Mexican president snubs immigrants in wake of deadly detention center fire

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On Friday, March 31, four days after 39 migrants died in a fire in a "provisional" government-run detention center in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) snubbed the survivors and families of the deceased, refusing to meet with them.

Knowing that AMLO was scheduled to meet in a college gymnasium with so-called "Servants of the Nation" (government social workers), over a hundred migrants, along with local immigration activists, waited outside for an hour to demand dialogue with him.

A Venezuelan migrant shouted through a microphone, "We are international workers, we want justice. They have treated us like criminals and we are not criminals, we came peacefully and we want to talk to the president."

When AMLO exited and attempted to leave in a van, migrants blocked it. Through loudspeakers they called upon López Obrador to "get out" and talk and listen to them.

One speaker said, "We do not want this to be a protest, we want to present a proposal to the President, that policies that violate human rights end, that they not put us in those prisons (immigration stations) and that the United States be made to understand that migration is not a problem, but a phenomenon in which we seek better conditions."

As a tribute they called out the names of each person who lost their lives in fire, chanting "Justice!" after each one.

Servants of the Nation and other AMLO supporters shouted back "get out invaders" and "get out f***ing intruders," reflecting the real character of his immigration policies.

AMLO himself had initially blamed the detained migrants for their plight for burning a mattress in protest of their confinement, ignoring that guards had not opened their cells as the fire grew, leaving them to suffocate and burn from the smoke and heat of the flames.

AMLO's entourage managed to depart within a few minutes of the encounter.

Thereafter, AMLO did not go to visit the more than two dozen seriously injured hospitalized migrants who had survived.

Many of the migrants had been unjustly detained merely for begging or washing car windows.

Richard Franco, a 37-year-old Venezuelan immigrant, elaborated in a television interview: "The authorities are annoyed that we are at traffic lights asking for help, and we don't want that either. But what else can we do if we have to eat to live? If this government gave us a provisional permit to work, we would not beg in the streets." He also said, as did other migrants, that one reason for the tragedy was a raid by the National Institute of Migration (INM) to get the migrants away from city cruise ships.

Franco continued: "We want our right to life and the right to liberty and work to be respected. Venezuela is experiencing the worst economic crisis in its history."

The streets of Ciudad Juarez are full of families with hungry and tired children, with not one peso or any place to sleep, exposed to the sun or the cold, waiting for a chance at immigration that is increasingly closed to them.

Mexico has sent millions of its own immigrant workers to the United States, yet it treats foreigners crossing its territory inhumanely.

Most of the migrants are from Venezuela or Central America, where poverty is endemic. It is common knowledge that Mexican authorities are the worst abusers during their entire trek.

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As one young Venezuelan put it in an interview on a US Spanish-language TV channel, “The only country that put obstacles before us has been Mexico. We suffered the worst in the Darien jungle [of Panama], Costa Rica and Honduras, but no officials made us suffer so much. [In Mexico] they grab you like you're a criminal and they tell you, ‘how much do you have?’ for bribes.”

The Mexican government has faced criticism from human rights organizations for accepting US policies, and deploying more than 20,000 agents of its Armed Forces at the borders for immigration tasks.

Felipe González Morales, a former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and current United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, criticized the practice of mass detentions of migrants. He said on Twitter that “extensive use of immigration detention leads to tragedies like this one.”

What occurred at the INM-run detention center in Juarez was nothing less than a state crime. The López Obrador government has implemented a policy of repressing, jailing and criminalizing migrants. That is what led to the deadly blaze, in a detention center, not a shelter, for migrants forced to survive on the street.

If any will be punished, it will only be the lowest-level officials. The higher ups who are responsible will go free.

López Obrador’s government bowed to the pressure from two US presidents—first Donald Trump and then Joe Biden—to, as one Mexican commentator put it, “turn Mexico into a border patrol and waiting room for the United States. Mexico is the wall Trump wanted.”

AMLO has deployed the Mexican military to serve in effect as an auxiliary of US imperialism and its US border police.

Many of the migrants face deportation from Mexico as a result of the Biden administration’s policy banning immigrants from applying for asylum at the US-Mexico border. The legal process for entering the United States is also very confusing, now requiring that an application be filled out on a cell phone, using an app that does not work very well and often freezes.

The Juarez detention center where the deadly fire occurred was also used to temporarily house migrants who had already illegally attempted to cross the border and were thus liable for deportation.

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.

The presence of migrants in the border area has intensified this year since the United States announced new measures, which include the immediate deportation under Title 42 of migrants from Haiti, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba who arrive by land.

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 more difficult it becomes to immigrate, the more desperate are the attempts to cross the border. Those that have come so far do not want to give up within sight of the border.

Many with young children are increasingly forced to take more dangerous routes, such as crossing the Rio Grande, and risking the blackmail of coyotes and drug traffickers.

The result is a cruel system that mistreats migrants, makes their trek more difficult and, in many cases, kills them.

According to Mexican civil organizations, 2022 was the most tragic year for migrants in Mexico, as nearly 900 people died trying to cross without documents into the United States.

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