

Eight people found dead near Canada-US border just days after Biden and Trudeau sign pact to stop refugee crossings

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The antidemocratic “modernization” of the reactionary US-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) was unexpectedly concluded during American President Joe Biden’s March 23-24 visit to Canada.

Less than 24 hours after Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally announced the change, Canadian border police shut down the unofficial Roxham Road crossing point into Quebec. As of 12:01 a.m., March 26, they began systematically handing over would-be refugee claimants, some of whom had spent their life savings travelling for weeks in a perilous journey, to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Late Thursday afternoon, less than six days after the new rules came into force, six bodies were pulled from the St. Lawrence River in the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, which straddles the New York, Ontario and Quebec borders. Two more bodies were recovered Friday. Local police have reported that the eight, who included two infant children, perished when their boat overturned while they were trying to cross into the US. They came from two families, one originally from India and the other of Romanian descent.

The STCA flouts both Canada and America’s obligations under international law. Under the revamped STCA, all migrants seeking refuge in Canada who enter via land or by waterway “irregularly,” i.e. not at an official entry point, will be arrested, and handed over to ICE agents, with a high risk of their being jailed and ultimately deported to their country of origin.

In addition to destroying the last hope of migrants fleeing war, misery and persecution, the new agreement signed by Biden and Trudeau fuels the long-standing xenophobic campaign of the Quebec, Canadian, and American ruling classes. The inextricable link between imperialist war and anti-immigrant policies was made clear by the fact that the STCA was adopted during Biden’s Canada trip, which served to broaden and intensify the North American imperialist powers’ preparations for world war and their pursuit of global economic hegemony.

Under the reactionary STCA, first signed in 2002 and enforced since 2004, asylum-seekers coming to Canada through an official Canada-US border crossing are—with very rare exceptions—automatically turned away and sent back to the US, and vice versa. However, a so-called “loophole” in the original agreement allowed, until now, people who entered Canada outside

of official checkpoints to stay while their application for refugee status was adjudicated.

The arrival of large numbers of refugee claimants in Canada via the so-called STCA loophole was essentially a non-event until the coming to power of the fascistic Donald Trump as US president in January 2017, and his immediate launching of a virulent anti-immigrant witch-hunt. The fake “pro-refugee” posturing of Trudeau and his Liberal government encouraged many migrants to come to Canada, passing through forests, swamps and country roads to reach Canada “irregularly.” Most of them have come from Latin America, Middle East or Africa, regions of the world ravaged by the wars and predatory economic policies of US and Canadian imperialism. Many were living in the US without documentation. Others entered the US via Mexico so as to pass through it to reach Canada. The vast majority of these “irregular” migrants have entered Canada through Roxham Road, a rural route located on the US border 60 km south of Montreal.

Under the new agreement, the entire 8,900 km Canada-US border is now considered an “official” crossing and Roxham Road has been permanently closed.

Refugee rights organizations were highly critical of the new STCA deal, warning that it will force those fleeing persecution to resort to still more desperate and risky measures.

France-Isabelle Langlois, executive director of Amnesty International for Francophone Canada, said, “The US is not a safe third country because it criminalizes migration. People are arrested, imprisoned, and families are separated...people are likely to be returned to their countries of origin where they are at risk of persecution, torture, and death.” She went on to explain that the law will only push asylum seekers into even more dangerous and costly routes. While a significant portion of the “irregular” migrants have been sent back to the US or their country of origin by Canadian immigration police after refugee hearings, they at least had a modicum of state support and recognized rights until their claims were ruled on. Now, those who cross will be forced to live as outcasts, working illegally, at the mercy of employers and landlords, and without access to public health care and education.

The closure of Roxham Road is the result of a long-standing anti-immigrant campaign emanating from the most right-wing sections of the political establishment. It has been led by the province’s Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and other right-wing

Quebec nationalists who systematically scapegoat immigrants for the economic and social crisis caused by capitalism, and who falsely assert that the French-speaking “Quebec nation” and its “values” are imperiled by immigration. In recent months, these forces have stepped up their xenophobic agitation, echoing the quasi-fascist propaganda of Trump and the US Republican Party. The federal Conservatives and their far-right leader, Pierre Poilievre, have also fueled this racist campaign, calling the refugees “illegal” and a threat to the country’s security, and blaming them for the deterioration of public services that is the outcome of decades of capitalist austerity.

In reality, the few tens of thousands of migrants who have passed through Roxham Road since 2016—the federal government’s Immigration and Citizenship website puts the total number of “irregular” border entrants to Canada between January 2017 and December 2022 at just over 100,000—are a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the tens of millions who have been displaced by the wars, and economic and environmental devastation wrought by the North American and European imperialist powers.

Exposing once again the hypocrisy of its “pro-refugee” claims, the Trudeau government has long acquiesced to the demands of the chauvinist right and far-right. It sought to “streamline” the refugee-determination process to accelerate the pace of deportations of those deemed not to be at sufficient risk of political persecution to warrant refugee status, and it has been negotiating for years behind closed doors with its American counterparts to “close the loophole” in the STCA. That is, to seal the border “legally.”

Apparently, the changes were agreed to just hours before Biden arrived for his official visit to Canada and only after Washington made a final and sordid deal in which migrants were used as bargaining chips. Biden demanded that Canada accept an additional 15,000 refugees “from the Western hemisphere” this year in exchange for his signature.

Quebec Premier François Legault reacted with surprise and enthusiasm to the closure of Roxham Road. He celebrated the Biden-Trudeau deal as a “great victory” for Quebec, and explicitly thanked Trudeau for taking the time to address the issue amidst more urgent discussions with Biden about Canada’s increasing role in the war against Russia in Ukraine. Underscoring the full support of the Quebec First wing of the bourgeoisie, whether chauvinist “autonomists” like Legault and his CAQ or pro-independence like the Parti Québécois, for Canadian imperialism’s aggressive and militarist foreign policy, Legault said, “We all know, with everything we are living right now, with Russia and China, that it’s more important than ever to have good relations with the US.”

For his part, Poilievre boasted that he had successfully pushed Trudeau to close Roxham Road, “30 days after I asked him to do so,” and vowed that he will never allow “illegal mass crossings” to “happen again.”

The unanimous support for the new agreement among the big business parties demonstrates how behind the political wrangling between the sovereignists and federalists, conservatives and liberals, the ruling class stands united in supporting Canadian imperialism against the working class, of which refugees are the

most persecuted section.

The trade-union backed New Democratic Party (NDP) has publicly denounced the changes to the STCA, but refuses to call for its abolition and for the full freedom of people to live in the country of their choosing. With its demand for the suspension of the STCA, the NDP only seeks to provide a “democratic” veneer to the anti-immigrant witch-hunt of the minority Trudeau Liberal government. Even if all the asylum seekers could legally make a claim in Canada and were not immediately turned over to ICE, this would not prevent the Canadian state rejecting their claims en masse. The reality is, whatever the New Democrats’ shallow criticisms of Trudeau, they are fully supporting his government’s program of war and austerity. Under the Liberal-NDP “supply and confidence agreement,” they are formally pledged to keep the government in office until June 2025.

The new STCA pact is seen as a political victory by the corporate elite—underscoring as it does the strength of the Canada-US imperialist alliance. But it is also viewed as an economic victory, necessary to uphold Canada’s “merit-based” immigration system, whereby immigrants are selected according to the needs of big business and capitalist markets. This system was hailed by Donald Trump as a model for the United States to follow.

For Washington the new agreement is seen as a concession to Canada—a crucial economic and military partner—to bolster its partnership with, and participation in, US imperialism’s wars of aggressions around the world, especially against Russia in Ukraine and in preparing for all-out war against America’s chief rival, China. During Biden’s visit to Canada, Trudeau pledged an additional \$100 million to the Haitian National Police as a new military intervention looms in that country where chaos reigns after decades of imperialist domination.

The Biden administration also intends to use the STCA to legitimize its recently-announced measures to immediately deport almost all refugees entering the US through the Mexican border, on the grounds that Mexico is a “safe third country.” Under pressure from Washington, Mexico under the pseudo-left promoted administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) is already serving as an immigration police force for the US and Canada, tasked with preventing working people from Central America, the Caribbean and South America fleeing poverty and political oppression from seeking refuge further north.

A glimpse of what is to come for refugees trying to cross the US-Mexico border was tragically demonstrated this week when at least 40 migrants were killed in a fire that broke out in a detention center in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, after a group of migrants launched a protest when they learned they could not apply for asylum and were to be deported.



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