

# After a century of plunder, US imperialism turns away Central American refugees

Eric London  
21 March 2021

An unprecedented human exodus is underway across the Americas, as two million people—nearly a tenth of the combined population of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala—are expected to flee to the United States in the coming months. The US government has responded by closing its doors, abolishing the right to asylum and detaining 15,000 unaccompanied children as lawbreakers. This is the brutal, irrational response of the capitalist system to human suffering on a mass scale.

The corporate media and political establishment have launched a campaign to force the Biden administration to take even harsher measures against the asylum seekers. Typical is a headline in the Bezos-owned *Washington Post* attacking what it called “the Biden administration’s failure to contain the border surge.”

Though millions of voters hoped that by supporting Biden they could undo Trump’s fascistic attack on immigrants, the new administration is only continuing the ex-president’s policies. Biden’s secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) threatened migrants on ABC’s “This Week,” telling Martha Raddatz: “The message is quite clear, do not come. The border is closed, the border is secure.”

There is bipartisan agreement on jailing children, separating them from their families, militarizing the border and carrying out mass deportations, but there is never any discussion in the compliant media about the root causes of the social collapse of the Northern Triangle countries. The poverty and violence that dominate Central America are portrayed as the product of some unhappy accident.

The fact is that American imperialism is guilty of sociocide, and that millions are escaping a nightmare that was made in the USA. The American ruling class has systematically destroyed Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador for over a century, plundering the natural resources, exploiting the labor power of the working class, hoarding the land, starving the population, bankrupting the public treasury, and enriching itself all the while.

The governments that presently run each country have their roots in police state dictatorships imposed by the

United States to enforce the diktats of American corporations and crush social opposition across the hemisphere.

For roughly two decades after the Great Depression, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras were ruled by dictators, who carried out routine massacres of workers and peasants on behalf of the United Fruit Company. In 1932, El Salvador’s fascistic President Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez slaughtered 40,000 peasants engaged in an insurrection against US corporations and local landowners led by Agustin Farabundo Marti. Guatemalan President Jorge Ubico was an admirer of Hitler and a close ally of the US and United Fruit.

In 1954, the United States carried out a coup d’état to remove Guatemala’s President Jacobo Arbenz from power, thwarting land reforms. Dwight Eisenhower would later acknowledge, “We had to get rid of a Communist Government which had taken over.”

Eduardo Galeano characterized the decades of dictatorship that followed in his book *Open Veins of Latin America*:

The world turned its back while Guatemala underwent a long Saint Bartholomew’s night. [In 1967,] all the men of the village of Cajón del Rio were exterminated; those of Tituque had their intestines gouged out with knives; in Piedra Parada they were flayed alive; in Agua Blanca de Ipala they were burned alive after being shot in the legs. A rebellious peasant’s head was stuck on a pole in the center of San Jorge’s plaza. In Cerro Gordo the eyes of Jaime Velázquez were filled with pins... In the cities, the doors of the doomed were marked with black crosses. Occupants were machine gunned as they emerged, their bodies thrown into ravines.

In the 1970s and 80s, the United States transformed Central America into an even larger mass grave, using

Honduras as a staging ground for efforts to crush the Sandinista National Liberation Front in neighboring Nicaragua, with death squads deployed to carry out quasi-genocidal war.

The US supported, trained and armed the dictatorships in El Salvador and Guatemala. In the course of El Salvador's civil war, 80,000 were killed and a million displaced in the scorched earth campaign against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. In just one year from 1982 to 1983, Guatemala's US-backed dictator Efraín Ríos Montt killed 75,000 people in a genocidal-style campaign against the indigenous. In 1982, Ronald Reagan met Montt, defended his actions, and called him "a man of great personal integrity and commitment."

This litany of crimes against humanity is not merely a thing of the past. In 2009, the Obama administration orchestrated a coup against the elected Honduran government led by Manuel Zelaya, who presented himself as a social reformist and ally of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Documents released in 2017 via a Freedom of Information Act request reveal high-level involvement of the US military and State Department, which was led at the time by Hillary Clinton. Roughly one week after the Honduran military frogmarched Zelaya out of the country in his pajamas, Clinton wrote the US embassy in Honduras with her approval to "engage elements of the Honduran Armed Forces and de facto regime." The Honduran regime implemented a brutal policy of austerity measures, murdered activists like Berta Caceres, and today continues to operate in a thinly veiled alliance with powerful drug cartels.

The United States is preparing further crimes, with US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Admiral Craig Faller telling the press in December that US imperialism's "competitive edge [in Latin America]... is eroding, particularly when it comes to the Chinese influence." Fuller declared that the US would remain an active presence in Latin America in order to force China to "play by global rules."

As a result of a century of imperialist exploitation, Central America is the most unequal region in the world. Sixty percent of Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans live beneath their countries' measly poverty line. Seventy percent of the population is only informally employed. Ten to 20 percent of the region does not have access to electricity. A quarter of the population is illiterate. Remittances from relatives in the United States account for roughly one sixth of the total GDP. Hundreds of thousands of workers toil in sweatshops producing textiles for export for US apparel corporations supplying retailers like Walmart, Macy's and Kohl's.

The coronavirus pandemic has ravaged Central America,

sending millions deeper into poverty and leading the United Nations to warn of widespread starvation across the region. The virus initially spread because the US deported many who were infected in immigration detention. While the US hoards vaccinations, hospitals are overwhelmed and testing is so inadequate that case and death numbers are vastly underreported.

Masses of Central American workers, peasants and small business owners are removing themselves from this social hellscape at great personal risk. They deserve every class conscious worker's sympathy and support. The exodus is an indication that masses of people are coming to the realization that life cannot continue in the old way, and that the social needs of billions of people cannot be met within the framework of the capitalist system and the restraints of national boundaries.

The Socialist Equality Party demands:

- Safe passage and legal status for all immigrants entering the United States.
- Immediate liberation of detained children to family in the United States and immediate liberation of all detainees regardless of age.
- A multi-trillion-dollar program to rebuild Central America, paid for by expropriating the wealth of America's billionaires.
- Abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).
- The right of all workers to travel the world safely and without fear of harassment.
- The abolition of the nation-state system and the formation of the United Socialist States of the Americas.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**