Democratic Socialists of America complicit in Chicago Democrats' scapegoating of immigrants

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More than 15,000 asylum seekers are currently in Chicago shelters, a makeshift camp in the airport, or waiting on buses to enter shelter buildings. The newest arrivals are currently living on warming buses while they wait for a spot in a shelter to open up, a process that can take several days. Migrant families speaking to local media say it is impossible to sleep on these buses, they do not have food or shower facilities, and they worry for the health of their children.

Since August 2022, the fascistic Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, has shipped about 100,000 asylum seekers to Chicago, New York City and Denver, Colorado. Busloads, and sometimes planeloads, of asylum seekers arrive into Chicago and its suburbs at all hours on the orders of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.

On several occasions this winter, scores of people have been deposited on the side of a suburban highway or at a train station some 40 to 50 miles from Chicago and told to make their way in. Some suburbs have passed ordinances blocking efforts to shelter asylum seekers in local hotels.

These horrific conditions are part of a bipartisan assault on immigrants and refugees at a national and local level.

The Democratic Party has collaborated with the far right on immigration policy, as it has with virtually every other social issue in the US. The Democrats have agreed to Republican demands to virtually shut down the southern US border and severely limit asylum rights in exchange for more than $60 billion in funding for the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine. Last year the Biden administration carried out more than 142,000 deportations, the highest number of any of his years in office.

Senate Republicans, convinced the Democrats will do anything to secure war funding, are now moving to cap the number of immigrants allowed into the country through parole.

Throughout these talks, the most prominent Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member in the US, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, has remained silent on the bipartisan plan to eviscerate the rights of migrants and shut down the border.

The approach taken by Democratic mayors in New York and Chicago has been to do as little as possible and as late as possible, to rely in all areas of response on volunteer networks, and to publicly plead for help and, in Chicago, cry poor while giving hundreds of millions in contracts to for-profit staffing firms. The predictable result has been intolerable conditions for asylum seekers, including humiliation, illness and death, for which no one in any position of political leadership is "officially" responsible.

In the Chicago city council, six of 50 alderpersons are members of the DSA, and a number of others identify as "progressive," but no statement opposing this criminal policy has been issued by the Chicago organization, which has all but completely retreated from public view. The DSA city council caucus has not issued a press release since July 2021.

Brutal conditions aimed at discouraging asylum seekers

In both Chicago and New York, Democratic mayors are moving to escalate the attack on asylum seekers. New York City Mayor Eric Adams is in the process of evicting more than 3,000 migrants from city shelters. Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Cook County Commissioner and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) lobbyist, will oversee the first evictions after a 60-day shelter limit period is scheduled to end next week, as winter temperatures dip into the single digits.

The city's 60-day time limit for shelter stays means asylum seekers must immediately locate housing and work. Late last year, the state limited the available rental assistance for asylum seekers to three months, down from six, and it is only available to those who made it into shelters by November or earlier.

According to CBS2, city data indicates that only 284 of the 26,000 migrants sent to Chicago by Abbott since August 2022 have been given federal work permits allowing them to legally seek employment. "Worse, city data suggests applications did not start processing until the week of Nov. 9, " the outlet reported. Only those who arrived before August 1, 2023 currently qualify for work permits, leaving thousands with no legal form of income.

Food and supplies in the shelters are inadequate, and migrant families can be seen begging in main thoroughfares and in grocery store parking lots in many neighborhoods.

Families have been warehoused in horrific conditions in police stations and disused warehouses.

Last month, five-year-old Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero died after a short illness in a warehouse shelter on the southwest side of the city that is currently housing more than 2,000 people–double its intended capacity–half of whom are children. The family of Martinez Rivero, who include the young boy's parents and infant sibling, are taking GoFundMe donations to allow them to remain in temporary housing, without which they will be placed back in a city shelter.

Last year, the Johnson administration announced plans for a large detention camp to be built by the private security company Gardaworld, which met with immediate protest. In response, DSA Alderman Carlos Ramirez Rosa took to social media to denounce critics of the plan as full of "hyperbole" and "misinformation."

Just weeks later, leaked documents revealed that an environmental

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survey determined the land was an unofficial brownfield, contaminated with heavy metals and petroleum products, and unfit for such use. Democratic Governor JB Pritzker, billionaire scion of the Hyatt Hotels fortune, stepped in to announce no permit would be issued for the camp, and construction was halted, but the city continues to pay rent to the landowners at more than $90,000 per month.

Still, Sigcho Lopez, who heads the city council housing and real estate committee, defended Johnson's aborted decision to build on the site, saying, "The mayor of Chicago had no choice but to take what's available. But what's available is unacceptable."

