

Trudeau slams door on desperate Haitian refugees

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Less than two years after he posed with Syrian refugees for the media at Toronto's Pearson airport, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has once again made clear that his "pro-refugee" posturing was a sham.

Speaking at an event in Charlottetown late last month, the Liberal Prime Minister declared that impoverished Haitians, together with millions more forced to flee war and poverty around the world, have no right to a better life. "Refugee status means that you have nowhere to go, you cannot be protected by your home state," Trudeau intoned. "It's not just a question of, 'I'm looking for an economic future, so I want to come to Canada'."

Trudeau's callous remarks were part of the liberals' months-long efforts at discouraging the growing number of refugees—many of Middle Eastern and African origins but most of them Haitians—who are fleeing the Trump administration's crackdown on immigrants to seek asylum in Canada.

Trump's measures include the suspension of the entire refugee assessment process, the travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries and the systematic rounding up and deportation of immigrants by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Trudeau and his Liberal ministers have deliberately avoided making any criticism of this reactionary agenda, confirming that the Liberal government, with the support of the entire ruling elite, is no less ruthlessly determined than the Trump administration to send migrants back to their war-torn, economically ravaged countries.

Since Trump announced his administration would end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted to 60,000 Haitians following the 2010 earthquake, an influx of Haitian migrants living in the US arrived in Canada. According to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board, out of the 14,467 refugees who crossed the border "irregularly" since February, 6,300 were Haitians.

While the numbers slowed somewhat in October, the Canadian government is apprehending a new wave of refugees as Trump officially announced that Haitians under

the TPS have until July 2019 to leave the United States or face detention and deportation. The Department of Homeland Security indicated that it also plans to terminate the TPS program for some 260,000 Hondurans and Salvadorians living in the US.

The Liberal government responded by pledging to intensify its collaboration with Trump's anti-refugee crackdown. Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, who has repeatedly called for closer cooperation between Canadian and US authorities on immigration, said that the government is following the situation "very carefully" and added, "the physical apparatus required for the RCMP and border guards to deal with an influx is in place, as are contingency plans for a variety of 'what if' scenarios."

Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen used newly released numbers by the Immigration and Refugee Board to tout the government's hardline stance, especially against Haitians. Hussen boasted of the fact that of the 298 Haitian cases that had been heard so far, only 29 were granted protection. In other words, authorities have rejected 90 percent of claimants.

Meanwhile, as decisions on asylum claims are expected to take months, many asylum seekers have received work permits and are sending their kids to school. The government, however, has made clear it will not hesitate to deport them anyway if their claim is rejected. Hussen, himself an immigrant from Somalia, coldly declared that "The principal applicants, after exhausting their appeal mechanisms, will be put on the removal stream and they will have to leave our country." To underscore his point, he bluntly added, "That's our law."

A recent article in *La Presse* showed that even the few refugees lucky enough to be accepted face harsh and unforgiving treatment. In addition to the complex issues of finding work, integrating into society and in many cases overcoming the traumas resulting from war and immigration, migrants coming to Canada are heavily indebted to the government—with figures ranging from US\$3,000 to US\$10,000. The US and Canada are the only

two countries that don't provide refugees with the necessary funds to cover the cost of paperwork and travel, while Canada is the only state charging interest on the loans.

As a preemptive measure, the liberals regularly send elected officials and Canadian representatives in the US to meet various immigrant communities in order to deter them from coming to Canada. A spokesperson for the Immigration Minister noted that "We have upcoming MP-led outreach trips to New York, Texas and California where we will continue to clear up misconceptions circulating about Canada's system."

The main "misconception" is that Canada deals with refugees in a more compassionate manner than the Trump administration. Since coming to power in 2015, Trudeau's Liberals have sought to cloak Canadian imperialism's predatory ambitions in "pro-refugee" and "humanitarian" garb. In this, they are supported not only by the corporate media but also by the union-backed New Democratic Party, which hailed Trudeau's coming to power as a "progressive" alternative to the decade-long Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

In fact, the Canadian government's cruel treatment of refugees is in keeping with its determination to deepen Ottawa's military-strategic partnership with its southern neighbour. This includes the militarization of Canadian foreign policy, with the Liberals investing in massive defence spending hikes so as to prepare Canada's armed forces for waging war around the world.

Since the first influx of migrants from the US at the beginning of the year, Trudeau has made clear that he has no intention of scrapping the Safe Third Country Agreement. Under the deal, asylum-seekers who enter Canada from the US at a regular crossing are denied the right to make a claim for refugee status in Canada and are immediately returned to the US (or vice-versa). But a loophole exists enabling asylum applications to be made in Canada by those who cross the border outside of a regular crossing, referred to by the government as "illegal" crossings. Thousands of migrants have sought to take advantage of this option, often risking their lives by attempting to traverse difficult terrain to reach Canada. Even for those who make it, the experience of recent months has shown that they face the almost certain prospect of deportation by the Trudeau government.

The Trudeau government's attitude toward refugees is all the more criminal given the fact that the poverty and desperation most of the refugees are fleeing are largely the result of US and Canadian imperialist aggression and intrigues. In the case of Haiti, Canadian imperialism has for decades ruthlessly exploited the country and the broader Caribbean region in pursuit of its predatory interests. Ottawa was deeply implicated in the 2004 US-orchestrated coup that

ousted elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, that included US support for far-right and outright fascistic forces. Afterwards, Canada used a series of natural catastrophes, such as the 2010 earthquake which claimed the lives of over 250,000 people, as a pretext to keep troops in the country so as to ensure Canadian interests are defended – including in the textile and mining industries.

The Liberal government's claim that Haiti is a safe country is a repugnant lie. Decades of imperialist plunder have left the Western hemisphere's poorest country with an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent. Reports indicate that a quarter of the population live below the absurdly low poverty rate of \$1.23 per day.

Despite the liberals' anti-refugee crackdown, Conservative immigration critic Michelle Rempel has complained that they have not gone far enough. She declared that the minimal social assistance provided refugees who are waiting a decision was costing the government too much. "You can enter the country illegally, and not have your case heard for a significant period of time while still being able to access social support services," Rempel said.

The Conservatives, which call for the removal of the loophole in the safe third country agreement, have encouraged the most reactionary right-wing extremist forces with their anti-refugee agitation. During the party's leadership campaign earlier this year, candidate Kelly Leitch appeared at a campaign event alongside a far-right Islamophobic group and called for a Trump-style approach to immigration, including questioning new arrivals as to whether they share "Canadian values." In the months since, small groups of right-wing extremists and outright fascists have organized demonstrations across Canada, many of which have been shut down by widespread popular hostility.

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[7 April 2017]

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