

Trudeau vows immigration crackdown as thousands of Haitians flee to Canada

Laurent Lafrance
24 August 2017

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued an explicit warning last weekend to the thousands of mainly Haitian refugees who are fleeing across the US-Canada border to escape the Trump administration's brutal crackdown on immigrants.

Speaking in Montreal, the Prime Minister openly discouraged Haitian refugees from cross the border. "Entering Canada irregularly is not an advantage" he said. "There are rigorous immigration and customs rules that will be followed. Make no mistake."

Trudeau's hardline stance towards refugees fleeing the US is bound up with his government's determination to maintain and deepen Ottawa's close economic and military-security partnership with Washington at all costs. It also further exposes the Trudeau government's phony "refugee-friendly" propaganda, which it has used to give a "progressive" cover to its right-wing policies of vast hikes in military spending, the maintenance of low corporate tax rates, and the privatization of public infrastructure.

Transport Minister Marc Garneau said that Canadian consulates in the US were being "mobilized" to discourage different groups that might be considering coming to Canada by explaining to them the strict criteria needed to be accepted as a refugee. Garneau also gave an interview to the *Miami Herald* last Sunday to warn members of the Haitian diaspora living in Florida of the risk of being deported once in Canada.

In the first two weeks of August alone, more than 3,800 asylum seekers walked over the border to Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec. This is in addition to the almost 3,000 who crossed in July, which itself represented a four-fold increase compared to the month of June.

More than 1,000 people are currently crammed into military tents on the border, waiting for Canadian authorities to verify their identity. Hundreds more have been housed in the Olympic Stadium in Montreal as well as a former convent and the old Royal Victoria hospital. Other centers have since been opened on the north and south shore of Montreal and a temporary shelter was set up in Cornwall,

Ontario.

The most recent influx of refugees has been triggered by the Trump administration's announcement that it will end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted to Haitians following the 2010 earthquake on the astonishing pretext that Haiti is now considered a safe country. The more than 50,000 Haitians living in the US now fear they will be caught in Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, jailed in privately-run prison facilities, and then deported to conditions of poverty and misery in Haiti.

The flow of migrants coming to Canada is not restricted to Haitians, however. Since the inauguration of Trump last January, thousands of refugees of Middle Eastern, African and South American origins have fled the US for fear of persecution and deportation.

According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) more than 10,000 asylum seekers have been intercepted in the last eight months after crossing the border "irregularly" in Quebec alone.

If refugee claimants are forced to enter Canada "irregularly" it is because the Liberal government continues to enforce the Canada-US Safe Third Country agreement, under which refugees who make an asylum application at a regular border crossing are automatically turned back to the United States. Migrants have a chance to apply for asylum only if they cross the border outside an official checkpoint, either via backroads or by crossing ditches, at considerable risk.

The refusal to abandon the agreement is bound up with the Trudeau government's determination to deepen Ottawa's working relationship with the Trump administration by stepping up the Canada-US military partnership and enhancing North American economic protectionism through the reshaping of the North America Free Trade Agreement.

The Liberals' contempt for Haitian refugees is also demonstrated by the conditions in which they are kept. Customs and Immigration Union president Jean-Pierre Fortin said there were about 300 asylum seekers sleeping on an offloading wharf last week and that another 150 to 200

people were sleeping inside in “extremely harsh conditions.” The Red Cross also said that it was treating around 40 medical cases each day as there is no doctor on the spot.

While Haitians are desperately seeking protection in Canada, most of them are unaware that Canada canceled its own temporary residency program for Haitians little more than four years after the 2010 earthquake, which claimed over 200,000 lives and displaced half a million people. At the time, news reports estimated that approximately 3,200 Haitian nationals were to be deported from Canada as a result of the program ending.

The program was fully ended in August 2016 under Trudeau’s watch. Immigration experts say that many of the refugee claimants have since been sent back to Haiti. In fact, the government itself boasted that about half of Haitians seeking refugee status in Canada have been denied in the last couple of years.

The suggestion that Haiti is safe is an absurd lie. Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas and one of the poorest countries in the world. The unemployment rate is at least 30 percent and more than half the population live in poverty. The country has not yet recovered from recent natural disasters, including Hurricane Matthew last year, which destroyed 32 percent of Haiti’s wealth and exacerbated social problems.

Although Trudeau has made clear that his government intends to crack down on migrants crossing the border “irregularly” and deport them after their refugee applications have been rejected, Conservative immigration critic Michelle Rempel put the blame for the flow of refugees on the “irresponsible tweets” Trudeau made in January, when he declared that “Canada welcomes those feeling persecution, terror and war.”

She added that the Liberals had to allocate more resources to speed up the processing of refugee claims, which means accelerating the deportation process. Rempel even claimed that “No one is fleeing persecution from the United States of America.”

In Quebec, the head of the pro-independence Parti Québécois, Jean-François Lisée, made similar comments saying Haitians are not at risk of poverty or repression in either the US or Haiti.

The head of the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec said that the province has already reach its maximum “integration capacity” and called on the provincial government to prevent new refugees from entering the province.

Quebec Liberal Premier Philippe Couillard said that “there exists no guarantee that refugee claims will be accepted, considering the strict rules that govern them.”

Earlier this month, Couillard insisted he was determined to

process asylum applications as quickly as possible because the basic necessities provided to refugees such as healthcare were too “expensive.” This from a government which recently announced billions in tax cuts for businesses.

The hardline attitude from all sections of Canada’s ruling elite towards those fleeing persecution has encouraged the most reactionary political forces to rear their ugly heads.

A protest against so-called “illegal” immigration was organized in Quebec City last Sunday by an extreme right-wing, anti-immigrant group called La Meute (the “wolf pack”). Taking place only days after the neo-Nazi rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia, the protest in Quebec was a direct response to the ongoing influx of refugee claimants.

Another anti-immigrant demonstration was called in Vancouver on Saturday but it never materialized because it was countered by thousands of anti-racist protesters, far outnumbering the right-wing extremists.

The ultra-nationalist, anti-immigrant movement in Quebec, including groups like La Meute, has not emerged out of the blue. Under conditions where the ruling class across Canada is imposing anti-immigrant policies to divide the working class, such reactionary and racist elements feel increasingly free to express themselves.

The sovereigntist movement led by the PQ and the union bureaucracy has played a key role in injecting chauvinist poison into public debate and inciting racist, anti-Muslim sentiments. Significantly, the *Journal de Montréal*, which is owned by media mogul and former PQ leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau, ran a series of commentaries condemning the “left-wing” violence during last weekend’s protest while presenting La Meute in a favorable light.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact