

First ICE detainee dies of COVID-19 in San Diego

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Carlos Escobedo Mejia, a detainee at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, died last Wednesday after testing positive for COVID-19. Despite having significant preexisting medical issues which rendered him especially vulnerable to the virus—Mejia was a 57-year-old wheelchair-bound amputee with diabetes and chronically high blood pressure—he was denied bond by an immigration judge on April 15 after being declared a flight risk. He tested positive for the virus on April 24 and passed away on May 6.

In a transparent attempt to downplay the significance of his death, ICE officials said that his preliminary cause of death was “undetermined,” despite having tested positive for and exhibiting all the common symptoms of the virus.

ICE detention centers, including both those run directly by ICE and those run by contractors such as CoreCivic and the GEO Group, are notorious for their abysmal conditions. Captured immigrants are confined to an unsanitary squalor in which their medical wellbeing would still be in question were a global pandemic not currently ravaging the Earth.

A Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) report released last December which investigated conditions at ICE prisons in Florida gave a picture of this. The report found that preventive medical care was all but nonexistent, and broken bones and cavities were treated with nothing but over-the-counter painkillers like Tylenol. According to the report:

“A primary complaint at Krome [An immigrant detention center in Florida] is severe overcrowding. While individual pod capacity is supposed to be about 65, some detained individuals estimate there are 100 or more people in their pods, a level that, we were told by a detained person, feels ‘dangerously overcrowded.’

“Overcrowding also creates sanitation and health issues. Germs spread more easily and the pod is harder to keep clean. ‘There are so many people and you can smell them.’ ... Several people told us that their health has been affected by the unsanitary environment in detention, which they cite as the source of their coughs, flu, and other respiratory conditions. In her three months since arriving at Glades, Marisol F. said she has endured a persistent cough.”

One does not need to be a medical expert to understand just how quickly an infectious illness like the coronavirus could proliferate in such unhygienic conditions.

At the time of Mejia’s death, over 140 prisoners at the Otay Mesa complex alone tested positive for the virus. As of Tuesday, that facility had tested a total of 181 detainees, indicating that the virus has infected a significant number of the prison’s inmates, if not a majority.

Across the US, there are over 700 ICE detainees who have tested positive for the virus, out of only 1,500 tested. As not everyone has been tested, it is likely that the real number of infections is higher. Some 400,000 immigrants passed through ICE custody in 2018. Given the virus’ high mortality rate and ICE’s criminal negligence for the well-being of its prisoners, further deaths are all but inevitable.

One ICE detainee interviewed by the Miami Herald spoke about his concerns over COVID-19, saying “There are too many people here, you can’t follow social distance. They won’t give us face masks, they won’t give us gloves, anything. We haven’t done anything bad, we aren’t criminals... We need them to do something. We’re not asking them to release us, *we’re asking them to test us for the coronavirus, just like they’re offering anyone else outside. We deserve to get*

tested too. [Emphasis added]”

Access to news must be limited. These immigrants could be forgiven for thinking that COVID-19 tests are readily available to everyone outside of prison.

While immigrants are left to suffer the effects of the coronavirus along with all the attendant miseries of ICE detention, the American ruling class is no less contemptuous of its native-born working class. Its response to the pandemic has been characterized by the same malign neglect that it's shown towards immigrants.

After the danger of the virus was made abundantly clear to the international community soon after it claimed its initial victims in China, the US did essentially nothing to limit the spread of the virus, even musing that the effect it had on Chinese industry could be to the benefit of American capitalism. When it became clear that the virus would hit the US, it bungled its response to the virus so badly that even its capacity to test patients was several orders of magnitude behind what was necessary, and there continues to be an acute shortage of respiratory equipment.

Today there are mass graves for victims of the virus in New York City and the ruling class and its political representatives—both Democratic and Republican—are pushing for a quick return to work. In other words, workers are to put their lives on the line to ensure the profits of the capitalism.

While the Trump administration bears the chief responsibility for promoting the fascistic elements in and around ICE, the Democrats did everything to pave the way for it.

It was Obama who earned the moniker of “Deporter in Chief” for his record-breaking deportations, and the Democratic Party promoted, or at the most put up only token opposition to some of the most reactionary anti-immigrant legislation, including the Secure Fence Act of 2006. Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, supported building a border fence and called for the jailing of anyone who knowingly hired “illegals.”

Moreover, the Democrats and Republicans have a record stretching back decades of supporting the machinations of American imperialism in Central and South America and in the Caribbean.

In this regard, Mejia's story has an additional tragic component to it: Mejia first came to the US in 1980

from his native El Salvador in order to escape that country's brutal civil war. He would have only been 17 when he left. Stoked by American imperialism, that war decimated the country and forced many to flee. Mejia survived for some 40 years after he escaped. While he escaped the deaths squads of El Salvador, it was the American gestapo that finished him off. Workers, both native-born and immigrant, share a common enemy in the profit system.



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