

After sixth death of a migrant child

Flu outbreak leads to quarantine at Texas immigrant detention center

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On Tuesday, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) suspended the intake of immigrants at the McAllen Central Processing Center, one of the busiest and largest migrant detention centers in the country. This is the same facility where sixteen-year-old Guatemalan migrant Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez died on Monday after being diagnosed with the flu.

“To avoid the spread of illness, the Rio Grande Valley Sector has temporarily suspended intake operations at the [Central Processing Center],” the CBP said in a statement. “Individuals apprehended in [Rio Grande Vally] Sector will be held at other locations until this situation is resolved.”

After being captured on May 13, Hernandez was admitted to the McAllen facility as an unaccompanied minor showing no signs of illness. He stayed at the facility for over a week—twice as long as is allowed by US law—and first reported feeling ill on Sunday. He was never taken to the hospital and was found unresponsive the following day. He is the sixth minor to die in US custody since last September.

The CBP statement did not report how many migrants are currently sick, simply stating that a “large number” of immigrants were suffering from “flu-related” symptoms. The mass quarantine of over 8,000 men, women and children in Texas is of a piece with the Trump administration’s fascistic efforts to paint asylum seekers as disease-ridden “criminals” who threaten the population with contagion.

“We are seeing migrants arrive with illnesses and medical conditions in unprecedented numbers,” said Acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan at a press conference in March. “We’re doing

everything we can to simply avoid a tragedy in a CBP facility. But with these numbers, with the types of illnesses we’re seeing at the border, I fear it’s just a matter of time.”

What hypocrisy! The CBP is itself responsible for administering the deficient food, housing and medical attention that make the spread of preventable diseases inevitable. The sickness and death of impoverished migrants whose illnesses were either contracted or exacerbated at squalid US-run detention centers are then used to ramp up authoritarian attacks on asylum seekers.

The McAllen detention center in Southern Texas, just across the border from Reynosa in Mexico, became infamous during the Trump administration’s barbarous policy of separating children from their families. With its metal wire cages and floor mats, the 77,0000-square foot converted warehouse resembles a dog shelter more than a place to house human beings. The images of children at the facility wrapped up in thermal blankets became a source of outrage for millions of people around the world.

The US Centers for Disease Control reports vaccination rates of over 90 percent in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. But the health of migrants—already compromised after weeks of travel to reach the US-Mexico border—is further damaged by fascistic agents of the US Border Patrol. The deliberate aim of Washington’s “zero tolerance” policies is to deter desperate workers and youth from attempting the journey to the US to escape poverty and gang violence.

Once in custody, immigrants are placed in what are popularly called *hieleras*, or ice boxes. These chilled jail cells are designed to make immigrants tremble in

the cold. In detention, they are fed as little as one piece of bread a day, further compromising their health and weakening their bodies. To these physical strains must be added the emotional trauma of family separation, lengthy incarceration and the threat of being sent back to the home country.

The unsanitary and cramped immigration facilities have bred conditions in which thousands succumb to viral diseases. An anonymous Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) official told Reuters that as of March over 2,200 immigrants were quarantined around the country. In that month, ICE officials reported 236 cases of mumps among detainees at its 51 facilities over the past 12 months, compared to zero reported cases between January 2016 and February 2018.

The infected individuals often do not show symptoms of viral diseases when they are contagious. They are often shipped from facility to facility across the country, creating the conditions for a humanitarian disaster. More than 52,000 migrants are currently being detained by ICE, an all-time high.

The for-profit centers that house the vast majority of immigrants are ill-equipped to provide adequate medical attention. In early January, a mumps outbreak at the privately run Pine Prairie Processing Center in Louisiana led to hundreds of detainees being placed under quarantine. Immigrants who had court cases scheduled were forced to attend remotely without their attorneys, who were not allowed inside the facilities.

Pine Prairie has over 1,000 beds and is run by the for-profit GEO Group. The outbreak at Pine Prairie appears to have originated from immigrants transferred from Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility in Mississippi, which is run by private detention company CoreCivic.

Both GEO and CoreCivic have been named in multiple lawsuits over the denial of medication, sexual abuse by guards and beatings of children. The companies have enjoyed a windfall in government contracts to house immigrants, taking in millions from mass immigrant detention and the creation of a vast prison apparatus.

The entire political establishment accepts the framework of an “immigration problem” and “crisis” at the border. From deporter-in-chief Barack Obama to “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders, the ruling class

sees attacks on immigrants as a way to divide the working class, divert attention from the real source of unemployment, poverty and inequality—the capitalist system—and build up a police state apparatus to attack the working class as a whole.



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