

Biden seeks to appease ultra-right with refugee policy

Patrick Martin
18 April 2021

President Joe Biden abruptly reversed himself on how many refugees the United States would accept this year, after a political firestorm erupted when the White House announced it was retaining the ceiling of 15,000 refugees set by his predecessor Donald Trump.

Biden had pledged during the election campaign to raise the ceiling on refugees to 125,000 a year—still a drop in the bucket compared to the millions of refugees created by US-instigated wars and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the principal driving force of recent mass migrations.

In February, the administration carried out a back-door reduction in the total number of refugees to be admitted during the current fiscal year, which ends September 30, notifying Congress that since barely seven months remained, only 62,500 refugees would be admitted. But the White House delayed issuing the formal “Emergency Presidential Determination” until Friday, April 16, stalling thousands of refugees who had scheduled flights to the United States.

The determination actually released on Friday restated the Trump ceiling of 15,000, although it altered the geographical distribution, permitting a few thousand refugees apiece from the Middle East and from predominantly Muslim countries in north and east Africa, who had been effectively barred by Trump’s anti-Muslim policy.

Groups which sponsor and care for refugees immediately protested, and many congressional Democrats joined them, including Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin, and Pramila Jayapal, co-chair of the House Progressive Caucus.

Several hours later, the White House issued a revised statement declaring that the ceiling of 15,000 set by Trump had been overturned, and that a new, higher ceiling for the current fiscal year would be announced

May 15. The statement reaffirmed that a ceiling of 125,000 would be in effect for the next fiscal year, beginning October 1.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki tried to explain the initial statement as a purely technical one which did not actually reiterate the Trump ceiling, only left it in place while a new ceiling was being discussed and decided on. She said that while a new ceiling would be set May 15, this was unlikely to be as high as the 62,500 promised in February.

Friday night, Biden’s assistant national security adviser Jon Finer held a conference call with refugee advocates, telling them the cap would likely be lifted well before May 15, and that the administration would try to resettle refugees as soon as possible, rather than spreading out the admissions until Sept. 30.

Some 33,000 refugees have already been “vetted” by the State Department, have housing, counseling and other resources already lined up, and await only legal permission to enter the country.

The reversal touched off a round of finger-pointing within the Biden administration, with leaks to the press blaming Ron Klain, the White House chief of staff, for the announcement that Biden would keep the Trump ceiling. Competing leaks blamed Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Xavier Becerra for the unpreparedness of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, although he was the last Biden cabinet member approved by the Senate, and has only been in office since March 18.

Right-wing anti-immigrant spokesmen seized on the White House flip-flop as an indication that Biden was bending to the pressure generated by congressional Republicans who have been howling about a “border crisis” because of the surge in Central American refugees coming across the US-Mexico border.

Stephen Miller, Trump's fascistic adviser on immigration, gloated, "This reflects Team Biden's awareness that the border flood will cause record midterm losses *if * GOP keeps issue front & center."

There is little doubt that the right-wing reading of White House political calculations is correct. The Biden administration, and the Democratic Party as a whole, continually bow to pressure from the right, a process which Biden has openly defended in the name of keeping a "strong opposition" and a "strong Republican Party."

Since the number of refugees crossing the US-Mexico border began to increase dramatically in January and February, the White House has been mainly concerned about right-wing political criticism of Biden's supposed "leniency," not about popular outrage over the spectacle of thousands of children packed into cages under police guard at the border.

Thousands of child migrants are being held at immigration detention camps for far longer than the 72-hour maximum set under the court-imposed *Flores* agreement, mainly because HHS facilities are themselves grossly overcrowded and unable to take them.

The same agency, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the HHS, handles both the intake of approved refugees from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and the long-term housing of undocumented child migrants at the US-Mexico border. The ORR has exhausted its \$1.3 billion budget for the year already, and while the Biden administration has authorized emergency funding to detain child refugees at the border, it has not taken a similar action for the ORR to allow the agency to carry out both its major operations.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact