

Kamala Harris's anti-immigrant tour: Identity politics in service of imperialism

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“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” (Poem by Emma Lazarus, inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty)

“Do not come, do not come...if you come to our border, you will be turned back.” (Vice President Kamala Harris to migrants fleeing destitution and rampant violence in Central America)

Kamala Harris this week made her first foreign trip since taking office as US vice president. It was a lightning three-day visit to Guatemala and Mexico aimed at firming up the use of their security forces to violently suppress the flow of Central American migrants seeking to escape desperate poverty along with police and gang killings, and to reunite with family members in the US.

Much was made in the US and international media of Harris being the first woman and first African/Asian-American to represent Washington abroad on such a high-level state visit. A child of immigrants, Harris was entrusted with the dirty and, indeed, homicidal job of coordinating a multinational crackdown on immigration.

Nowhere could one find a more blatant illustration of the role played by identity politics in defending the capitalist order at home and US imperialist interests abroad.

Harris's trip included window-dressing along these lines, including a promised \$40 million to “empower” young women in Guatemala. This represents a drop in the ocean for a country where fully half of the population is categorized as poor and which has the sixth-highest malnutrition rate on the planet. As for the rate of chronic child malnutrition, it now stands at a shocking 70 percent, the highest in the world, with children dying every day for lack of food.

Harris spent her day in Guatemala in discussions with President Alejandro Giammattei, an extreme right-wing politician who came into office with the backing of the country's ruling oligarchy and the military. He was nearly overthrown last year by mass protests, which included the burning of the Congress building, that broke out against government austerity and its criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Giammattei's political career included a stint as chief of the country's prisons, during which security forces carried out a massacre of inmates in 2006. He was briefly jailed on charges related to the killings and the horrendous conditions inside the penitentiaries. This could have served as a bond with Harris, who as California's attorney general carried out an aggressive campaign to overturn court rulings that conditions in the state's prisons constituted “cruel and unusual punishment” in violation of the US Constitution.

“We share bonds that are historic,” Harris said in public remarks delivered with Giammattei. “And it is important that, as we embark on a new era, that we recognize the significance and the importance of this relationship as neighbors.”

Harris provided no details about the “historic” bonds between Guatemala and Washington, for understandable reasons. Dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these “bonds” were forged through the brutal exploitation and bloody oppression of Guatemala's population of workers, peasants and indigenous peoples. The country's economy was effectively taken over by the United Fruit Company and other US banks and corporations, whose interests were defended by a series of military dictatorships that regularly massacred and executed workers who dared to strike or protest.

In 1954, the CIA directly engineered a coup that overthrew the democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, whose sin was to initiate a limited land reform that included the expropriation, with compensation, of lands controlled, but unused, by United Fruit.

The coup ushered in three decades of brutal military dictatorships and a US-backed counter-insurgency war that claimed the lives of an estimated 200,000 people, most of them indigenous peasants wiped out in a genocidal campaign by a military that was trained and armed to the teeth by the Pentagon. The money offered by Harris to supposedly “empower” women represents a tiny fraction of the money doled out by Washington to empower the mass murderers of the Guatemalan security forces.

In a confidential memo drafted in the wake of the coup against Árbenz, the US National Security Council stated that Washington's aim in the region was to compel Latin American countries "to base their economies on a system of private enterprise, and, as essential thereto, to create a political and economic climate conducive to private investment of both domestic and foreign capital."

More than six decades later, this remains Washington's core policy in the region, as Harris made clear during her visit to Guatemala. The main "aid" she had on offer to supposedly improve lives and thereby stanch the flow of immigration was a package to back "entrepreneurs" and a promise from US corporations that—provided their conditions are met—they will invest in the region "to promote economic opportunity and job training." In other words, any restrictions on the flow of US capital in search of cheap labor must be scrapped, even as walls of steel are erected to imprison workers within national borders.

This is of paramount importance to transnational corporations that depend upon US-owned factories in Mexico and Central America as part of the supply chain for US auto, electronics, defense and other industries. Washington pressed for these plants to remain open during the pandemic, and the governments readily complied, drastically intensifying the rates of infections and deaths.

The same issue was stressed in Harris's talks Tuesday with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), which produced a statement stressing "the strengthening and attraction of foreign investment to Mexico." Once again, open borders for the banks and corporations, and militarized frontiers for working people.

Both the supposedly "left" government of AMLO in Mexico and the right-wing Central American regimes are serving as willing subcontractors in the Biden administration's war on immigrants. In April, the White House announced the deployment of 10,000 soldiers by Mexico, 7,000 troops by Guatemala and 1,500 security officials by Honduras on its northern border. These forces are equipped with drones and other surveillance equipment and backed by US "advisors."

Last month, Mexico expedited deportations by shifting from transporting migrants in buses to setting up an "air bridge" from the states of Tamaulipas and Chihuahua bordering Texas to the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula and the southern Mexican cities of Villahermosa and Tapachula, which harbor the largest migrant detention centers, described by legislators of AMLO's own party as concentration camps.

On the US border itself, draconian methods are employed to turn back migrants. According to the latest figures available, in April, 111,714 of the 178,622 migrants detained

by the US Border Patrol were summarily deported to Mexico, using as a pretext Title 42, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention public health order ostensibly aimed at controlling the pandemic. Public health experts have stated that the order has no grounding in science.

Those apprehended are, in many cases, transported to a distant part of the border and forced back across into Mexico, with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Thousands are now trapped in squalid tent camps, lacking access to water, food and medical care, and facing daily threats of violence and kidnapping.

This gross violation of both international and US law on the right to asylum is a consensus policy within the US ruling establishment, with the Biden administration continuing the essential policies of the fascist ex-US president Donald Trump.

Conditions within immigration jails remain inhuman, with immigrants, including children, subjected to overcrowding, extreme cold and inedible food. COVID-19 infections are running rampant, with the Department of Homeland Security reporting at the end of last month that it was monitoring 2,007 cases among detained immigrants, while barely 7 percent of them have been vaccinated.

So much for the crocodile tears shed by Kamala Harris about the "dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border." The greatest dangers are those deliberately created by the US government to suppress migration. This is just as true under Biden as it was under Trump.

Workers in the United States must come to the defense of working people from Mexico and Central and South America who are risking their lives in an attempt to enter the US. They are fleeing barbaric conditions created by more than a century of US imperialist oppression and are, in many cases, children, mothers and fathers who are desperately trying to reunite with their families.

The working class in the United States and internationally is being driven into struggle against the same transnational corporations that have reaped profits amid the mass death and illness of the COVID-19 pandemic. The success of these struggles depends upon workers uniting across national boundaries. This requires unconditional rejection of the xenophobia and nationalism peddled by the capitalist parties and the corporatist unions and the defense of the democratic rights of immigrant workers to live and work in the country of their choice.



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