

Scores of immigrants die in bus crashes trying to reach locked-down US border

Bill Van Auken
24 February 2023

Some 70 immigrants have been killed in a series of back-to-back bus accidents that have taken place this month on the perilous route from Latin America to a US border that has been locked down by the Biden administration, which is intent on abolishing the right to asylum.

The most deadly of them took place in Panama, near the Costa Rican border, on February 15, killing 41. Another crash happened on a Mexican highway between the states of Oaxaca and Puebla on February 19, claiming the lives of at least 17. In both these incidents there were dozens more severely injured.

On February 7, a bus was found overturned and submerged in a creek in an isolated area of the northern Mexican state of Nuevo León with the bodies of 14 people inside. The victims included 11 immigrants from Guatemala and a child from Honduras. The bodies of another child and a woman have yet to be identified. The area has become an increasingly active route used by polleros, or immigrant smugglers, to evade the crackdown on immigrants by the Mexican police and National Guard.

The victims in all three incidents were drawn from across the Americas and beyond. The bus that crashed in Panama carried 66 people, with some of them packed in the aisle. According to a report issued by the Panamanian government, they included 22 immigrants from Ecuador, 16 Haitians, 11 Venezuelans, six Brazilians, five Colombians, two Cubans, two migrants from Cameroon, along with one Eritrean and one Nigerian. There were 20 children on the bus, 12 boys and eight girls.

The driver of the bus had missed the turn into its destination, an immigrant shelter near the Costa Rican border, and slammed into another vehicle, losing control and turning over an embankment. Witnesses

described a horrific scene, with the bus's roof torn off, its seats along with passengers' bodies—some of them dismembered—scattered around the wreckage, and with survivors screaming in agony.

The tragedy has served to expose a corrupt multi-million-dollar government-sponsored business of transporting migrants on ramshackle buses, part of their continuing exploitation and abuse after surviving the grueling 65-mile trek through the jungles of Panama's Darién Gap, where many have died and countless more have been robbed, raped and assaulted by criminal gangs. In 2022, Panama reported that a record of nearly a quarter of a million people had made the dangerous crossing.

The crash in Mexico resulted in carnage after the overloaded bus ran into a roadside barrier and broke in two. Police reported that the driver, who fled the scene, had lost control of the vehicle, which had no brakes. Volunteer rescuers struggled to recover two corpses that were thrown into a ravine.

The scenes of twisted and crumpled bodies and scattered belongings at the bus crash sites recall the searing protest song "Deportee" written by Woody Guthrie in the wake of a 1948 California plane crash that killed nearly 30 migrant workers being deported to Mexico:

We died in your hills, we died in your deserts,
We died in your valleys and died on your plains.
We died 'neath your trees and we died in your bushes,
Both sides of the river, we died just the same.

Seventy-five years later, people trying to reach asylum in the US continue to die in the jungles of Panama, at the hands of police and criminals in Central America and Mexico, and in the Rio Grande and the southwestern deserts as they are driven by cruel and illegal US immigration policy to ever more dangerous border crossings.

The number of these deaths continues to rise. The Disappeared Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2022 alone recorded 1,212 migrant deaths in Central America, on the US border and in the Caribbean. This is unquestionably a vast undercount, given the unrecorded deaths of many migrants in areas like the Darién jungle or in the capsizing of rickety boats from Cuba and Haiti and the many unreported murders of immigrants in Mexico.

These deaths are not merely statistics, but catastrophes and tragedies for families on both sides of the Rio Grande. This includes both immigrant workers in the US losing husbands, wives and children making the journey north to reunite with their loved ones, and families in impoverished villages from Guatemala to Ecuador who borrow every cent they can to send their sons and daughters north for a better life, only to have them come home in a coffin.

Commenting on the recent migrant death toll, the OIM's regional director for Central America, North America and the Caribbean, Michele Klein Solomon, said that "placing obstacles to migration will not stop it, but will make it more dangerous." True as far as it goes, but the obvious questions remain: what has created the unstoppable surge of migration and who is responsible for imposing these deadly obstacles?

The tragedies in Panama and Mexico are not mere "traffic accidents" but part and parcel of monstrous social crimes committed by US imperialism against the peoples of the countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and beyond over more than a century, and cruelly continued to this day by US banks and corporations together with the Democratic administration in Washington.

Those heading north are not doing it on a whim. They are driven by intolerable conditions of life in their own countries, from the poverty created by US economic blockades against Venezuela and Cuba, to the rampant violence, misery and repression that are the end product

of decades of dictatorships and near-genocidal US-sponsored "counterinsurgency" wars in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Compounding these crimes are Washington's viciously inhumane immigration policies. The Biden administration is in the process of replacing the cruel and hypocritical use of Title 42 to ban immigration under the pretext that it threatened to spread COVID-19 with an outright abolition of the right to asylum on the grounds that migrants can apply for it in Mexico, where their lives are as much in danger as in their home countries. At the same time, the US government has contracted out the repression of immigrants to security forces in Mexico and Central America which operate in barely concealed coordination with the region's predatory criminal mafias.

It pursues these policies not because immigrants pose some existential threat to the American people, but rather as part of the lurch to the right by the entire political establishment, driven by growing social and economic crises and the steady march toward world war. The anti-immigrant policies of the Biden administration become ever more indistinguishable from those of the fascistic right within the Republican Party, with which it seeks "bipartisan unity" in support of the US-NATO war against Russia and the suppression of the working class at home.

The Biden administration's bid to abolish the right to asylum, a fundamental democratic principle guaranteed under both international and US law, is a warning to the working class of the United States itself, which faces the trampling of its own democratic rights in the interests of war and reaction.

The working class must pursue its own independent policy on immigration, defending the right of all workers to live and work in the country of their choice and fighting for the unification of the workers of Central, South and North America and the Caribbean in a common struggle to put an end to social inequality and capitalist exploitation throughout the Western Hemisphere and across the globe.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)