Immigration Nation reveals the suffering of migrants at the hands of the US detention and deportation machine

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Immigration Nation, the six-part documentary now on Netflix, is a powerful exposure of the conditions facing immigrants, fleeing poverty and violence in their home countries, at the hands of the detention and deportation machine run by the US Department of Homeland Security.

Filmmakers Shaul Schwarz and Christina Clusiau secured official permission to accompany agents of both ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (Customs and Border Patrol), responsible for immigration enforcement in the interior of the US and on the border, respectively. The Trump administration, stepping up its hunt for undocumented immigrants fleeing poverty and violence in their home countries, perhaps thought a documentary would help promote xenophobia.

However, the final result was not what the administration officials who first signed off on the deal were expecting. Even though the filmmakers had a signed contract, when they submitted the work for review they were suddenly confronted, according to a report last month in the *New York Times*, with angry demands that scenes be deleted or that the film be delayed until after the November election.

One of the most important elements of the multi-part film is the way it interviews detainees and follows their cases as they languish inside ICE detention centers for many months. The authorities were particularly upset with the way in which the documentary allows the migrants to speak for themselves. In the end, officials may have realized that even if they were successful in holding up the film, it would only be a Pyrrhic victory. In any case, the dispute was resolved and *Immigration Nation* was released in early August.

The documentary, including footage of agents at work in New York and in offices processing immigrants for deportation in El Paso, Texas and Charlotte, North Carolina, took three years to complete. In its first few minutes, it shows agents in New York City forcing their way into apartments, claiming they have warrants that are never shown, nabbing family breadwinners who have been targeted because they have been caught through traffic tickets or minor misdemeanors. Once inside the apartments, the agents round up so-called "collaterals," others who are not on the list of targets but are also subject to deportation because they lack legal status. In one case, a raid on a crowded dormitory-style apartment nets two collaterals in addition to the target. In other cases, the lives of workers who have raised their families inside the US for 15 or 20 years are turned upside down.

Among those interviewed is Berta, a 63-year-old grandmother from Guatemala, who fled with her granddaughter rather than give in to the demands of drug gangs to make the 12-year-old a child bride. Berta, already worn down by a life of poverty, sits in detention for 17 months. Her deportation would mean certain death. Her prolonged detention is meant to send a brutal message to others who hope to escape the miserable conditions for which American imperialism is primarily responsible.

Bernardo Arevalo, another Guatemalan, came with his son Emilio, who is sent to live with an aunt whom he does not know, while his father is detained for months. "If I had known, I never would have come," Bernardo tearfully explains. "Even the best man cries at being separated—because we have a heart, we love our families." Bernardo has made the difficult journey because his elderly mother-in-law back in Guatemala urgently needs eye surgery the family cannot afford. He speaks on the phone with his wife Rebecca, who is unable to send two of their children to school for lack of money. The family is separated into three parts for eight months, and Bernardo must make the decision on whether to ask for deportation and whether to ask Emilio, now living in Virginia and desperately lonely for his family, to go back with him.

These are only two of the cases presented in *Immigration Nation*. There is also Deborah Jane, who fled for her life from Uganda after she was gravely disfigured in an acid attack by her former husband. Deborah waits for five years before she is finally reunited with her five children, who have suffered serious psychological harm in the interim.

The fate of the detainees is decided by immigration judges. These judges are part of the executive branch, however, not the judiciary. As employees of the Justice Department, they lack even nominal independence. A former judge explains that there are de facto deportation quotas judges must meet, and that many judges are frightened of the repercussions if they do not meet these targets.

Another positive element of the documentary is the way it lets the ICE and Border Patrol agents speak for themselves. Identified by their first names, the agents include some who are a bit defensive or uncomfortable with their role. Some confess to uneasiness when, in the words of one, "I would do the same thing if I were in their [the immigrants'] circumstances."

There are also many who are almost gleeful as they rack up the numbers and quotas of arrests. Bob, assistant manager of the ICE office in Charlotte, wears a "We Build the Wall" T-shirt and derives an almost sadistic pleasure from his daily activities. He is typical of the ultra-right elements whom Donald Trump has mobilized behind anti-immigrant xenophobia.

The US deportation juggernaut is without parallel anywhere in the

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world. In the past 25 years, since the adoption of the Strategic Plan, "Prevention Through Deterrence," under the Clinton Administration, the apparatus has grown to an astounding extent. In 1990 there were 3,800 border patrol agents. Their number had grown to 20,000 by 2015. Over the same period the budget of the agency swelled even more, from $260 million to $4.5 billion.

ICE now runs 220 facilities in 47 states. The 3 million undocumented immigrants on ICE records represent an inexhaustible pool of targets who live in fear of the knock on the door or the raid on their workplace. At least another 8 million undocumented also have reason to look over their shoulders. The detention facilities are privatized, like so much of the US prison system. The cost of telephone calls is prohibitive for many detainees. Those who work are paid $1 a day. As one observer comments, the client of the companies who run the detention centers is ICE, and the detainees are the product.

One of the episodes in *Immigration Nation* focuses on a political campaign in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, whose largest city is Charlotte. A police detective runs for county sheriff on the promise to cease cooperation with ICE through the so-called 287g program, in which immigrants facing criminal charges, even misdemeanors, are turned over to ICE. Between 2008 and 2018, 1.3 million undocumented immigrants around the US were transferred in this way, representing about three-quarters of ICE arrests during this period. The candidate, Garry McFadden, is successful, but ICE simply responds by stepping up its own raids throughout the area, spreading fear within the immigrant community, which now constitutes about one-sixth of Charlotte's overall population.

Yet another example of the exploitation and victimization of the immigrants is wage theft. The series turns its attention to Panama City, in the Florida Panhandle, where more than 100 workers who have come to the area for construction work in the wake of recent hurricane destruction find themselves waiting for pay months after the work has been done. These are among the many thousands of immigrants who travel from place to place to fill demands for difficult and temporary jobs after natural disasters. In this case, they were employed by the Winterfell Construction Company, owned by Tommy Hamm, who is also a County Commissioner. Hamm claims that subcontractors are responsible. When the workers and their supporters come to a County Commission meeting to plead their case, they are angrily ruled out of order and the meeting is adjourned, while Commissioner Hamm looks on, totally unconcerned.

Immigration Nation's last episode focuses on another and more gruesome side of the anti-immigrant campaign. Migrants are funneled into the Arizona desert, where thousands have died from the heat or after losing their way. The series follows as some human remains are found, a daily occurrence at present. Later, DNA testing is used to try to bring a grieving family news on the fate of their loved one.

Jason De Leon, a professor of anthropology at UCLA, explains that one of the metrics used by the authorities to measure deterrence is a rise in migrant deaths. The claim originally was that word would get out and the immigrants would stop coming, but as economic misery deepened this proved not to be the case. In the 1990s the number of annual deaths discovered in the Arizona desert rarely climbed out of the single digits. The number reached 75 in 2000 and 150 the following year. It has steadily climbed, to a total of 3,069 in 2018. As De Leon explains, the brutal claim by the authorities is that "people put themselves in harm's way, they did it to themselves." The latest total is undoubtedly not complete, since some remains are never found.

At various points in the documentary, Democratic Party politicians can be seen posing as friends of undocumented immigrants. Former congressman and presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke is shown briefly. The explosion of cruelty under the Trump administration is highlighted, with the hint that a fundamental difference exists between the two parties on this issue.

In this light, Professor De Leon's interview in the final 10 or 15 minutes of the program is all the more vital. "Things are bad under the Trump administration, but things have been bad for a long time," he observes. The screen then fills with a video of President Bill Clinton delivering his 1995 State of the Union address. His words deserve to be quoted in full:

"Americans are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country," he declares, as Vice President Al Gore and House Republican Speaker Newt Gingrich look on approvingly behind him. "The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants. The public services they use impose burden on our taxpayers. That's why our administration has moved aggressively to secure our borders more by hiring a record number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before."

The Clinton administration's war on migrants was part of its overall right-wing law-and-order program, which saw the enactment of draconian anti-crime legislation and the continued growth of mass incarceration. The administration bragged about the end of the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program—all while Wall Street soared to new heights and inequality grew. The austerity, prison-building and police brutality continued through the next quarter of a century, under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the "deporter-in-chief." Joe Biden played a prominent role in the Senate.

Trump has taken the assaults on immigrants to new levels, and also sent federal forces into city streets to nab peaceful protesters, part of his attempts to build up a mass fascist movement. There could be no clearer proof that the attack on immigrants is an attack on the working class as a whole. However, the weapons wielded by Trump have been put into his hands by the bipartisan criminalization of immigrants and refugees. Both Republican and Democratic presidents have the blood of thousands who have died in the Arizona desert on their hands.

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