

Democrats continue attacks on immigrants in Chicago and Illinois

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22 June 2023

The crisis facing migrant workers is deepening in the city of Chicago. Over 10,000 migrant workers seeking asylum in the US, mostly from countries in Latin America torn apart by poverty and violence, have languished in shelters set up to house them after buses began arriving in the city last summer.

The migrant workers and their families began to arrive in Chicago after governors like Texas Republican Greg Abbott and Florida Republican Ron DeSantis shipped them to “sanctuary cities” across the country. These cities, including Chicago, had little funding or resources set aside to assist in such a crisis, in spite of billing themselves as safe havens for immigrants. Shelters and nonprofit agencies soon became overwhelmed with the demand for services, and migrants were forced to sleep on the floors of police stations, shuttered public schools and district field houses.

As she was leaving office in May, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot declared a state of emergency in response to the influx of migrants into Chicago. Echoing calls by the far right and former President Donald Trump to deploy the military to working class neighborhoods in cities across the US, Lightfoot’s order stated, “I reserve the authority to request the Governor of the State of Illinois to mobilize the National Guard to provide staffing and logistical support to address this emergency in the city of Chicago.”

When Lightfoot’s emergency order was declared, the situation for migrants was dire, with thousands sheltering in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions with poor access to food. As newly elected Mayor Brandon Johnson has taken office, nothing has improved, and the situation has become increasingly desperate. Migrants face worsening conditions and long wait lists for temporary housing as funding and volunteer efforts are stretched thin.

Lightfoot’s order granted the Mayor’s office sweeping purchasing powers similar to those granted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the order, the city can shift emergency funds and order city departments to “undertake whatever efforts are feasible pursuant to their powers and duties and to direct their employees accordingly to manage this declared emergency.”

Rental assistance wait lists for migrants have stretched for months, with some waiting as long as nine months to receive a

shelter voucher with rental assistance that covers up to just six months plus move-in fees before asylum seekers are on their own again. Currently, migrants who have lived in shelters provided by the city for eight months or more are prioritized by the system, underscoring the dire lack of funding and resources for a crisis that came as no surprise to the Democratic ruling establishment in Chicago.

Funding for rental assistance for the migrants is currently provided through the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) under the American Rescue Plan Act. However, the housing itself is supplied through private landlords and not through state-owned public housing. Only 590 Chicago landlords have agreed to participate, so wait lists are long, not only due to inadequate funding but also because of the lack of landlords willing to rent to migrants with the subsidies, according to a recent report on the migrant housing situation by National Public Radio affiliate WBEZ.

Before the rental assistance program began in November, some migrants who were eligible were moved to state-contracted hotels where they stayed temporarily. Some of these families have since applied for rental assistance, but the need far outpaces the resources that the city has provided. Since the program was launched, the IHDA has received 1,182 applications and disbursed \$6.8 million in aid to just 885 of those applicants, the majority of whom are migrant workers seeking asylum. This leaves thousands of migrants still languishing in unsanitary and depressing shelter conditions.

The affordable housing shortage in Chicago and surrounding Cook County has added to the plight of migrants, and those who have received paltry housing assistance funds through the state-funded program or through nonprofit agencies have been moved as far as Will County, 40 miles southwest of Chicago, for temporary rental housing. Though the state-funded rental assistance program has no specific end date, the funds provided must be spent by 2025. With the influx of migrants and an overworked shelter and nonprofit staff, the outlook for meeting the spending deadline appears bleak.

The new Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson has addressed the crisis since taking office with talk of plans to resettle migrant workers. The city is reportedly seeking to fund \$25 million for temporary six-month leases for migrants, no longer

than what is currently offered, with some of the funding coming from the state. This would temporarily house just 6,500 migrants out of shelters, leaving thousands more who are already in the city and more on their way without assistance.

Furthermore, Johnson's administration is seeking to offset the costs and responsibility for relocation and the social services involved onto already understaffed and underfunded nonprofit organizations through a "community-based model that could also cut down on current high costs of contractual shelter staff," according to the mayor's deputy chief of staff Cristina Pacione-Zayas, speaking to the *Chicago Tribune* earlier this week.

Chicago faith-based groups are shouldering much of the work of sheltering and providing services to migrants that has been offloaded by the city, with Catholic Charities among the main nonprofit providers of assistance for migrants. Volunteers at these groups are concerned over dwindling resources and overwork in what is an unviable solution to the crisis.

Johnson ran for mayor with the backing of the unions and Democratic Socialists of America, stressing commitment to minorities and "underserved communities" in Chicago. He received the support of prominent "left" Democrats and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and was voted into office on a platform that promised to curb police violence and establish a "universal basic income." The administration's treatment of migrants since taking office is just one element in the unraveling of the lies and illusions on which his campaign rested.

On June 16, shelter security called police on volunteer workers who brought warm food and clothing for migrants outside the temporary shelter at the West Ridge YMCA. Migrants told volunteers they were given nothing but "bread and apples" to eat in the shelter, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. Pacione-Zayas claimed the Johnson administration is "investigating" the incident, but it is clear that they are doing nothing further to address the basic needs of the migrants staying in the shelters.

In a further attack on the rights of immigrants in the state of Illinois as a whole, Illinois Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker announced last Friday that the state would be clawing back limited healthcare benefits for low-income undocumented immigrants aged 42 and older under the Health Benefits for Immigrant Adults program. The state will continue to cover healthcare for low-income undocumented children up to age 18 under the All Kids program and seniors over age 62 under the Health Benefits for Immigrant Seniors Program but has rejected calls from immigrants rights and healthcare activists to provide coverage for low-income undocumented adults aged 19 to 41.

Pritzker's cuts are a bow to the demands of Illinois Republicans and a nod toward the fascistic Republican Party's agenda to deny basic rights to immigrants. The changes to the Health Benefits for Immigrant Adults include a "temporary" enrollment pause that will prevent new eligible residents, ages

42 to 62, from signing up for the program beginning July 1; a cap of 16,500 new seniors who can enroll; and mandatory copays for enrollees of \$100 to \$250 for hospital visits that are not eligible for matching federal reimbursement.

A number of activist organizations held a rally outside of Alivio Medical Center in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood Thursday to protest the cuts that will put many undocumented workers at risk of losing vital health care services. Tovia Siegel, director of the Healthy Illinois Campaign, said that the cuts "will take away healthcare, a basic human right, from thousands of undocumented people."

The recent attacks on immigrant workers in Chicago and throughout Illinois are peeling the mask off the identity politics rhetoric of the Democratic Party. It is showing its true face as a counterpart to the Republican Party in fulfilling the demands of the corporate ruling class in curtailing the rights of the most vulnerable workers at a time when the entire working class, regardless of race, gender or national origin, is more than ready to enter into struggle for higher wages and good working conditions as inflation remains high and wages stagnate and working conditions become unhealthier for all workers.

The attack on immigrants is an attack on the whole working class. Capitalism attacks the most vulnerable sections of the working class first. The attitude of the capitalist ruling class as a whole towards immigrants was displayed most nakedly in the drowning of over 500 migrants, including many children, when the ship carrying them sank southwest of Greece after distress signals were ignored by Greek authorities.

The callousness of the Democratic Party in Illinois and all over the US is not an aberration but an expression of this class policy. Just like the great working class struggles that united immigrant and native-born workers in the US in the first half of the 20th century, workers everywhere must be concerned with the rights of immigrant workers and fight to unite their struggles with their brothers and sisters from other countries, for the rights to healthcare, high-paying jobs and access to decent shelter and nutrition.



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