Democrats promote racial and ethnic conflict

Last fall, right-wing Democratic aldermen, with the support of the far right—a political amalgam found in the mayoral campaign of Democrat Paul Vallas—moved to place an anti-immigrant referendum on the March 2024 election ballot aimed at revoking Chicago's "sanctuary city" status. This status protects undocumented immigrants, but not asylum seekers, from arrest by local law enforcement on behalf of immigration authorities. This measure was defeated 16-31.

Readily adapting to the promotion of anti-immigrant sentiment, however, Mayor Johnson proposed his own version, which read: "Should the city of Chicago impose reasonable limits on the city's providing resources for migrant sheltering, such as funding caps and shelter occupancy time limits, if necessary to prevent a substantial negative impact on Chicago's current residents?"

Appealing to a foul racial chauvinism, Ald. Ray Lopez, the sponsor of the earlier referendum, said, "Vote this down … we know, and what so many in this room fear, is that the true coalition between the African American and Latino communities does exist around this question because both communities want an end to it," referring to asylum seekers in Chicago.

Neither version of the referendum managed to pass the city council and so will not appear on the March ballot, but only because the two right-wing factions could not find agreement between them. Neither does this put the poison gas back in the tank. Chicago Democrats and the media aired these views, legitimized them, and continue to promote an atmosphere of racial and ethnic conflict in order to block and undermine the class struggle.

The DSA's complicity

DSA alderpersons have either issued apologetics for the horrific conditions migrants are being held in, as in the case of Byron Sigcho Lopez, or joined in the reactionary racialist tirades.

Jeanette Taylor, the DSA's 2023 national conference keynote speaker, flatly demanded the city keep asylum seekers out of her ward: "Stop putting them in our community.

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

Recently Taylor appeared on a local political podcast where she was invited to elaborate on her views. She took back nothing, and shied only from the inevitable consequences of her statements: "... [N]one of my coworkers with the exception of maybe three or four came to my rescue. So when you're under attack, you do what you have to, you get people off of you. So a lot of the things that were said and done, hindsight being 20-20, I may have—and I don't take back what I said, I said what I said—but I didn't want to create a bigger divide in the black and brown community."

No public statement opposing any of Taylor's statements have been issued by Chicago DSA, which can only be interpreted as support for the sharp shift to the right being made by the Democratic Party as a whole.

Johnson too has made xenophobic statements portraying migrants as a danger to be kept sequestered from the rest of the city: "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."

During his mayoral campaign, Johnson was promoted as a left-wing and even a "labor" candidate, due to his role as a CTU lobbyist. But this was quickly exposed. Like Lori Lightfoot before him, his political supporters simply allowed his race to stand in for an examination of his actual political views.

Johnson's election was supported by the five incumbent DSA alderpersons—Carlos Ramirez Rosa, Byron Sigcho Lopez, Jeanette Taylor, Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez and Dan La Spata. Subsequently, all DSA alderpersons were awarded leadership positions on the city council, with Ramirez Rosa initially taking the position of floor leader, responsible for pushing through the mayor's agenda. Ramirez Rosa was later removed from those positions as Johnson made a political shift to the right, involving even closer collaboration with the Biden administration and New York City Mayor Adams.

Instead of fighting for affordable housing on the basis of class needs as socialists, DSA alderpersons are promoting Johnson's "Bring Chicago Home" referendum. This raises the real estate transfer tax rates a bit for homes sold at over $1 million and $1.5 million, while slightly lowering the tax for homes sold under that value. According to the Johnson administration's Brandie Knazze, the funding level that legislation establishes will continue to provide housing for about 500 people per year. But if it fails, and the funding drops, that number will drop to half or lower, according to a report in *Block Club*.

Such token efforts do not even approach the scale of the problem, as the official homeless population in Chicago is reportedly over 65,000, a number which does not include asylum seekers. And there is no reason to think even this will become a reality under the Johnson administration, which is moving further to the right.

There is in fact no lack of funding or actual housing capacity. The central issue is that the Democratic Party, including its DSA faction, are opposed to policies that meet the most basic needs of the population, immigrant or native born. For both capitalist parties, there is only funding available for big businesses, repression and war.

Meeting the enormous social need in society is impossible without the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the capitalist class and the reorganization of society along socialist lines, bringing an end to austerity and war. For this to succeed, the working class—black, white, immigrant and native born—in the US and around the world must be united in struggle and guided by a genuine socialist program.

Read the 2024 New Year statement of the Socialist Equality Party, "The working class, the fight against capitalist barbarism, and the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution" and contact the Socialist Equality Party today.

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