

At least 40 immigrants dead in fire at US-Mexico border: A crime of US imperialism and the Mexican state

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At least 40 refugees were killed in a fire that broke out Monday night in a crowded detention center in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez. The deadly blaze, which left 28 more hospitalized in serious condition, erupted during a protest by refugees from Central and South America, who had learned they were to be deported from Ciudad Juarez as a result of the Biden administration's policy banning immigrants from applying for asylum at the US-Mexico border.

Fearing death and persecution in their home countries, the desperate group of immigrants lit a fire in the men's wing of the detention center. Operated by the Mexican government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), this immigration jail is located directly adjacent to the US border. The refugees hoped the fire would draw attention to their plight. Instead, it spread into an inferno, fed by the facility's cheap, flammable mattresses and with not a single fire extinguisher available to put it out.

The dead and injured include 28 Guatemalans, 13 Hondurans, 12 Salvadorans and 12 Venezuelans, as well as immigrants from Colombia and Ecuador. The bodies of the dead were unceremoniously dragged into a parking lot as relatives wept and demanded answers.

It is cruelly symbolic that these immigrants, who had traveled over a thousand miles in search of safety, were left to burn to death within sight of the US border. Video now confirms the victims were locked in a cell and that guards refused to open the door.

Other videos show guards fleeing the facility as flames leapt around the detainees, who were locked behind bars and screaming to be let out. One guard was heard saying, "Let those who started the fire burn," according to a survivor.

López Obrador issued a perfunctory statement calling the incident a "terrible misfortune," while blaming the migrants for their own deaths. But what took place in Ciudad Juarez was a crime, the direct product of the policies pursued by both the US and Mexican governments. The chief culprit is the Biden administration, with AMLO's government serving as its enforcer and accomplice.

The immigrants who perished were barred from entering the

United States under Title 42, an obscure public health provision of US law employed by Trump and then Biden to ban immigration at the US-Mexico border under the false pretense that immigrants spread COVID-19. With Title 42 slated to expire in May, Biden announced a new policy last month to fill the gap. Under the new asylum ban, immigrants at the southern border would not be allowed to enter the US to apply for asylum, regardless of the fact that such a right is guaranteed under international law, on the grounds that they should apply for asylum in Mexico instead.

The Mexican government has played a critical role in helping the Biden administration violate the rights of Latin American workers and peasants fleeing violence and poverty caused by a century of imperialist exploitation.

AMLO has deployed the Mexican military to serve as an auxiliary of the US border police, arresting and often brutalizing Central and South American immigrants passing through his country on the way to the United States. The detention facility in Ciudad Juarez was tense and overcrowded because police had combed the city's streets Monday, picking up immigrants who had been left destitute after being thrown back across the border.

AMLO's administration was praised by the Democratic Socialists of America and the pseudo-left as "progressive" or even "revolutionary." In reality, his government is no less subservient to its American masters than its predecessors under the PRI and PAN.

Now the Biden administration is preparing even more ruthless attacks on immigrants. In early March, the *New York Times* reported that "The Biden administration is considering reviving the practice of detaining migrant families who cross the border illegally."

Leading officials in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have been meeting secretly to discuss options for detaining parents and children despite court orders prohibiting them from doing so. Even the *Times* admitted that "the move would be a stark reversal for President Biden, who came into office promising to adopt a more compassionate approach to the border after the harsh policies of his predecessor, former

President Donald J. Trump.”

In the hours after the fire, Biden’s DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in what became a three-hour bipartisan rant against immigrants. Mayorkas made no reference to the fire in his opening statement and referred to immigration as part of the “heightened threat environment,” saying the US borders must be militarized to protect against “increasing economic and political instability” around the world, as well as “to ward off aggression by the People’s Republic of China.”

During the hearing, Democratic senators praised Mayorkas for slashing immigration, while Republicans demanded even more violent and anti-democratic measures be taken to effectively block all immigration into the country. Earlier this month, Republican House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer said it was a “mistake” that Trump did not bomb Mexico to eliminate drug cartels during his presidency. Both Democrats and Republicans praised “our partners in Mexico” for facilitating mass deportations.

The ruthless bipartisan attack on the rights of immigrants can only be understood in the context of US imperialism’s war against Russia and plans for war against China. During the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, senators from both parties said that further border restrictions, an expansion of mass surveillance, and the removal of undesirable foreigners is necessary to challenge Russia and China and establish total state control over the US “homeland.”

Above all, this requires the suppression of the class struggle in the United States as well as across Latin America, which has historically served as US imperialism’s primary source of natural resources and cheap labor. Today, the suppression of immigration is an integral part of maintaining order across the entire hemisphere, and the border is seen as the “one yard line” of US imperialism’s efforts to dominate all of Latin America.

As former DHS Secretary John Kelly put it in 2017, “homeland defense does not begin at the ‘one yard line’ of our Southwest border, but instead extends forward, throughout the hemisphere, to keep threats far from our nation’s shores.” It is highly significant that Mayorkas referenced economic instability as a primary motivator of the present border crackdown.

The defense of the rights of immigrants must therefore be rooted in a fight to mobilize the international working class against US imperialism, the expanding US-NATO war against Russia and its plans for war against China.

Throughout American history, world war has been accompanied by the most vicious attacks on immigrant workers, and such attacks have always been based on a desire to suppress antiwar sentiment in the American working class.

During and after World War I, laws facilitating the deportation of immigrants were passed within weeks of the Espionage Act, which outlawed antiwar speech and led to the

jailing of socialist leader Eugene V. Debs. These laws gave Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer the legal tools to deport thousands of socialist immigrants in the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, and the Espionage Act has continued to serve as the basis for persecution of whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange.

In the lead-up to World War II, Congress passed the Smith Act, which created an “alien registry” system used for internment of Japanese American citizens, while also illegalizing antiwar speech, leading to the jailing of 18 Trotskyists in 1944. Since the initiation of the “war on terror,” the suppression of free speech and the erection of a mass surveillance state have been inextricably linked with attacks on immigrants, as evidenced by the 2002 founding of the Department of Homeland Security itself. In every case, both parties have prepared their attacks on the rights of the entire working class by fostering a climate of extreme nationalism and jingoism directed against immigrants.

Today, the working class in the United States is tied by millions of threads to its class brothers and sisters in Mexico and throughout Latin America, both through family connections as well as through the process of production itself and the revolutionary transformation of communications technology.

The division of the world into nation-states is incompatible with the objective interests of the working class in the Americas and across the world. The same basic fact is on display throughout Europe, where migrants die by the thousands in the Mediterranean, attempting to escape violence and oppression in Africa and the Middle East.

Justice for the victims of the horrific fire in Ciudad Juarez, as well as the thousands upon thousands waiting in similar conditions for the right to asylum, will not come through the capitalist political establishment in the US or Mexico. It requires the building of a mass socialist movement in the working class against imperialist war and in defense of all democratic rights.



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