

# Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson signs \$29 million contract with Virginia-based defense firm for migrant camp

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Democratic Mayor of Chicago Brandon Johnson's plan to have private security firm GardaWorld build and operate what he calls "winterized base camps," rather detention centers, to house thousands of asylum seekers is provoking popular revulsion and anger.

It is also exposing the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—which the Democratic Party has relied on in Chicago, as elsewhere, to shore up its political legitimacy—to be vocal supporters of corporate interests and also advocates of the racial divisions long used by the capitalist ruling elite to keep the working class divided against itself in the face of intensifying austerity, class conflict and war.

Busloads of people, many young families from Venezuela, are being sent into Chicago from the southern border with Mexico by the fascist governor of Texas Greg Abbott. More than 15,000 have arrived over the last 14 months.

The previous administration of former Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot opened up a series of makeshift shelters for asylum seekers in park district facilities, shuttered schools and other temporary and thoroughly inappropriate locations, a practice which Johnson has continued. Over 9,300 migrants currently reside in these shelters, while another 1,700 are forced to live and sleep on the floors of police station lobbies. Another roughly 500 have been confined to a small, curtained-off section of the city's O'Hare International Airport.

On September 12, the Johnson administration signed a one-year \$29.4 million deal with GardaWorld Federal Services, a subsidiary of Aegis Defense Services, to build and operate migrant camps at yet to be announced locations. GardaWorld will supply identified shelter locations with tents, and claims it will keep them heated to a temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit through Chicago's long, cold winter.

Johnson made xenophobic statements portraying migrants as a danger to be kept away from the general city population, "If we do not create an infrastructure where we're able to support, and quite frankly, contain these individuals who have experienced a great deal of harm, individuals who are desperate—if we do not provide support for these individuals and these families, that type of desperation will lead to chaos."

According to the plans, the camps will be guarded and those living there will have limited if any access to electrical outlets, while "sanitation tents" will house latrines and other facilities for personal hygiene.

A protest was held last week against the plan at Federal Plaza and many more have taken to social media to express their shock and outrage.

Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Johnson's deputy chief of staff, said the administration chose GardaWorld because the state of Illinois already has a master contract with the company through the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA). She claimed the city would hold GardaWorld to account and "operationalize our values" in all shelter settings. Pacione-Zayas even said the winterized tents will "be centering

the dignity of the migrants" and will not force those arriving in the city to live in "sub-par conditions."

In a bid to present the camp as a "growth opportunity" for local business Pacione-Zayas told WBEZ the administration is looking into whether GardaWorld will allow local organizations to staff the camps.

The speed at which the plan for camps is moving comes at the request of the Chicago Police Department and the fascist Fraternal Order of Police President John Cantanzara, whose favor Johnson has sought ardently in his first months in office.

Migrant assistance volunteer Kathryn Zamarron told WTTW about the experiences relayed by migrants sleeping in police stations, "Unfortunately, what I hear a lot is, 'They're treating us like animals,' which is a terrible situation to be in, when one person is treated that way."

GardaWorld and Aegis have a long history of abuse and mistreatment of migrants at immigrant detention centers in Texas and Canada. An internal US Army investigation in 2022 found migrant children at a facility in El Paso suffered distress and panic attacks because GardaWorld staff had neither the training or resources to release the children in a timely and safe manner.

The companies have also been accused of human trafficking and abusive employment practices at foreign US military bases, dragooning desperate workers from across the African continent and from other impoverished countries, taking their passports and forcing them to work for extremely low pay. Aegis, whose mercenaries were implicated in attacks on civilians in Iraq during the long American occupation of the country, has also been accused of using former child soldiers from Sierra Leone as mercenaries. In 2011, Air Canada used GardaWorld to scab on striking airline workers.

On Monday, Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker, a billionaire scion of the Hyatt Hotels ownership, wrote a letter to President Joe Biden highlighting the costs Illinois has incurred in accepting migrants sent from Texas, requesting the process be accelerated for applications to work visas and health and social services, for additional funding and imploring the federal government take responsibility for tracking and managing the movement of asylum seekers from the southern border into different areas of the US—essentially demanding that the government step in to stop Abbott from shipping human beings wherever he pleases for political purposes—which has been going on for close to 14 months.

The city is on track to spend around \$345 million ostensibly on "asylum seekers" by the end of the year, \$43 million more than the city estimated just three weeks ago. The city is expecting a budget deficit of \$538 million next year, \$200 million of which the city claims is being spent in meeting migrant families needs. Lacking work permits and adequate food and health care, migrant adults and teens can be found begging for food and cash on main thoroughfares throughout the city.

At an acrimonious five-hour-long meeting of the city's Immigration and

Refugee Rights Committee on Friday, the committee's chair, alderman Andre Vasquez, said, "I am saddened by the possibility that we are on the precipice of this administration moving forward with building military-grade tent base camps in our great city."

Nonetheless, Vasquez defended the camps as a necessary measure, saying, "I don't have the luxury to walk away because I disagree. We were elected to lead and we cannot do so by withdrawing to our separate corners." He also said, "The elected representative in me, on the other hand, recognizes that in order for us to be successful, we as a municipal government have to come together to move our city forward."

In defense of the Johnson plan Vasquez said, "It's not like they're hop, skipping, and jumping to get tents setup. It's difficult for everybody involved."

