

Mexican President López Obrador breaks up migrant caravan

Andrea Lobo
28 January 2020

Last Thursday, the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) broke up the latest Central American caravan headed to the United States by using Mexican troops to attack and round up its rearguard of 2,000 migrants. After marching eight miles into Mexico and resisting countless threats by Guatemalan and Mexican authorities along the way, the migrants were blocked and arrested by over 200 National Guard troops using batons and tear gas.

It took the state forces less than two hours to capture virtually all of the exhausted migrants and pack them into buses, which drove them to the infamous Siglo XXI detention center. Shortly after, the Mexican government reported that it was loading airplanes and buses to deport them *en masse*.

The caravan left the northern Honduran city of San Pedro Sula on January 15 with about 1,500 migrants. While remaining divided in large contingents, about 3,000 more migrants from Honduras and other smaller groups from El Salvador joined the caravan in a bid to escape desperate poverty and violence.

While the migrants were crossing Guatemala, the incoming administration of Alejandro Giammattei deployed the police to halt the caravan, using tear gas and detaining some 400 people. Far from providing them shelter while they applied for asylum in the United States, as stipulated under a recent agreement, the Guatemalan regime deported them back to Honduras.

Giammattei had expressed qualms about Guatemala's anti-immigrant deal with the Trump administration, including the reception of third country migrants seeking asylum in the US, but he has quickly demonstrated his total subordination to Washington.

The caravan arrived at the border between Guatemala and Mexico on January 18 and the Mexican government immediately closed the international bridge at Ciudad Hidalgo. The National Migration Institute (INM) processed a thin stream of migrants for deportation.

Two days later, the Mexican government announced that it

would not give "transit papers" for the caravan to reach the United States. This compelled the migrants to attempt to cross the Suchiate River into Mexico, but they were violently repelled by hundreds of national guardsmen and police, who threw tear gas and beat the defenseless workers.

Only some 200 migrants were able to make it through the blockade, and most sought refuge at shelters. However, *La Jornada* reports that many are already planning on returning home given the increased difficulties in reaching the United States. The handful of caravan members who were able to apply for asylum in Mexico were all part of the group that escaped the National Guard operation.

While López Obrador offered jobs for all of them and plainly said that migrants "didn't want" to apply for asylum in Mexico, *Animal Político* reported that the institution in charge of processing asylum requests was not given access to the detention centers where the caravan members were being held until January 24. According to INM figures, at least 679 migrants had already been deported. The newspaper interviewed a migrant captured last Thursday and deported by bus on Friday, who said, "They never offered us asylum, just deportation."

With human rights groups barred from access to the detention centers, Amnesty International released a statement raising concerns about "the efforts of the INM to limit the work of these organizations." This follows a Human Rights Watch report citing "inhumane conditions" at detention centers and "human rights violations committed by security forces" against immigrants.

After the incident at the Suchiate River, López Obrador called the repression "an isolated incident," but it occurred again on Thursday. And despite widespread pictures and videos showing the brutality of the soldiers against entire families, the president declared that the National Guard "resisted," but "didn't fall into responding with violence, which is probably what the leaders of these caravans wanted, as well as our adversaries, the conservatives."

Last Wednesday, López Obrador again suggested that migrants were arriving with violent intentions, claiming that

“we want peace, to resolve our differences through dialogue.” He went as far as declaring that the repression was aimed at “protecting” refugees from organized crime in northern Mexico.

On Friday, he said, “This movement is not spontaneous. Of course, there are needs, but there is a leadership, let’s say, political.”

By criminalizing migrants and portraying the caravans as pawns in a conspiracy hatched by his political opponents, López Obrador is taking a page from the fascistic playbook of the Trump White House. In both cases, the aim is to legitimize a further militarization of the country, attack basic democratic rights—beginning with asylum rights enshrined under international treaties signed by Mexico—and rally the most right-wing elements of the armed forces, while seeking to undermine the vast and growing sentiment of international solidarity in the working class.

Far from “protecting” migrants, while avoiding a political conflict with the Trump administration, as he claims, López Obrador is protecting the financial and political ties of the Mexican oligarchy to US imperialism. By demonstrating his government’s readiness to engage in repression by keeping migrants out, López Obrador hopes to attract investments into the country, ultimately preparing a militarized crackdown against opposition in the Mexican working class to revolting levels of social inequality.

According to Oxfam, six Mexican billionaires control eight times more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the population, or 62.5 million people, who live below the official poverty line. Topping the list is Carlos Slim, who has consistently backed López Obrador’s right-wing policies. Last November he said: “The foundations have been laid with the public finances, with lots of discipline by the public sector. The debt didn’t increase, inflation fell. The foundations have been laid; great confidence has been generated for financial investments.”

The American ruling class took the measure of López Obrador long ago, understanding that he would defend its interests. In a February 2006 cable published by WikiLeaks, the US ambassador dismissed the issues raised by a central bank official: “His concerns over a possible future AMLO presidency are not unique, but are not in line with mainstream expectations that the Mexican economy will survive an AMLO presidency relatively unscathed, even if unimproved.”

López Obrador’s emulation of Trump’s anti-immigrant agitation is a grave warning to the entire working class. He is heading up a rapid shift toward authoritarian forms of rule as demanded by the ruling class, which feels besieged by the international resurgence of working class militancy and a growing interest in socialism.

Trump called the first migrant caravan in October 2018 an “invasion,” claiming it included “Middle Easterners.” He blamed Democrats, Jewish billionaire George Soros and Venezuela for organizing it.

Trump deployed over 5,000 US troops to the border. His sympathizers have carried out shootings against the Jewish population and immigrants, as well as threats against political opponents. This includes the El Paso shooting last August, which killed 22 people, with the attacker issuing a manifesto denouncing a migrant “invasion.”

Based on the Mexican government’s policies, anti-immigrant sentiments are being whipped up by corporate and local media across Mexico in an effort to undermine widespread support for migrants in a country where millions have lived in the US. A protest demanding that migrants leave has been scheduled in the border city of Matamoros, where tens of thousands of striking workers last year marched to the US border to appeal for international unity against the transnational corporations.

At the same time, in response to denunciations by migrants of the squalid conditions at the camp in Matamoros, several groups of Americans have crossed on foot from Brownsville, Texas with aid.

On Sunday, Alejandro Encinas, sub-secretary of human rights, population and migration, fed the chauvinist filth, insinuating a political plot based on the claim that there were more male adults in the latest caravan. He denounced a “radical group” that called on others to continue to challenge the blockade by Mexican troops. “We have to track that group... we’re investigating it in particular,” Encinas said.

The anti-immigrant policies to strengthen the capitalist state are aimed against the entire working class. The struggle to defend the Central American migrants and, more generally, the right of everyone to travel safely, enter and enjoy full citizenship rights in the place of his or her choosing, is a fundamental component of the fight for social equality and democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact