

COVID-19 outbreak at Virginia migrant detention center caused by repression of anti-police brutality protesters

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A COVID-19 outbreak at an immigration detention center in rural Virginia was caused by the rapid transfer of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assault teams chauffeured into the area by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as part of the crackdown on anti-police brutality protests that broke out throughout the United States in late May and early June.

As of Sunday, 339 of the facility's inmates and staff at the Immigration Centers of America (ICA) private prison in Farmville, Virginia have tested positive for COVID-19. The outbreak is the most serious recorded at any immigrant detention center across the country. Last month the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that the outbreak claimed the life of a 72-year-old detainee and Canadian national, James Thomas Hill.

The revelation of the source of the outbreak is part of an ongoing lawsuit brought against the detention center by four migrant detainees. According to sources inside ICE that spoke to the *Washington Post*, prisoners were moved to the Farmville center in order to give cover for the Trump administration's operation involving militarized agents of the state apparatus to repress protests in Washington, DC.

"They needed to justify the movement of SRT [special response teams]," a Department of Homeland Security official told the *Post*. According to ICE lawyer Yuri Fuchs, "there is an ICE Air regulation that requires detainees and staff to be on the same flight, so they're being moved around," referring to the colloquial name of a program ICE uses to shuttle prisoners, material, and personnel around the country on charter commercial flights.

This open admission by a United States federal

official of the use of immigrant detainees as human shields for an operation of mass repression prompted federal judge Leonie Brinkema of the US District Court in Alexandria, Virginia to help cover for the overshare of information by rewording the sentence into a legally permissible action: "I think what you're saying then is when you move inmates, or detainees, you have to have ICE people with them," Brinkema said. "That's got to be what that means." Fuchs replied: "Yes."

The units sent on the flights were Special Response Teams (SRTs), ICE's most elite paramilitary units. Actual security and logistics for the transfer of prisoners was handled by private security firms and regular ICE officers, while the SRT troops deployed to the DC protests as soon as they landed.

According to the administration's cover story, the prisoner transfers were done to alleviate overcrowding and allow social distancing at ICE prisons throughout the US. This account is directly contradicted by multiple current and former DHS officials who took part in the operation. They confirmed to the *Post* that the primary purpose of the flights was to mobilize SRTs to DC, over the objections of DC field office commanders.

The officials stated that numerous other immigration prisons in the country were less filled than Farmville at that time, including a facility in Arizona that supplied many of the infected inmates who were transferred, which was at only 35 percent capacity at a time when Farmville was 57 percent full.

It is also likely that ICE simply fabricated any documents or information needed to effect the transfers. Jeffrey Crawford, Director of Immigration Centers of America (ICA), the for-profit prison company that

owns the Farmville facility, told the Farmville Town Council that the local ICE field office rejected the proposed transfer because there wasn't enough room at the nearby jail to quarantine the transferees appropriately.

According to Crawford, ICE headquarters responded that quarantine was not necessary because all of the inmates were known to be uninfected. But when they arrived, one was visibly sick with COVID-19 symptoms and tested positive right away. The rest of the group was then tested, with 51 coming back positive.

"We were assured before they came that these folks were healthy. We were told that one of the facilities where the detainees were coming from had no instances of COVID-19. In hindsight, we believe we've discovered information that that is not accurate. But that is what we were told at the time," the ICA director complained. It is difficult to say which is more jarring, ICE's criminal disregard for detainees' health or the ignorance and greed of the ICA officials, who were only too eager to increase the prisoner headcount at the for-profit facility.

In essence, these immigrants were collateral damage in the attempted coup d'état launched by the Trump administration against Constitutional rule in the United States in June. The apparatus of state repression was hindered not one iota by concerns that this move would seed coronavirus throughout the country, or in Farmville—a rural area with two major universities nearby.

SRTs have been central to the Trump administration's strategy of using shock-and-awe tactics, including overtly fascistic methods like snatch-and-grab disappearances in unmarked vehicles, to suppress protests against police murder. In addition to Washington, DC, paramilitary shock troops from Arizona, Texas, and Florida have been deployed against protesting workers and youth in Portland, Oregon.

In this episode one sees the American ruling class's equal disdain for democratic rights and the lives of the population. It points to the overtly fascistic character of the US immigration agencies, which are emerging as the incubators for paramilitary domestic repression units. While immigrants currently bear the brunt of this apparatus, it is directed at the working class as a whole.



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