

Federal agents release more than 1,000 immigrants in El Paso, Texas

Patrick Martin
28 December 2018

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have released more than 1,000 immigrants in various locations in downtown El Paso, Texas over the last four days, in what appears to be a politically motivated effort to flood the city with impoverished people needing emergency shelter, food and medical care, including many hundreds of children as part of family groups, as well as pregnant women.

The mass releases began on Sunday night, December 23, when 200 Central American immigrants were taken to a Greyhound bus station in downtown El Paso, where many of them attempted to board buses, although they had no money or tickets. ICE made no provision for food or shelter for the immigrants, although night-time temperatures in the city were around 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Eventually four buses were brought in to house the migrants for the night, giving them a heated shelter.

On Monday, another 100 immigrants were released, then on Christmas Day nearly 200 more in downtown El Paso. Finally, on Wednesday, more than 500 immigrants were released, although this release was coordinated with charities and shelters in the El Paso area which were prepared to receive the influx. The first three releases were unannounced, and aid agencies had to respond on an emergency basis.

One aid official told the press, “About half of them were children, and some parents had more than one child with them.” The official said the migrants wanted “a place where they can sleep, make phone calls to their contacts or relatives in other parts of the country. Most of these folks are en route to another part of the country. They are not staying here in El Paso. They want to go to their sponsor or family members in other parts of the country. They just need a place for the night.”

ICE issued a statement in response to an inquiry by CNN about the releases, blaming “decades of inaction by Congress” and unfavorable court rulings that made it impossible for it to continue detaining all the Central American immigrants now crossing the US-Mexico border to seek asylum. An executive branch agency would only engage in such extraordinary public criticism of the legislative and judicial branches of the government if authorized by the White House.

The ICE statement said that its own detention facilities in the region were full and that it had no alternative but to release family groups that would otherwise be held longer than the 20 days provided under a court-supervised consent decree.

“To mitigate the risk of holding family units past the timeframe allotted to the government, ICE has curtailed reviews of post-release plans from families apprehended along the southwest border,” the statement said, without actually referring to the city of El Paso. “ICE continues to work with local and state officials and (nongovernmental) partners in the area so they are prepared to provide assistance with transportation or other services.”

The targeting of El Paso seemed to be politically motivated, since the city is a Democratic-controlled island in Texas, where the Republican Party controls the state government and the state legislature. The city’s current congressman, Beto O’Rourke, who leaves office January 3, lost a close race for the US Senate seat in Texas and is now being talked up in the media as a potential challenger to President Trump in 2020.

It is possible that ICE officials are also responding to resentment among rank-and-file officers who are not being paid because of the partial shutdown of the federal government, but are nonetheless required to

continue working—and arresting and detaining immigrants as they cross the border—because they have been classified as “essential employees.”

All ICE public affairs officers have been furloughed for the duration of the shutdown, so it is not clear who was responsible for crafting the public response to the press inquiry.

While the new policy in El Paso began on Sunday, December 23, the day before the death of a second Central American refugee child in the custody of US immigration authorities, it is clear that the mass releases also reflect a concern that further child deaths will provoke widespread popular outrage in the United States and completely discredit Trump’s policy of stepped up persecution of immigrants.

Seven-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquin died on December 8 at an El Paso hospital, two days after she and her father were taken into custody by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers at a New Mexico border crossing. Eight-year-old Felipe Alonzo-Gomez died in El Paso on December 24, a week after he and his father were taken into custody by CBP. They were housed in several different overcrowded facilities, and at one point bused as far north as Alamagordo, New Mexico, before the boy fell ill, began running a high fever, was taken to the hospital with respiratory failure, and died.

CBP officials announced a number of actions in response to the two deaths, including secondary medical checks on all children in custody, with a focus on children under age 10; individual health assessments for each of the 700 children in custody in the El Paso area; and a review of other custody arrangements for family groups including small children. Additional military medics are being deployed to the border to assist.

In another effort at damage control, DHS secretary Kirstjen Nielsen announced she would visit El Paso and the border stations near it on Friday. But Nielsen continued to blame immigrants, not the US authorities, for the deaths in custody. “I once again ask—beg—parents to not place their children at risk by taking a dangerous journey north,” she said.

Despite claims to the contrary by federal officials, it is clear that it is the deliberate policy of the Trump administration to inflict as brutal conditions as possible on the children of migrants in order to deter parents and

family groups from seeking to enter the United States. When Trump took office, there were just over 2,000 migrant children in federal custody. Today the system has 16,000 beds and, according to the DHS, these are now full. The Associated Press reported that there are nearly 10,000 detained migrant children at large facilities, those holding 100 or more children at one time.

The author also recommends:

The death of Felipe Alonzo-Gómez: A crime of US imperialism

[27 December 2018]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact