

Kamala Harris stages photo op at Mexican border to defend mass incarceration of immigrant children

Meenakshi Jagadeesan
25 June 2021

Vice-President Kamala Harris visited El Paso, Texas on Friday in her first visit to the US-Mexico border since being designated by President Joe Biden to head up his administration's efforts to halt the flow of refugees into the US.

The visit came on the heels of two major reports this past week detailing the horrific and illegal treatment of migrants by successive administrations, including the mass incarceration of children by the Biden-Harris government. Her trip to El Paso was a photo op staged to deflect Republican agitation about an "immigrant invasion," while obscuring the continuity between the anti-immigrant policies of Trump and those of the current administration.

Joined by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, Senator Dick Durbin (Democrat of Illinois) and Representative Veronica Escobar (Democrat of Texas), Harris spouted the usual banalities in her responses to reporters, claiming that the Biden administration had made great "progress" despite inheriting "a tough situation."

Neatly sidestepping the question of why it had taken her so long to visit the border, Harris said she had done so multiple times (though not as vice-president), and added, "It was always the plan to come here."

Her visit consisted of a quick visit to a US Border Patrol processing center, where she met five young migrant girls being held there; a stop at the Paso del Norte port of entry, across from the Mexican city of Juárez; a meeting with Walter Slosar, the acting deputy chief of the US Customs and Border Patrol's El Paso sector; and a discussion with immigrant advocates.

Harris cynically told reporters that the stories she heard from the migrant girls reminded her of the

importance of focusing on the "root causes" of migration. Earlier this month Harris, the daughter of immigrants, traveled to Guatemala and Mexico and met with their presidents to shore up the use of their security forces to suppress the flow of Central American migrants seeking to escape poverty and police and gang killings and reunite with family members in the US.

Touted as the first woman and first African/Asian-American to represent Washington in such a high-level state visit, Harris told desperate Central American migrants seeking refuge in the US, "Don't come... If you come to our border, you will be turned back."

Again, in El Paso, Harris sought to use identity politics to soften the stench of her anti-immigrant policies. Speaking of her interactions with the detained migrant girls, she claimed they had asked her, "How do you become the first woman vice president?"

She told reporters that her discussions served as an important reminder that "the issue [of immigration] cannot be reduced to a political issue. We're talking about children, we're talking about families, we are talking about suffering."

Attempting to draw a line between the Biden and the Trump administrations, she declared, "It is here in El Paso that the previous administration's child separation policy was implemented."

The level of hypocrisy here is difficult to put into words.

In the past few months of the Biden administration, the number of migrants trying to cross into the United States has reached record levels. In May, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) recorded 180,000 encounters, the highest number since March of 2000.

Those who have not been turned back have been subjected to the detention system that was put in place by the Obama administration, nurtured by the Trump administration and now fully utilized by the Biden administration. As testimonials of detained children filed in California federal court earlier this week and an American Civil Liberties Union report on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) responses to hunger strikes in detention centers have made clear, this is a system in which neither legality nor basic humanity has a place.

Unaccompanied minors are packed into cramped quarters and denied basic amenities like edible food, potable water and clean clothes, not to mention being deprived of access to legal services and contact with family members.

Adult asylum seekers have fared no better, with multiple instances of detainees being forced to go on hunger strikes to draw attention to their desperate straits, and then being subjected to invasive force-feeding procedures, which, according to the United Nations, constitute torture.

Harris's visit to El Paso was made primarily in response to mounting Republican criticism about the "weakness" of the Biden administration's immigration policies and demands that an even more draconian system of arrests and deportations be put in place. It is not mere coincidence that her visit came just a few days before a planned trip to the border town of McAllen, Texas by former President Trump.

The choice of El Paso was itself politically motivated. As a former Obama administration official told *Politico*, "It's a much more secure location than the Brownsville area or some parts of the Arizona area. And so, if you're trying to show that the border is secure, you would be much more likely to go to El Paso."

Harris chose not to visit the Fort Bliss tent city in Texas that houses thousands of unaccompanied minors and has been in the news recently because of the systematic abuse being carried out under the auspices of Biden's Health and Human Services Department (HHS).

During the vice-president's trip to the border, her press secretary, Symone Sanders, told reporters, "The administration is taking [the situation in Fort Bliss] very seriously. Extremely seriously." She added that

HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra had been instructed "to do a thorough investigation" of the military facility.

However, within a matter of hours, the White House backtracked, with a spokesperson claiming the conditions in Fort Bliss had already improved and that "HHS has already been looking into [the] facility on their own." The spokesperson added, "At no time did the White House recommend a probe of the facility."

The backtracking should not come as a surprise to anyone who has been following the Biden-Harris administration's policies. For all its claims of being different from the Trump administration, the past months have revealed horrifying continuities.

An administration that is committed to removing all COVID-related restrictions and reopening the economy regardless of the human cost is continuing to use Title 42, an obscure rule first invoked by the Trump administration, citing the dangers of the pandemic, to deny desperate refugees the right of asylum, thereby forcing them to make the perilous trek across the Southwestern border.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact