New York begins sheltering refugees in tent city

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Last week, New York City opened up a massive new encampment for refugees and other migrants arriving by the busload from Texas and other southern border states. The barracks-like facility on a desolate island in the East River continues the inhumane treatment of migrants crossing the southern border of the US.

The city has tallied more than 20,000 migrants arriving in recent months, many of whom made a desperate trek from Venezuela in an attempt to escape crippling poverty, exacerbated by years of US sanctions that have bankrupted the country. Approximately three-quarters of the migrants processed in New York remain in the shelter system, trapped in immigration limbo and unable to work despite having entered legally while seeking asylum.

The bulk of the refugees were placed on buses by Texas Governor Greg Abbott. The fascistic maneuver by the Republican governor is aimed at stoking up anti-immigrant hysteria as part of the Republican Party's midterm election campaign.

The arrival of the migrants in a city of nine million and a regional economy the size of South Korea's has triggered a political crisis for the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Eric Adams. Since the first buses arrived, the city's shelter system has been unable to fulfill its legal responsibility to provide safe and decent housing. Migrants who lined up at the overwhelmed Men's Intake Center in midtown Manhattan were left to sleep on the street or on the floor of offices.

Any illusions that the political establishment in the Democratic Party stronghold of New York City would treat immigrants humanely crumbled with Adams's initial choice of Orchard Beach as the location for his tent city. The isolated, windswept location in the Bronx, surrounded by 2,700 acres of park land, was abandoned after the site flooded during a minor rainstorm.

The new location, on Randalls Island, is, if anything, even more isolated and foreboding. Up to 1,000 migrants will be housed in a facility built in a track and field stadium parking lot. There are no permanent residences on the island, which hosts a sewage treatment plant, a psychiatric hospital, training facilities for the New York Police Department and a few buildings sheltering homeless residents.

Last Wednesday, the Adams administration led reporters on a tour of the newly constructed camp, attempting to spin the facility as a welcoming intake center to process migrants on the way to more permanent housing. The camp has two sleeping areas filled with dozens of rows of cots lined up head to toe. Initially, it will sleep up to 500 single men, with the possibility of doubling the number housed under the tarp roofs. In addition, the site contains a recreation area, a cafeteria and trailers with bathrooms and showers.

Mayor Adams presented the camp as a temporary stop with the goal of limiting stays to four days. However, when questioned during the press tour, an official with New York Health and Hospitals Corporation, which jointly runs the site along with the city's Emergency Management Office, admitted that there is no limit on how long people will stay. The severe shortage of affordable housing in New York, combined with a shelter system that cannot cope with demand, renders this goal almost meaningless.

The grossly inadequate character of the tent city on Randalls Island is demonstrated by Mayor Adams' need to sidestep New York's constitutional requirements to guarantee shelter for all that meets basic standards. To evade this requirement, Adams declared a state of emergency on October 7.

With cold weather approaching and the coronavirus pandemic poised to surge, the city is herding refugees like animals into tents, separated from much of the outside world.

To oversee and assist in the operation, Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul has deployed 147 members of the New York National Guard.

The human toll of the brutal treatment of refugees is exemplified by the case of a young asylum seeker from Colombia who committed suicide last month. The woman, a mother of two, killed herself in a shelter in Queens after being trapped for more than three months in New York's

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broken system.

Following the tragedy, *Gothamist* interviewed several residents of the shelter who explained that they were left to fend for themselves, with no support from social services. They were prevented from even speaking to fellow shelter residents.

"We just got here, and the idea is to make connections, not to be locked inside and have to cross the street to have a conversation," one resident said. "It drives you to solitude; you can't connect with anyone." They described feeling like "prisoners."

The horrific plight of refugees in New York City exposes the bipartisan character of the anti-immigrant policies being carried out nationwide.

The Republican Party continues to spearhead the assault on immigrants, attempting to scapegoat migrant workers for the economic calamity facing broad masses throughout the US. In a speech in Texas Saturday night, Donald Trump praised Governor Abbott for shuttling thousands of refugees to New York City. Trump's rant, which featured his customary call for the death penalty for drug smugglers, sought to blame immigrants for drug-related deaths.

Trump and Abbott are far from outliers in the Republican Party, which peddles the racist and anti-Semitic "Replacement Theory" and conjures up imaginary voting fraud by undocumented immigrants. Nor is Abbott alone in shipping migrant workers and asylum seekers to Democratic-run cities in the North in order to whip up the most backward and fascistic sentiments among the Republican "base." Arizona Governor Doug Ducey has boasted of sending more than 1,500 migrants to Washington D.C. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered two state-chartered planes to pick up migrant asylum seekers from Texas and fly them to Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts.

Yet despite a difference in rhetoric, the policies of the Democratic Party converge with those of the Republicans. President Biden has continued Trump's use of emergency health provisions under Title 42 to deny asylum seekers the right of entry to the US, despite having declared that "the pandemic is over." On October 12, Biden began implementing a deal with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to summarily deport Venezuelan refugees to Mexico, in contravention of asylum rights enshrined under international law.

Recently released statistics reveal that Biden's border policies have led to 856 deaths on the southern border during fiscal year 2022, which ended on September 30. The horrific toll is the deadliest ever recorded. The number of arrests on the southwestern border also reached record levels in 2022, with 2.4 million migrants detained. That figure is more than twice the number in 2019, the last full year of the Trump administration.

Mayor Adams, a former New York City cop who ran for election as a "law-and-order" candidate, cheered on Biden's closure of the border to asylum seekers, saying on Thursday, "The president responded. They did a decompression strategy." His spokesperson similarly lauded Biden for stemming the flow of immigrants to New York. Adams previously referred to migrants arriving in New York as an "assault on our city" that "undermined" the economy.

The Democratic Party's adaptation to the fascistic scapegoating of immigrants by the Republicans illustrates that the defense of the rights of immigrants and refugees is impossible through the two parties of big business. Both parties uphold the interests of US imperialism, which has carried out a policy of social and economic devastation in Latin America, the Middle East and beyond. Both seek to divide the working class on the basis of immigration status, national origin, race and other factors.

The refugees arriving in New York have undertaken a perilous journey of thousands of miles through jungles and deserts and over mountains, all in an effort to find work and provide a better life for their families. Their struggle to overcome repression and poverty aligns with the strivings of workers in the US, who confront similar attacks on their living standards and democratic rights at the hands of the same corporate-financial class enemy.

The defense of immigrants is not simply a question of compassion, but fundamentally a class issue. The brutality and violence inflicted on immigrants will increasingly be deployed against all sections of the working class, native-born included, as workers come into more open conflict over jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Workers everywhere must have the right to live and work in the country of their choice. It is the task of the working class internationally to take up a struggle to make this a reality.

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