Democrats vow to vote against their own bill to abolish ICE

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On July 12, three liberal Democrats—Representatives Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, Parmila Jayapal of Washington and Adriano Espaillat of New York—introduced a bill to formally abolish the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE). Within 48 hours, the bill was exposed as a cynical maneuver when Republican House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy called the Democrats' bluff by announcing that he would bring their legislation to a vote later this month.

The response of the Democrats was to declare that they would vote "no" on their own bill. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which had previously refused to take a position on the bill, joined in declaring that its members would vote against the legislation.

In a joint statement, the three lawmakers who had introduced the bill attempted to explain their about-face, writing, "We know Speaker [of the House Paul] Ryan is not serious about passing our 'Establishing a Humane Immigration Enforcement System Act,' so Members of Congress advocacy groups and impacted communities will not engage in this political stunt." Instead, they declared, they would use the House vote on the bill to "force an urgently needed and long-overdue conversation on the House floor."

This explanation is absurd on its face. If the Democrats were serious about the ostensible purpose of their bill, there would be nothing to prevent them from marshalling their caucus in the House to obtain the biggest possible vote in its favor while at the same time denouncing the Republicans for carrying out a dishonest maneuver and continuing to support the immigration Gestapo known officially as ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

But, in fact, the Democrats never had any intention of abolishing ICE, even though their so-called "abolition" would amount to little more than rebranding the agency while allowing it to continue brutally persecuting, jailing, deporting and killing immigrant workers and youth. This, after all, is what US immigration agencies did under the Democratic administrations that preceded that of Trump.

Under the Obama administration, 2.7 million immigrants were deported, more than all his predecessors combined, earning Obama the nickname the "deporter-in-chief." In 2006, leading Democrats—including Obama, Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Joe Biden and Dianne Feinstein—supported the Secure Fence Act, which authorized the building of over 600 miles of fencing on the US-Mexican border.

Bernie Sanders has also supported the attack on immigrants, stating in January, "I don't think there's anybody who disagrees that we need strong border security. If the president wants to work with us to make sure we have strong border security, let's do that."

As one of the bill's sponsors, New York Representative Adriano Espaillat, explained: "We want to enforce immigration laws, but with a heart."

Another of the sponsors, Mark Pocan, told a recent press conference that his aim was to refurbish the immigration and border apparatus to make it more effective. "Right now," he said, "ICE is being misused by the president in a way that makes it unable to function as it needs to." He stressed that he was opposed to open borders.

Democratic Socialists of America member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently won an upset victory in the Democratic primary election for the US House seat in New York's 14th Congressional District, made the call to abolish ICE a central part of her campaign. But in an interview with CNN the day after her victory, she began hedging on the demand,

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declaring, “We do need to make sure that our borders are secure.”

A minority of Democrats saw the adoption of the popular slogan “abolish ICE” as a risk-free way to give themselves a “left” cover, particularly among Hispanic voters, while in practice continuing to enable Trump to wage his war against immigrants. They knew their anti-ICE bill would never pass the Republican-controlled House, let alone survive in the Senate and be signed into law by Trump.

On the contrary, they assumed that the Republican leadership in the House would prevent the bill from coming to the floor for a vote. Nevertheless, the Democratic congressional leadership made it clear that it opposed even the toothless bill introduced by Pocan, Jayapal and Espaillat.

When, to their horror, McCarthy announced that he would bring the bill up for a vote, the Democrats evidently panicked, terrified of casting a vote to abolish ICE and then being pilloried by the Republicans as proponents of open borders and accomplices of immigrant “gangs and rapists.”

Moreover, the Democrats stand in mortal fear of a growth of social opposition to the policies of the ruling class and are determined to do whatever they can to prevent it. The last thing they want is to inadvertently spark mass protests around the demand to abolish ICE and the rest of the repressive anti-immigrant apparatus.

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