

As refugee caravan heads north

Trump administration prepares draconian new anti-immigrant measures

Bill Van Auken
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With thousands of Central Americans headed north through Mexico in a caravan of refugees and migrants, US President Donald Trump has launched a campaign of xenophobic and racist demagoguery in an attempt to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment in the run-up to the US midterm elections.

Trump has told Republican campaign rallies that he will deploy the army to the US-Mexican border and cut off all aid to Central America, while repeating the lies that the caravan includes Middle Eastern “terrorists” and is comprised largely of criminals. At the same time, he has suggested that the Democratic Party is somehow involved in organizing the exodus of thousands of working class people—men, women and children—from intolerable poverty and violence plaguing Honduras and the rest of the region.

For their part, the Democrats have maintained a cowardly and complicit silence on the immigration question. At a White House bill-signing ceremony on Tuesday, Trump repeated the allegation against the Democrats, pointing to senators from the party standing behind him, who attempted to laugh it off.

Trump’s threats pose the real danger that the US-Mexican border could become the kind of killing field seen recently on the border between the occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza and Israel.

As yet, however, his demagoguery has not been translated into action. There have been no indications that the US regular Army has been given any marching orders, and it is by no means clear that Trump can simply turn off the meager spigot of aid destined to Central America, which is an appropriation enacted by the US Congress. The miserable total of this aid for Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador combined amounts to little more than \$180 million, most of it going to state security forces tasked with repressing the population and securing borders.

Behind the scenes, however, the White House, the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies

charged with the repression, hunting down and deportation of immigrants have been meeting to prepare a set of new measures aimed at denying the rights of refugees, exacting retaliation against those who seek asylum in order to deter others from trying, and organizing rapid and summary deportations.

The principal aim is to produce a new version of the “zero tolerance” family separation policy, which was implemented by the administration last April but then rescinded just four months later in the face of widespread popular outrage and court challenges to the forcible ripping of children from their mothers and fathers. At least 3,000 children were subjected to this cruelty and hundreds have yet to be reunited with their families.

According to a report in the *New York Times* Tuesday, officials from the White House, the Department of Homeland Security, the Justice Department and the State Department have been holding “intense closed-door meetings” to fashion a new policy that would be equally criminal in its effect on immigrants and refugees. Their aim, the newspaper said, is to roll out this policy before the November elections.

Under the new version of the family separation policy that is being prepared, immigrant parents would be presented with the agonizing choice of giving up their children to foster care or staying together in prison as a family, under the condition that the parents waived their children’s right to be released from detention within 20 days, which is now required under US law.

The *Times* quoted a person familiar with the discussion as saying that the aim was to present a “binary choice” that would “maximize deterrence and consequences for families.”

Other measures being prepared would speed up the deportation of migrant families and further limit the right of asylum, with the aim of turning back families who meet the standard of “credible fear” of violence and persecution in

their home countries. Also being discussed is the more sweeping use of GPS ankle monitors for undocumented immigrants and the immediate arrest of anyone receiving a deportation order.

Such measures, while inflicting suffering and pain upon refugees and migrants, will not stop those who are driven to flee their homelands by the catastrophic conditions created by more than a century of oppression and exploitation at the hands of US imperialism, which backed a series of dictatorships and organized bloody civil wars to secure its interests in the region.

New caravans are reportedly forming in El Salvador and Guatemala, despite the threats from the White House and the repressive measures taken by the Central American and Mexican governments.

The main caravan of some 2,000 that set off on October 12 from San Pedro Sula in Honduras, dubbed the most violent city on earth, has swelled to over 7,200. The Mexican government claims that roughly 1,000 have applied for asylum in Mexico. The vast majority have rejected this option, which entails detention and, in most cases, deportation back to the country from which they came. Last year alone, Mexico deported some 82,000 Central Americans.

The main body of the caravan, described by the local press as an “exodus,” has reached the coastal town of Huixtla in the state of Chiapas. It paused there for the day and night Tuesday, with declarations that it was mourning for a young Honduran who was killed on Monday after falling off a vehicle. Many of the marchers, particularly children and mothers with infants, as well as the elderly, are suffering from the severe conditions of the march in the blazing heat of southern Mexico. They vowed to take the road north again early this morning.

The marchers filled the central plaza of Huixtla, sleeping on the ground and attempting to shelter themselves from the sun with makeshift tarps.

The Central American refugees have received an outpouring of support from the Mexican population, an expression of class solidarity with oppressed layers of workers who are marching north and demanding their rights.

This backing, which has included spontaneous efforts to deliver food, water, clothing, medical care and other assistance, has stood in stark contrast to the reaction of the Mexican government of President Enrique Peña Nieto, who on Friday declared that Mexico “does not allow people to enter our territory illegally and much less so violently.” Meanwhile, President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) has signaled that he will collaborate with the Trump administration on its anti-immigrant policy.

The mayor of Huixtla, José Luis Laparra Calderón of

AMLO’s Morena party, indicted the federal government for failing to provide any assistance to the migrant caravan. “I don’t see any support from the federal government,” he said. “I don’t see anything.”

Instead of aid, the Mexican government has sent federal police to harass the marchers, as well as military helicopters to track their progress, flying low over the crowds and terrorizing them.

A group of aid organizations that have assisted the marchers and advocated for their rights have also denounced the Mexican government for refusing to provide elementary humanitarian aid to the refugees, as part of a strategy to comply with US demands to impede their progress.

The groups, which include the American Friends Service Committee, the Jesuit Refugee Service, Doctors of the World and others, said that the Mexican government had responded not with aid, but with repression. They denounced arbitrary detention of the refugees at the border, condemning the government for “the denial of access to the process of recognition as refugees, the rejection at the border and the mass deportations... the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment carried out, running the risk that these people will be the victims of some form of torture.”

The diametrically opposed response to the caravan of the Mexican government from that of the Mexican people expresses the immense class divide that exists not only in Mexico and Central America, but also in the US and internationally.

The Central American refugees have identified themselves in their chants as “international workers” and they deserve and have received class solidarity along the route of their march. The US working class must also come to the defense of these working people fleeing poverty, violence and repression, upholding their right, and the right of all workers, to live and work in the country of their choice.



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