

Trump administration moves to impose class-based restrictions on immigration

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On Saturday night, the Trump administration quietly announced a change to immigration regulations that will effectively bar immigrants from acquiring legal status if their families have used social programs.

The change, which will go into effect after a pro-forma 60-day public comment period, is a monumental attack on the international working class. The explicit formalization of a class-based immigration system marks a turning point that will substantially alter the state of social relations in favor of the rich.

The new policy labels all undocumented immigrants who have ever used cash- or non-cash benefits as “public charges.” Working class immigrants whose families have used programs like food stamps, Section 8 housing assistance, subsidized housing under the Housing Act of 1937, Medicaid or health care subsidies under Medicare Part D will now be relegated to permanent illegality.

According to the new rule, an income below 125 percent of the federal poverty level (\$31,400 for a family of four) will be a “negative factor” in considering a green card or a visa application. On the contrary, an income over 250 percent of the federal poverty line will count as a “strong positive factor.” In other words, wealthy immigrants will be approved to travel and immigrate while the working class will be forced to live in the shadows.

Tens of millions of workers will be affected by the change. Just under 10 million undocumented workers, most of whom have escaped brutal poverty and violence in countries devastated by US imperialism, have already used the benefits outlined in the rule.

Beyond this 10 million, almost all non-citizen immigrants, including those who already have legal permanent residency, will likely forego future use of social services, with disastrous implications for health

and nutrition. In addition, 18 million US citizen children with at least one immigrant parent will now go without access to necessary public programs, since immigrants will be penalized for allowing even citizen children to use social programs.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) callously states in its proposed rule that the policy will lead to “worse health outcomes... especially for pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants, or children,” “increased use of emergency rooms,” “increased prevalence of communicable diseases,” “increased rates of poverty and housing instability, and reduced productivity and educational attainment.”

These are not undesired consequences, but deliberate goals.

The rule change is a maneuver to establish a permanent underclass of deeply impoverished workers, largely in the service and agricultural industry, too fearful of deportation to demand higher wages or better conditions.

Both parties will cite the inevitable drop in overall reliance on social programs to justify further cuts aimed at all workers. In announcing the policy change, DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen echoed the corporate-speak used by politicians to demand cuts to social programs: The rule change would “promote immigrant self-sufficiency and protect finite resources by ensuring that they are not likely to become burdens on American taxpayers,” she said.

Starvation, homelessness and disease will become more widespread. Immigrant neighborhoods in major US cities will increasingly resemble the slum areas of megacities in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Immediately after the policy change was announced, a wide array of national medical associations, including the American Academy of Family Physicians, the

American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American College of Physicians, the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association denounced the plan, warning it will cause a public health crisis.

The Democratic Party is itself responsible for passing the statute that Trump and DHS are using to justify their expansion of the “public charge” rule.

In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA), which required that immigrants prove that their sponsors have income above 125 percent of the poverty line in order to immigrate. Without the 88 “yes” votes from congressional Democrats, the measure would not have passed. Democratic President Bill Clinton signed the measure into law. Three years later, Clinton published a guidance establishing that immigrants could be considered public charges if they were “primarily dependent” on government cash assistance.

Today, Democrats have remained silent on the rule change and have instead focused all their political capital on portraying Trump’s reactionary Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh as a sexual criminal based on unproven allegations from the early 1980s. The aim is to divert public attention from the pressing class issues, including the attack on immigrant workers, on which both parties are fundamentally agreed.

Workers of all nationalities, regardless of immigration status, must recognize the attack on immigrant workers as an attack against the working class as a whole.

No worker stands to gain by allowing the government to strip millions of people of social programs without even the formality of a vote or public debate. No worker will benefit by giving the government the power to conduct military raids on workplaces to drag undocumented workers away to internment camps. No worker will gain from the ruling class’s efforts to expand the reserve army of undocumented labor that will work any job at any wage and be too fearful to speak up.

The clearest 20th century parallel to the present rule change provides an important historical lesson for the working class.

The 1924 passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, which established quotas for immigration from Southern and

Eastern Europe, was enacted following one of the largest strike waves in US history.

Passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, the Johnson-Reed Act was aimed at blocking the growth of the class struggle and halting immigration by European workers influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917, where the working class overthrew the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty and established the world’s first workers’ state. Fearful of the growing popularity of socialism, the ruling class attempted to divert social opposition in a right-wing direction by fanning the flames of racial and national hatred in order to divide and weaken the working class.

Workers today must not fall into the same trap! The first half of 2018 saw the highest level of strike activity in years, but to build momentum in the struggle for social equality, workers must recognize that their strength lies in their international unity. It is urgent that US citizen workers come to the defense of their immigrant brothers and sisters and link up in a common fight against their common enemy: the American ruling class.



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