US announces new barrier to citizenship for low-income immigrants

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On Friday, US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kirstjen Nielson signed a proposed new rule that will require all immigrants applying for permanent legal status or citizenship to provide evidence of their financial status, including applications for public benefits, proof of private health insurance and credit histories and scores.

The rule is another major step in the Trump administration's drive to create a class-based immigration system. The DHS defends the new rule as a means of preventing immigrants who may become a "public charge" from acquiring permanent legal status.

This is supposedly being done to prevent foreigners from becoming a "burden" on the American taxpayer—an appeal to national chauvinism and xenophobia. Neither the Trump administration nor its nominal opposition in the Democratic Party evinces a similar concern for the burden on the average taxpayer of multitrillion-dollar tax cuts for corporations and the rich.

According to the proposal, a credit check is needed to reveal an individual's bill payment history, current debt, work history, bankruptcies and, most importantly, whether a person can be "self-sufficient" in the United States.

This proposal follows a regulation change announced last week that will effectively bar immigrants from acquiring permanent legal status if their families have used social programs. That new policy labels as public charges all undocumented immigrants who have ever used cash or noncash benefits—such as food stamps, housing vouchers or Medicaid—making it all but impossible for them to obtain permanent legal status (a green card). This directly affects just under 10 million undocumented workers who have already used the benefits outlined in the rule.

Millions more immigrant workers will be affected because they will forgo use of public benefits for themselves and the children for fear of being branded "public charges" and targeted for deportation. The rule, as numerous studies have pointed out and even the DHS itself has acknowledged, disproportionately targets the most vulnerable sections of the population, including pregnant women, infants and children and will increase poverty rates.

There are 10.4 million children who are US citizens with at least one noncitizen parent. Of this group, nearly 6 million children receive public health benefits. These families could be separated if a parent is considered a public charge and not granted legal permanent residency.

These rule changes will take effect after a 60-day pro forma public comment period. They are being announced alongside ongoing Gestapo-style raids and mass arrests by immigration police at work sites around the country, the construction of a network of detention camps for immigrants, and the continuing detention of hundreds of immigrant children who have been separated from their parents.

The Trump administration is escalating its war on immigrants behind a wall of media silence and the connivance of the Democratic Party, which says nothing. The Democrats have all but dropped any pretext of defending immigrant workers and youth. They are focusing all their efforts in the run-up to the November midterm elections on promoting their warmongering anti-Russia campaign and their right-wing #MeToo witch hunt, designed to solidarize their alliance with the CIA and the military and mobilize their base among privileged upper-middle-class layers of the population.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of immigrant workers

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are being subjected to the most brutal conditions in detention centers across the country, their only “crime” being the search for refuge from the hellish conditions of poverty and violence caused by a century of US imperialist intervention in Central and Latin America.

This past week a court case in Tacoma, Washington revealed a month-long hunger strike by detainees at the Northwest Detention Center, a facility run by the for-profit company GEO Group. The detainees, who are paid $1 a day instead of the state’s minimum wage, were protesting against the overall “zero tolerance” policy of the Trump administration as well as more specific issues within their facility, including a chickenpox outbreak and exposure to toxins from a nearby chemical fire.

It is also reported that nearly 70 fathers, separated from their children, have started a hunger strike at the Karnes detention facility in Texas.

Workplace raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are continuing unabated. This past week, ICE carried out a series of raids in Southern California, arresting 150 immigrants who were categorized as “public safety threats.”

A 10-day ICE operation in North Texas and Oklahoma led to the arrest of almost 100 people.

The persecution and scapegoating of immigrants is not simply a US issue. It is a global phenomenon. Across Europe—in Germany, Italy, the UK, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia—the capitalist ruling classes and all of the major parties are seeking to divert mass discontent along reactionary nationalist channels by witch-hunting immigrants and blaming them for unemployment and poverty. They are encouraging the growth of far right and neofascist parties as part of the preparation for war abroad and dictatorship at home.

Workers in the US must join hands with workers all over the world to defend the rights of immigrants and fight for a socialist policy of open borders. Workers of every country must have the right to live and work in the country of their choice.

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