

# Amid deadly pandemic, Canada deported record number of refugees in 2020

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12 February 2021

Canada deported 12,222 refugees in 2020—the highest number of deportations since at least 2015, even though deportations were suspended for several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The figure was contained in a Reuters news agency report dated January 22.

On March 17, 2020, among the limited preventive measures taken at the beginning of the pandemic, Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government suspended the deportation of migrants who were in Canada without status under Canadian immigration law.

The lifting of this suspension was announced on November 30, 2020, by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), a police organization under the Department of Public Safety, whose responsibilities include deportations.

The resumption of deportations was not due to an improvement in the pandemic situation in Canada. On the contrary, on the day of the announcement, Canada had 7,681 new cases of COVID-19, which was the highest tally since the beginning of the pandemic.

The government justified the resumption of deportations in the midst of the pandemic by citing the return of airline operations, the emergence of “vaccination options” and public health policies that have “contributed to a high degree of safety for those being deported by air.”

These explanations are nothing but bogus pretexts, without any foundation in the reality of the pandemic. They contradict the position of the government itself, which has closed its border with the United States for nonessential travel and has just reached an agreement with the airlines to discontinue flights to some holiday destinations.

As for “vaccination options,” none had been approved as of November 30, and to this day the Canadian vaccination campaign is characterized by improvisation, lack of resources and a shortage of doses.

Public health experts continue to warn that travel of any kind poses an increased and undesirable risk of transmission, made all the more serious by the emergence of new highly transmissible and likely more lethal variants of the virus.

Under these circumstances, deportations pose a deadly risk

to the deportee and a risk of contagion to the country to which they are returned.

As explained by the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers (CARL) in a letter strongly criticizing the November 30 decision, before their being deported, a person must make a multitude of trips in the community, including several trips to CBSA premises, to the bank to close accounts, to the doctor and to the pharmacy to get the treatment and medication they will need during the trip, etc. Each of the activities necessitated by deportation represents a risk of catching and transmitting the coronavirus in Canada before departure or, subsequently, in his or her country of origin.

CARL lawyers noted that deportations by the United States have caused outbreaks of COVID-19 in several countries, including India, Haiti, Guatemala and El Salvador.

In addition, many of the deported refugees have been sent to countries where the coronavirus is raging, posing an increased risk for the deportee of contracting the deadly disease. Canada has imposed a moratorium on deportations to countries where the political system is said to be unstable, such as Syria or Iraq, but makes no exception for countries particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

For example, migrants have been deported from Canada to Mexico, a country that is facing a real health catastrophe due to the homicidal policies of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and is now the third most bereaved country in the world with more than 171,000 deaths officially attributed to COVID-19.

Deportations also pose a significant risk of outbreaks in Canada as CBSA agents escort migrants on these air trips, which often involve transfers in several different airports and having to spend hours in a confined space with scores, even hundreds, of people.

The reality is that the Canadian government has unnecessarily deported thousands of people, ignoring the health crisis and the most basic public health measures, thus increasing the risk of new outbreaks of the deadly virus in Canada and around the world.

This development is part of the right-wing turn of the entire Canadian political establishment, including increased promotion of hostility to refugees and immigrants.

In the same week that the CBSA declared the resumption of deportations, the Trudeau government announced that there would be no expansion of the regularization program for “guardian angels”—those refugees and asylum-seekers who have answered the call of provincial governments, particularly the Quebec government, to take over for exhausted and overburdened health care workers.

During the spring and summer, as the pandemic raged unchecked, refugee rights groups drew attention to the courageous role of these migrants. After an initial period of reluctance, the ruling class seized upon this issue to save face and camouflage the disastrous consequences of its own deadly back-to-work and back-to-school policies.

In August, following a popular campaign to have their immigration status regularized, Ottawa and Quebec City reached a deal on the issue. Announced with great fanfare as a humanitarian gesture under the slogan “guardian angels will not be deported,” the deal is in fact little more than window dressing.

The program is limited, with numerous conditions, and only applies to asylum seekers who have directly provided care to patients, such as orderlies, nurses and nursing aides. This leaves out those who have done equally important work in hospitals and health centers, as janitors, cooks or security guards.

In total, just 1,000 migrants throughout Canada—a dozen times less than the number deported in 2020—are covered by the program and will be granted residency status.

In the face of strong popular criticism of the limited nature of the “Guardian Angel” program, Ottawa and Quebec have pretended to continue discussions to expand its scope. This political theater lasted until late November when the Trudeau government announced that the program would not be expanded and that it would come into effect in early December, at the same time as the resumption of deportations. The media reported that it was the Quebec government that categorically refused to include additional workers in the program.

The *Coalition avenir Québec* (CAQ, Coalition for the Future of Quebec) government led by François Legault, a multimillionaire and former CEO, was elected in 2018 on the basis of a chauvinist agenda combining Quebec nationalism with virulent attacks on immigrants, who were targeted as a threat to “Quebec values.” Since then, Legault has made anti-immigrant agitation a priority, including passing legislation to reduce the annual number of new immigrants to Quebec.

While Trudeau and the federal Liberal government posture

as progressive and pro-refugee, his government collaborated closely with the Trump administration in its anti-immigrant witch hunt; and more generally the Canadian state and ruling class rely on their USMCA (revised NAFTA) partners to keep migrants fleeing repression and poverty from reaching Canada.

Last March, in violation of international law, the Trudeau government seized on the pandemic to close the legal loophole in the reactionary Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement that allowed those who crossed into Canada “irregularly” to make a claim for refugee status.

Nationalism and xenophobia are being promoted by the ruling elites around the world to make immigrants and refugees scapegoats for their reactionary policies and divide the working class.

In Canada, under a humanitarian-democratic mask, the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau is pursuing a militaristic policy that includes a 70 percent increase in the budget for the military, participating in the US imperialist wars in the Middle East and elsewhere, and integrating Canada ever more fully into Washington’s military-strategic offensives against China and Russia.

Workers must reject the nationalist poison of the ruling elite and defend refugees and migrant workers—including the right of workers of all origins to work, live, and have access to health care and social services in the country of their choice, without fear of persecution or deportation.

This will be realized only as part of a broader working class mobilization, based on an international socialist perspective, against social inequality, the repressive policies of the capitalist state and imperialist war.



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