Vasquez and other Democratic politicians are concerned that opposition to the construction of migrant tent cities too visibly expresses the similarity between the Democratic and Republican parties as municipal functionaries of a corporate financial elite.

Above all, the \$29 million agreement with GardaWorld to build a tent city has exposed the "progressive" pretensions of the Johnson administration and his backers in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) as so much hot air.

Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, a DSA member and the leader of the city council's "Socialist Caucus," who serves as Johnson's floor leader on the council, criticized Pritzker's comments on the tent camps on Twitter/X, saying the state has not opened any migrant shelters itself, unlike New York State, defending the Johnson administration's proposal as a necessary step due to the state's lack of initiative. Ramirez-Rosa also attacked criticisms of Johnson's plan for GardaWorld-run camps as "hyperbole" and "misinformation."

Most odious has been the response of Jeanette Taylor, also a DSA member on the city council. During the five-hour city meeting Taylor, who gave the keynote speech at the 2023 DSA Convention, expressed outright hostility, saying flatly, "Stop putting them in our community."

Taylor declared, "We need to say we can't take no more. Why won't nobody say that out of their mouth out of this administration?"

While claiming to oppose the idea of tent camps as "wrong," Taylor provocatively stated, "What y'all doing is you're going to start a race war. That's what you're doing. This is going to be a race war because y'all choosing who you're taking care of."

According to the city's own marketing portal, the Choose Chicago website, there are more than 150 hotels in Chicago's central business district alone, with over 45,000 daily hotel rooms available. Additionally, according to a report compiled by the United Way of the National Capital Area, the Chicago metro region has over 300,000 vacant homes, nearly 10 percent of all housing in the area, more than enough to house every migrant and homeless person in the city.

Rather than opposing the whole reactionary framework of operating migrant shelters in favor of providing migrants the resources needed to live in homes of their own, the Johnson administration and his pseudo-left allies have concentrated on ensuring local residents are recruited to work in the facilities and for local companies to receive more of the largesse.

Spending on the migrants has been a bonanza for several companies which have been involved in operating shelters and providing other services.

A report from ABC7 shows \$56 million has been paid to Favorite Healthcare Staffing, \$12.6 million to Equitable Social Solutions and \$9.4 million to Open Kitchens. The city recently rejected FOIA requests detailing what Favorite Staffing was paid \$56 million for. Some documents already released indicate one facility manager was paid \$14,000 per week.

The hotel and restaurant industries, among others, hope to exploit the labor of the migrants and use their precarious status as a battering ram

against wage demands by workers more generally. A recent move by the Biden administration to grant Temporary Protected Status to the migrants who arrived before July 31 will allow many of these migrants to work, where they will be shunted into low paying jobs.

According to *Eater Chicago*, the Illinois Restaurant Association (IRA), along with Pritzker and Johnson, lobbied the Biden administration to take this action, with the IRA cynically stating, "Immigrants have always been the backbone of the hospitality industry and restaurants continue to be a home for immigrants from all over the world seeking to build a new life and achieve the American Dream."

The problem is not a lack of resources, but rather the subordination of the needs of the population to the demands of private property and the capitalist system, which itself is being reshaped to serve the needs of a dangerous and expanding war.

Those seeking asylum from both Ukraine and Latin America fundamentally are fleeing war or conditions very close to war, respectively, and the associated economic and social breakdown, for which US imperialism is *primarily* responsible.

Since last August, more than 15,000 migrants have arrived in Chicago from Latin America, mostly from Venezuela, by bus from the border. Meanwhile, Illinois accepted 20,000 refugees from Ukraine, as of January 2023 according to the *Chicago Reader*, with 15,000 or more expected to arrive since then.

Asylum seekers from Ukraine have been quietly integrated into the city and surrounding suburbs, putting the lie to Johnson's bigoted claims that asylum seekers from Latin America need to be "contained" in camps guarded by private police and treated as dangerous because they have faced hardship and trauma.

Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, the US has accepted 300,000 refugees from Ukraine. Asylum seekers from Ukraine are also offered very little: a temporary status called humanitarian parole, which provides a work permit lasting just two years, and some housing and social support in which limited government services, non-profits, churches and private individuals are relied on to provide for arriving individuals and families—in a program "organized" by the US government.

The relative disparity in treatment of asylum seekers cannot simply be reduced to the fact that one group of refugees is generally lighter skinned than the other. The US and its NATO allies instigated and are now waging a deeply unpopular undeclared war against Russia, taking place in Ukraine, and killing, injuring and displacing hundreds of thousands. After a disastrous spring "counteroffensive," the US is not after peace negotiations but intensifying the conflict, with the British government now preparing to deploy troops to Ukraine. The Democratic Party, which represents the financial aristocracy and the military intelligence apparatus, aims to reduce Russia to a collection of neocolonial assets, even as it prepares for a greater conflict with China.

Any humane political response to the migrant crisis must start with a rejection of the politics of austerity and war of both the capitalist parties, Democrat and Republican, which are jointly responsible for American imperialism's devastation of Latin America, including Venezuela, and Ukraine which has led so many to flee their homes and make the treacherous journey to the United States.

The only way to ensure that social resources are available for all workers, including asylum seekers, is through the expropriation of the billions being squandered on war and in Wall Street's casinos and the overturn of capitalism in favor of socialism, ensuring the right of all to work and live wherever they please, free from harassment and the fear of deportation.



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