to countries where they are then raped and sexually abused.

Victoria had no choice but to leave town to save her children. Her plan was to save up enough money working as a cleaning lady in the US to pay for her husband and remaining two

children to be brought to the US. She traversed over 1,000 miles of rugged terrain in 16 days on her way north.

“The coyotes took us through Mexico, sometimes by foot, a group of 10 or 15 of us. There were days where we didn’t eat. For three days I did not eat and I was running out of food for my baby,” Victoria said. By day, the group travelled, Victoria taking Edwin Jr. in her arms as they ran through fields and hid under bridges to escape the Mexican police and border agents who work with the US to deport Central Americans migrating north.

Each night, the group of immigrants stopped to sleep in a field or in one of the “safe houses” often controlled by the gangs or local criminals along the way. Victoria slept with her arms around her children, fearful that they would be sexually abused or attacked. One of the young women in Victoria’s travel group was dragged away one night and raped by two men. In the morning the young woman was not there.

As the group approached the border, their coyote told them to lie in the bed of a pickup that closed with a low hatch and could not be opened from the inside. They were packed on top of one another and left with little air circulation. Edwin Jr. began to cry, causing panic among the travelers and concern they would be discovered. After several hours, the coyote changed his mind, unloaded the immigrants and took them across the desert on foot instead.

The walk across the arid desert was the most difficult part of the journey, Victoria said. She was grateful it was only February and temperatures in the desert had yet to soar. The group had a limited water supply and they knew that if their coyote got lost or abandoned them, they would likely die. They marched through the rocky terrain until late at night, and then they saw the headlights.

“When we were across the US border, the coyotes took us to hide,” she said. The immigrants first stayed hidden, hoping the Border Patrol did not see them. When more headlights appeared, Victoria’s heart sunk. She was running out of baby food and was too exhausted to scramble through the desert away from the guards.

Customs and Border Patrol found Victoria cowering under a bush in the desert with her children. Covered in dirt, the family was detained together in an immigrant processing center.

“We were detained for a day and a night, and it was very cold,” Victoria said. “My baby didn’t want to eat anything because the food they gave us was so bad. He cried and cried, and there was nowhere he could rest because they didn’t give us beds. I wouldn’t put him on the floor because I was worried he would get sick from how dirty it was.”

“Some of the guards were nice, but some humiliated us. They took my stuff and threw it in the trash. I had some money I had saved, and I had a list of phone numbers of the only people I know in the US. They threw all of that in the trash. When I was released, I didn’t have money to buy food for my baby. Thank god a kind stranger bought me some food for my child and

gave me a few dollars to buy food for my 14-year-old and me.”

When immigrants are captured at the border, they often face a quick round of questioning by immigration officials at the processing center before being sent to a longer-term jail. One immigration attorney told the WSWS that agents often lie to ensure that the migrant’s asylum claim will fail. They invent testimony, claiming the immigrants say they are “looking for work” or came for “economic reasons.” These are legally insufficient reasons under US immigration law for granting asylum, and often result in denials of otherwise valid asylum claims.

The predominant social type that works on the Border Patrol or in an immigration detention facility is distinctly fascistic. As of November 2016, a review board set up to investigate incidents where Border Patrol agents shoot immigrants has cleared the agents each time, regardless of whether the migrant was killed. The US Supreme Court is currently hearing a case filed by the parents of a young Mexican boy who was shot and killed by a border guard in El Paso after he and his friends were playing near the border. An appeals court held that the parents have no right to sue.

A source told the WSWS that guards have also begun posting signs inside detention centers mocking migrants and telling them Trump is going to make them pay for the construction of the border wall. Many of the border guards and immigration officials are of Hispanic descent and are hired for their Spanish language skills. Immigrants are often surprised by the fact that officers and guards with Hispanic names treat them so harshly.

Overall, 65 percent of ICE detainees are held in for-profit private prisons. Legislation introduced by Democrats and signed by Democratic President Barack Obama in 2009 mandates that ICE fill these facilities to a certain quota to ensure the profit margin of the immigrant detention profiteers. Since 2003, 167 people have died in immigration detention facilities, many due to lack of medical care. The prices of stocks for two of the largest for-profit prison companies—GEO Group and CoreCivic—have doubled since Trump’s election.

Victoria expressed her sympathies for migrants from the Middle East who are also subject to Trump’s anti-immigrant bans: “The government is now saying they’re not going to let immigrants in from the Middle East, but they need help, too. Trump, he has a lot of money. He wants to do whatever he wants. He doesn’t think of the poor people or the migrants. He doesn’t know poverty. He doesn’t know violence or any of that. He only thinks of the people with money.”

To be continued



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