

San Diego Convention Center to be used by Biden administration to detain 1,400 migrant children

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Federal officials announced Tuesday that the San Diego Convention Center in downtown San Diego, California, will be used to hold up to 1,400 unaccompanied migrant children. The Biden administration is currently detaining over 14,000 children in federal custody. Over 9,500 children are held by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), while the remaining 4,500 are in the custody of Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The move to place 1,400 children in the convention center comes as photos have surfaced showing children sleeping on thin mats on hard floors in dire and overcrowded Customs and Border Protection holding cells. Earlier this week Representative Henry Cuellar (Democrat, Texas) shared photos of the facility in Donna, Texas, which is comprised of eight plastic sided “pods,” each with a 260-person occupancy, noting that one overcrowded pod held over 400 male minors.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), part of the US Department of Health and Human Services, is responsible for the unaccompanied minors and normally runs 13,500 beds in official state-licensed immigration prisons for children.

Responding to the recent surge in unaccompanied minors, the ORR has turned to other facilities and has added 7,852 beds, including the San Diego Convention Center, which could begin to hold children as soon as this weekend. A second facility for holding up to 500 children is being opened in Carrizo Springs, Texas, and HHS officials are seeking approval from the Pentagon to use an empty dormitory at Joint Base San Antonio and open land at Fort Bliss in El Paso for additional detention centers.

Posing as a humanitarian, San Diego’s Democratic mayor Todd Gloria explained to reporters on Tuesday, “What we have are young people who are in unacceptable conditions and this condition [the convention center] can

be better for them.” HHS plans to operate the site for three months with children held for up to 35 days in the convention center before being transferred to the custody of family or a guardian in the US.

Gloria and San Diego County Board of Supervisors Chair Nathan Fletcher released a statement on Monday stating that the children “will be provided with food, medical care, a place to sleep and showers. A safe and secure recreation area will also be created on the exterior of the facility. The children are not permitted to leave the convention center until reunification occurs.”

While the center is being hailed as a more “humane” place to hold children, the reality is that it remains a prison, one in full violation of the immigration laws to protect children from being detained for longer than 72 hours before being placed with a sponsor or family member.

Before the convention center can begin intaking children, the city must disperse 500 homeless individuals currently housed there during the COVID-19 pandemic. San Diego has the fourth largest homeless population in the country and the convention center was made available to a tiny percentage last year to give the appearance the homeless were being assisted and provided sanitation. Mayor Gloria made a statement that the homeless would be properly housed, but it is not clear how housing facilities for these 500 have suddenly become available.

Meanwhile just across the border from San Diego, some 1,500 migrants, predominantly from the Northern Triangle, remain camped out and stationed along the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, Mexico. Hundreds protested Tuesday with hand written signs pleading for their right to asylum.

They stood at the San Ysidro Port of Entry with signs that pleaded “Please let us in,” “ayúdenos” (“help us”)

and urging President Joe Biden to “sí al asilo” (“yes to asylum”).

The response by Mexican and US officials has been to heighten border security and increase brutality. Last week CBP officers dressed in riot gear shut down the San Ysidro Port of Entry in an exercise launched to train border agents how to fight back a large crowd that might rush the lanes. CBP referred to the training as an “Operational Readiness Exercise” that would “assess the capabilities of our facilities,” and claimed it had nothing to do with the growing encampment of migrants who are increasingly desperate to set foot on US soil and apply for asylum.

Additionally, officials in Tijuana, Mexico, announced this week that they intend to construct a fence to contain the 1500 migrants waiting at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. The migrants are living in squalor, many having been squeezed dry of every last cent, paying for travel and passage to the border from their home countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. They are also joined by a number of Haitian immigrants who have remained at the border in tent camps for years now.

Many of those who voted for Biden in last year’s presidential elections believed he would put an end to the deadly spread of the pandemic and adopt a more humane policy towards immigrants in opposition to Trump’s xenophobia and cruel child separation policies. The response by the Biden administration has been to “keep together” families as they are deported and to detain unaccompanied children, but the ability to actually obtain asylum has remained as out of reach as it was under the Trump administration.

There has been no halt to the arrests, detentions, and deportations of migrants. In the month of February alone, 9,460 unaccompanied minors were detained, a 60 percent increase from January, and children represent nearly a tenth of the nearly 100,000 total immigrants detained.

Hoping to make clear to the ruling class that he is as ruthless as Trump in his deportations and anti-immigrant policy, Biden continues to emphasize that his administration does not run an “open border” and has actively discouraged immigrants, telling them not to come to the US.

Emphasizing this, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday the Biden administration had paid for 17,118 radio ads in Spanish, Portuguese and six indigenous languages to discourage migrants from Central America and Brazil. She said 589 digital ads have also been placed. Psaki insisted that the “vast, vast

majority [of families] are being turned away.”

On this Psaki is correct, in the month of February alone 72,413 migrants were “expelled” from the US under Title 42, a provision of federal law first used in March 2020 under the Trump administration with the assistance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which allows for the rapid expulsion of immigrants citing COVID-19 concerns.

Significantly these are “expulsions” rather than “deportations” as migrants cannot make a case before an immigration judge. The vast majority of migrants who have been expelled under Title 42 measures are returned to Mexico within hours.

For the ruling class the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a justification to speed up deportations and wage an open assault on the fundamental right to asylum. Trump and Stephen Miller attempted as well to invoke the 1944 Public Health Service Act to turn away asylum seekers and children on public health grounds. The special protections offered to minors have long been viewed as a major hurdle to carrying out widespread deportations, but what is clear is that children are continuing to be punished and held for weeks on end, and their asylum protections further eroded.

Biden has returned to the familiar mass deportations which were carried out when he was vice president in the Obama administration. Both parties fundamentally and actively support the inhumane immigration policies of the United States and are directly responsible for the present crisis.

On Wednesday, Biden announced that Vice President Kamala Harris, the former “top cop” of California, who served as the state’s attorney general from 2011 through 2017, will take the lead on negotiations with Mexico and Central American countries to block the flow of immigrants to the US border. “She doesn’t have to check with me. She knows what she’s doing,” Biden said.

The American working class must organize their political strength and come to the defense of these children and the ten of thousands being shipped off to deadly home countries that have been ravaged by US imperialism.



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