

Exploiting Coronavirus pandemic, Canada's Trudeau closes border to asylum seekers

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In a flagrant violation of international law, Canada's Liberal government has struck a deal with the Trump administration to deny "irregular" migrants who have crossed into Canada via the US the right to file for refugee status in Canada.

Henceforth, asylum seekers fleeing Trump's ruthless anti-immigrant crackdown will be automatically sent back to the US where they will be handed over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) thugs and in all likelihood detained.

The agreement was announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a press conference last Friday morning and took effect at 11:59 p.m. that day—the same time that Canada and the US closed the world's longest international border to all but "essential" travel and their returning citizens and permanent residents in response to the growing coronavirus pandemic.

This move, which is the latest in a long series of attacks on refugee rights from the Liberal government, is all the more criminal in a context in which the number of coronavirus cases is increasing rapidly on both sides of the border. Due to a virtual absence of medical assistance and the indifference of the authorities, US refugee detention centres are hotbeds for infection.

Earlier last week, after the agreement with Washington to limit movement across the border to essential business travel was first unveiled, Trudeau said "irregular entrants" would still be allowed to claim refugee status, but would be quarantined for 14 days in case they were infected. Public Safety Minister Bill Blair justified this decision, which dovetails with the government's order that most entrants to Canada self-isolate for two weeks, by noting that there is "no evidence" to suggest asylum seekers are more likely to have COVID-19 than anyone else.

However, in a further exposure of the fraudulence of its "pro-refugee" posturing, Trudeau and his Liberals made a sudden volte-face Friday, and acceded to the longstanding demand of the right and far right that they bar all so-called "irregular migrants" from entering Canada.

The working class must take Trudeau's decision as a serious warning. The Canadian ruling class will seek to exploit the health, social, and economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic to ram through reactionary and anti-democratic measures it has previously been unable to implement. At the same time, it is whipping up nationalism and xenophobia to channel mass anger in a reactionary direction and divide the working class.

Trudeau demagogically claimed that his agreement with Trump is "a temporary measure to protect Canadians," implying, in the manner of a far-right xenophobe, that migrants represent a special and inordinate COVID-19 "threat." In truth, there is no medical justification for banning refugee claimants, especially under conditions in which the authorities were stating just days earlier that they could easily be quarantined.

The Canadian ruling elite has more than enough resources to provide the refugees with the care and support they need, even in the midst of the pandemic. The Trudeau government has just handed hundreds of billions of dollars to the banks and corporate elite to protect their wealth amid the economic collapse triggered by the pandemic.

Workers who have fallen ill, must self-quarantine, look after a family member, or have lost their job, on the other hand, are being offered a pittance in state support. No less derisory are the sums the Liberals are making available to Canada's overstretched health care system, which has been devastated by decades of austerity measures implemented by federal and provincial governments of all political stripes.

Refugee rights organizations have voiced their concern and opposition to Trudeau's decision. Janet Dench, the executive director of the Canadian Council for Refugees, noted, "There is a major concern that people turned back to the US will be put in detention if they don't have status." She added, "Immigration detention in the US was already a serious rights violation [and] the situation is even worse now with the pandemic putting detained people at risk."

The whipping up of xenophobia by Canada's political establishment and by leaders around the world—including

Trump, who delights in provocatively labeling the coronavirus the “Chinese virus”—serves to divert attention away from the ruling elite’s criminal negligence prior to and during the coronavirus pandemic. In recent years, scientific experts have warned repeatedly about the high risk of a global pandemic and pointed to the unpreparedness of governments around the world to face such a potential catastrophe. Yet no investments were made, because the ruling elites saw such preventive measures as an unacceptable drain on their frenzied accumulation of vast wealth.

The attempt to scapegoat immigrants for the social ills created by the capitalist crisis and decades of social spending cuts has a long history in Canada. As part of this campaign, the Conservatives in English Canada and the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) and other right-wing Quebec nationalists such as the Bloc Québécois have been pressing the Trudeau government to take a harder line towards refugees fleeing Trump’s anti-immigrant witch-hunt. They have called on Trudeau to declare the entire Canada-US border an “official entry point,” which would give Ottawa the authority under the Canada-US Safe-Third Country Agreement (STCA) to summarily reject all asylum seekers and return them immediately to the US.

The STCA stipulates that any refugee entering Canada at an official entry point from a so-called “safe country”—that is one where basic democratic rights and the rights of refugees are supposedly protected—can immediately be returned there without having the right to file an asylum claim in Canada.

The language in this reactionary agreement has encouraged those fleeing oppression and war to avoid official entry points and cross the border irregularly in order to file asylum claims in Canada. The number of refugees making use of this “loophole” increased dramatically after Trump threatened to deport immigrants to their war-torn, economically-ravaged countries, including hundreds of thousands of Haitians and other Latin Americans who had benefited from temporary US residency.

As recently as last week, Trudeau and his top ministers were still insisting that refusing to hear refugee claims by irregular entrants would be illegal under international and Canadian law. They also argued that denying refugees the right to file an asylum claim was not necessary, because under Canada’s reactionary immigration laws the vast majority of asylum-seekers were being deemed ineligible and ordered expelled.

However, all the while Ottawa was engaged in extensive behind-the-scenes discussions with the Trump administration to seal the border to refugees. At his press conference last Friday, Trudeau revealed, “We’ve been in

discussions with the Americans for several years to try to find a measure like this.”

Conservative and Bloc Québécois spokespersons have voiced their satisfaction with the Trudeau-Trump agreement. Significantly, as the coronavirus crisis exploded over the past two weeks, threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands, the main contenders for the federal Conservative Party leadership, Peter MacKay and Erin O’Toole, focused their campaigns on the reactionary demand to bar refugees from Canada.

Trudeau’s latest joint action with Trump will lend political legitimacy to Trump’s reactionary policies against immigrants, above all his drive to militarize the entire US-Mexico border so as to prevent Central and South American refugees from reaching American soil.

The closing of the US-Canada border to refugees is part of the Trudeau government’s efforts to maintain and deepen Ottawa’s military-strategic partnership with Washington and its fascist president. One of the Liberals’ major concerns in the midst of the pandemic was the final passage of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which aims to consolidate North America as a US-dominated economic bloc that can confront the international rivals of US and Canadian imperialism, above all China.

The Trudeau government’s barring of refugees from entering Canada underscores that insofar as the working class does not intervene as an independent political force, the ruling elite will exploit the coronavirus crisis to attack democratic rights. While travel restrictions and quarantines are necessary to suppress the highly-contagious and potentially lethal coronavirus, they must be implemented in a way that respects democratic rights and human dignity. As a recent statement by the Socialist Equality Party in the United States notes: “In the struggle against the pandemic, the working people of the world must view all manifestations of national chauvinism as no less a threat to humanity than the coronavirus itself” (see: “Reject capitalist xenophobia! For international socialist solidarity in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic!”)



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