

New waves of migrants expose alleged “recovery” in Venezuela

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A massive surge Venezuelan migrants and refugees has been reported crossing the Darién jungle between Colombia and Panama, headed toward the United States.

Panamanian migration authorities reported on Thursday that between 2,500 and 3,000 migrants—mostly from Venezuela but also many Ecuadorians, Haitians and growing numbers from Africa and China—are crossing the Darién daily. An estimated 248,000 migrants crossed in all of 2022, while this year has already seen more than 300,000.

Last week, videos of thousands of Venezuelan migrants entering from the Colombian side, including many families with children, went viral on social media.

In a joint program with the United States and Colombian governments, Panama deployed thousands of security forces to block the migrants. The only effect, however, has been to compel the travelers to take even more perilous and longer routes through the dangerous and dense jungle. Last week, Panamanian authorities threatened to “close the border,” which will only lead to more migrants dying and going missing attempting to cross.

Earlier this year, Venezuelans drove a surge in migration in the days before the Biden administration imposed a new ban on asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border in May.

More than 7.3 million Venezuelans—over a fifth of the pre-crisis population—have emigrated since 2014. A deep economic and political crisis began that year, prompted primarily by a drop in international oil prices and an economic and financial blockade by the United States aimed at facilitating regime change.

With the drying up of international reserves necessary for basic imports like food, medicines, machinery and parts, the economy shrank 80 percent. At its lowest point in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 95 percent of the population was living under the official poverty line and suffering from food insecurity in the country with the largest oil reserves in the world.

In May 2020, a failed mercenary invasion organized with the support of the Trump administration and US oligarchs spelled the end of the attempts to install the deeply unpopular US puppet Juan Guaidó, who had declared himself Venezuelan president in January 2019. Then, after the Russian invasion of

Ukraine instigated by the US and NATO powers, the Biden administration began seeking a limited rapprochement with President Nicolas Maduro to procure alternatives to Russian oil.

Last year, Maduro renewed negotiations with the US-backed opposition and announced presidential elections for 2024. Then, in November 2022, the Biden Treasury Department allowed Chevron to resume operations in Venezuela, including oil exports to the United States. Oil production has increased from negligible amounts to nearly 800,000 barrels per day (bpd) in July. This compares to 2-3 million bpd before sanctions began, while crude oil prices around \$80 per barrel today remain far below the peak of \$147 per barrel in 2008.

The US State Department also expressed support for an “anti-corruption crusade” launched by Maduro that led to the arrest of 76 top officials and businesspeople associated with the state-owned oil company PDVSA. Most belonged to the “boliburguesía,” a layer that made ill-gotten fortunes under the “Bolivarian” regimes of bourgeois nationalist Hugo Chavez and his successor Maduro.

Through measures of economic war, including the seizure of foreign assets of the Venezuelan state, US imperialism essentially rebooted the Venezuelan economy and temporarily succeeded in its main geopolitical objective of cutting Venezuela’s oil supply to China. However, as production restarts, most of the Venezuelan petroleum coke is being shipped to China, mainly to service a massive debt, and Turkey.

However, the United States is now seeking to use Chevron and ongoing sanctions to revert the country back to before the nationalization of Venezuelan oil in 1976 and place it directly back in the hands of US corporations.

As the United States escalates its war drive against Russia and China, the dispute over oil and other major commodities in Venezuela and the rest of South America threatens to become a flashpoint in a global conflict.

Maduro has combined appeals to Washington with his demagogic “anti-imperialist” rhetoric, while exploiting a slight economic uptick last year to absurdly proclaim a “recovery” and “fixing” of the economy. However, the economy is already stagnating this year given the low levels of national

consumption and lack of access to credit and trade markets internationally.

The Andres Bello Catholic University reported that multidimensional poverty fell from 65.2 percent to 50.5 percent of households last year, but most households still depend on a tenuous access to social assistance. Ninety percent of homes require “bags of food” from the Local Supply and Production Councils (CLAP), but only 35 percent get them monthly, according to the study. Meanwhile, two-thirds of students rely on school nutritional support and reports indicate that most don’t show up to school when this aid is not available.

Most significantly, study authors found that inequality has continued to increase sharply. The Gini coefficient, which estimates income distribution, rose from 0.407 in 2014 to 0.603 last year, which places Venezuela as the most unequal country in the Americas.

The historic lowering of the standard of living for workers in what was one of the wealthier countries in the region, while a thin layer continued to enrich itself, has only been made possible thanks to the violent suppression of the class struggle by the Maduro administration. Every sign of social opposition from below has been met by the use of the Bolivarian National Guard, the special forces and political armed groups.

While the US was never able to rally any popular support behind Guaidó, social hatred to Maduro has reached the point that polls show that María Corina Machado, a long-time right-wing politician financed by Washington who broke with Guaidó, would defeat Maduro in the presidential elections, obtaining 50 percent of the vote. The Maduro government, however, has disqualified Machado.

Several reports from Venezuelans inside and outside the country reflect widespread popular illusions that a government under Machado, whose politics are inspired in Margaret Thatcher, would lead to an ending of sanctions and an economic recovery. However, whether it is under Maduro, Machado or any other capitalist politician, the Venezuelan ruling elite offers no alternative to the subordination of the economy to foreign finance capital, which is intent on exploiting the country’s natural resources and cheap labor, maintaining conditions of widespread misery.

These same calculations have also applied to Venezuelan migrants. Numerous papers from the World Bank, IMF, and US-based think-tanks have described the exodus as a lucrative opportunity, proposing injections of capital in Mexico, South and Central America aimed at exploiting the young and relatively skilled and educated Venezuelan workforce. Undoubtedly, a major incentive for rejecting migrants from the US is to exploit them at cheaper rates south of the border, while profits ultimately find their way to Wall Street.

About 2.5 million Venezuelans moved to Colombia, which has “regularized” the residency status of virtually all of them under a Temporary Protection Status. While allowing migrants to work legally, the temporary nature of the program maintains

a vulnerable position exploited by employers.

The US authorities have also reached agreements with countries in Central America and Colombia, in some cases involving European governments and Canada, to establish third-country facilities where refugees will be compelled to apply for asylum.

Earlier this month, Mexico announced a plan to admit 20,000 vetted refugees from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela over three years to a program of “work opportunities in regions with labor shortages,” i.e., the most desperate migrants will be super-exploited under the most grueling and unsafe conditions. On top of \$40 million for the program, Biden also handed the Mexican authorities and bosses a vague promise of “resettlement referrals” to the US, which will be kept dangling just out of reach of the refugees.

At the same time, from all sides, Venezuelan migrants face victimization by police and military forces, xenophobic campaigns stirred up by Latin America’s ruling elites, lack of housing and social assistance, precarious, unsafe and largely informal working conditions, threats by organized crime and countless other deadly obstacles.

Just last week, at least 18 people, mostly Venezuelan migrants, died when their bus crashed in Puebla, Mexico, while 29 migrants, mostly Venezuelans, were injured when their bus fell into a precipice in Costa Rica.

This generation of Venezuelan workers has not only been scattered across the entire American continent, but has experienced in one country after another the bankruptcy and reactionary character of all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist movements, which are ultimately all subordinated and dependent upon imperialism.

Objectively, it represents a powerful contingent for the emerging wave of struggles of the working class. However, the working class must organize its struggles consciously on the basis of its international character and connections to fulfill its historical interests of ending capitalist exploitation, inequality, and war. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International fights for this internationalist and socialist program.



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