

Trump administration moves toward deportation of Central American immigrants

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Late Monday, the Trump administration announced its decision to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for as many as 5,000 Nicaraguans who have lived legally in the United States for close to two decades. These immigrants, many of them with spouses and children who are US citizens, and who have jobs, homes and small businesses, will be rendered undocumented in January 2019, subject to being hunted down and deported by armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) squads.

TPS was created by legislation enacted in 1990 to cover non-citizens unable to return to their own countries because of armed conflicts and environmental disasters. The status is highly restrictive, applying only to those immigrants who were in the US at the time of the designation, and excluding those fleeing the same conditions afterward. While it allows TPS recipients to work and requires them to pay taxes, it denies them all federal benefits and provides no means of obtaining legal resident status or reuniting with loved ones left behind. Any immigrant convicted of a felony or two misdemeanors is deprived of TPS protection.

Though the ruling on Nicaragua affects a relatively small number of immigrants, it is a first step in the introduction of a reactionary anti-immigrant policy that could see as many as 325,000 people with TPS status forcibly expelled from the United States and returned to impoverished and violence-plagued countries that, in many cases, they left as children.

TPS was granted to both Nicaraguans and Hondurans, including the undocumented, who were residing in the US when Central America was ravaged by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. While the status has to be renewed every 18 months—requiring beneficiaries to re-register—this has been done more or less routinely for the past two decades.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which made the determination on ending TPS status for Nicaraguans, temporarily postponed the decision on Hondurans, some 85,000 of whom have benefited from the program. TPS status for both countries was set to expire in January. Under the decision announced Monday, Nicaraguans will have until January 2019 to obtain legal residence or leave the country before facing forcible deportation. A decision on Honduras, meanwhile, has been postponed until July of next year.

The supposed basis of the decision is that conditions in Nicaragua have improved to such an extent that TPS is no longer needed, while for Honduras “additional information is necessary,” in the words of acting DHS Secretary Elaine Duke. Duke added that the government of Nicaragua had made no request for extending TPS for its citizens in the US, while Honduran authorities have appealed for an extension.

The shift toward a draconian crackdown on immigrants covered by TPS was signaled in May when then-Homeland Security secretary—and now White House chief of staff—Gen. John Kelly granted a six-month, rather than an 18-month, extension to nearly 59,000 Haitians who have been in the US since the devastating 2010 earthquake that claimed the lives of as many as 300,000, while leaving 1.5 million homeless.

Kelly falsely claimed that the Haitian government wanted its citizens sent back and urged those in the US to use the six months to “to prepare for their return to Haiti.”

Meanwhile, TPS status for immigrants who came to the US before earthquakes devastated El Salvador in 2001 will expire in March. Salvadorans are by far the largest population affected by the program, with roughly a quarter of a million of them having been covered by the program. It appears likely that the DHS

will detect similar “improvements” in this Central American country justifying their expulsion.

The claims that the US government is acting on the basis of any objective evaluation that these longstanding US residents can be re-integrated into the countries that they left in many cases decades ago are utterly false and cynical.

Central America’s poverty-stricken Northern Triangle faces civil war levels of violence, with 50,000 people murdered there over the last three years. Haiti continues to be plagued by poverty and lack of infrastructure, with Hurricane Matthew in 2016 leaving vast destruction in its wake.

All of these countries are the victims not merely of natural catastrophes, but more fundamentally a century of oppression by US imperialism, punctuated by American invasions and occupations, US-backed dictatorships and CIA-orchestrated civil wars and coups.

The human cost of the policies being initiated by the Trump administration is devastating. A recent study conducted by the Center for Migration Studies found that TPS recipients from El Salvador, Honduras and Haiti—who account for 90 percent of immigrants with this status—together have 273,000 children who are US citizens. More than half of those from El Salvador and Honduras, and 16 percent from Haiti, have been in the country for 20 years or more, while 68,000 of them—22 percent—arrived before the age of 16. Roughly 30 percent of them are paying mortgages on homes.

The impact within the countries where these immigrants are to be sent will also be catastrophic. Remittances from abroad, most of them coming from immigrants to the US, account for nearly 30 percent of Haiti’s gross domestic product (GDP). In the Central American countries, they constitute about 15 percent.

The scrapping of TPS is part of a fascistic policy on the part of the Trump administration that demonizes immigrants as a threat to national security and a drain on “American” jobs and living standards. It is in sync with the wholesale attack on immigrant workers through stepped-up raids and detentions and the threats of mass deportations.

At the same time, the administration is utilizing the TPS immigrants—much like the so-called Dreamers, the 800,000 young undocumented immigrants covered by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)—as

pawns in its attempt to push through draconian anti-immigrant legislation that would massively build up police state measures against immigration, revoke current policies allowing for US citizens and legal immigrants to sponsor close family members and drastically limit the rights of refugees.

In her statement announcing the latest decisions on TPS, DHS Acting Secretary Duke called “on Congress to enact a permanent solution for this inherently temporary program.”

The administration’s actions have drawn fire from its base among fascistic and white supremacist layers reflected in outlets like *Breitbart*, which accused the DHS of “caving in” by not ordering the summary deportation of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans and Haitians.

The Democratic Party has signaled its willingness to reach a deal with Trump on stepping up the war on immigrants. In September, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi praised Trump for his feigned “sympathy” for the Dreamers, indicating that they were willing to accept an agreement that would include stepped-up border security and an immigration crackdown.

Such a deal would only represent a further escalation of anti-immigrant policies enacted by the administration of President Barack Obama, who earned the title “deporter-in-chief” by expelling more immigrants than all the presidents who had preceded him combined.

Monday’s brutal decision on TPS is not without precedent. In September 2016, before handing the White House over to Trump, the Obama administration stripped Temporary Protected Status from 4,270 immigrants from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia who had been allowed to stay legally in the US because of Africa’s Ebola crisis.



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