

Report to the SEP (US) Eighth National Congress

The strategic necessity of uniting the international working class against political xenophobia

Eric London
21 August 2024

We are publishing here the report to the Eighth Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) given by Eric London. The congress was held from August 4 to August 9, 2024. It unanimously adopted two resolutions, “The 2024 US elections and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party” and “Free Bogdan Syrotiuk!”

Introduction

In the recent period, the ruling class in every imperialist country has adopted a strategy of unrestrained anti-immigrant chauvinism as the spearhead of domestic political reaction. Today, in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Canada and the United States it is the mechanism through which the ruling class justifies the massive expansion of the police powers of the state, divides the increasingly interconnected, globalized working class, scapegoats the oppressed for the crimes of capitalism, and contributes to the generation of a cultural climate of national backwardness necessary for imperialist war. For this reason, the “Immigration Question” can no longer be considered as a mere “issue” among others in the bourgeois political landscape.

This flowering of bourgeois counterrevolutionary strategy arises in response to changes in objective conditions that massively undermine the global position of the capitalist class. The globalization of the process of production has irreversibly changed the social physiognomy of the human race. The working class has grown in size and degrees of interconnectivity more in the last 30 years than at any time in world history. There are 8 billion people on earth, hundreds of millions of transnational families and 5.3 billion internet users. According to the depraved logic of capitalist self-preservationist politics, the increased facility of goods and products to move freely across national boundaries is met with greater restrictions on the movement of people, who are made the target of right-wing vitriol.

In the United States, the threat posed by Donald Trump cannot be overstated. He has made anti-immigrant xenophobia the ideological glue of his 2024 campaign. Claiming immigrants will “poison the blood of the nation,” Trump plans to initiate Project 2025, a set of Heritage Foundation proposals for the attack on immigrants. As one think tank reports, Project 2025 “isn’t simply a refresh of first-term ideas, dusted off and ready to be re-implemented. Rather, it reflects a meticulously orchestrated, comprehensive plan to drive immigration levels to unprecedented lows... These proposals circumvent Congress and the courts and are specifically engineered to dismantle the foundations of our immigration system.”^[1]

The proposal would involve martial law in major cities, police-state round-ups of immigrants at schools, workplaces and in homes. It would turn immigrant areas into ghettos by barring immigrant children from attending public school and prohibiting even citizen family members of undocumented people from applying for housing benefits. It would

require states to turn over residency information on all undocumented people to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Border Patrol or else lose federal funding for social programs.

While the 70 million votes cast for Trump in 2020 did not each represent a full-throated endorsement of the attack on immigrants, and while it is correct to note that the ruling class has not yet built the type of popular support for mass violence that existed in the 1920s and 1930s, the danger is extremely great. The events this week in England testify to this danger.

In the US, the Democratic Party has adapted itself entirely to Trump on immigration in terms of both policy and tone. It is not only that the Democrats seek an accommodation with the Republicans on all domestic questions to win their support for imperialist war abroad, though that is a significant factor. More than this, the very logic of their wars drives the Democrats to a policy of total intolerance for all democratic rights at home, the fortifying of the nation state and its borders, and the enclosure of the country behind a wall of bayonets, to borrow Trotsky’s phrase. Biden has imposed unprecedented restrictions on immigration at the southern border and banned the right to asylum by parroting Trump’s baseless claims about “asylum fraud.” Nor has opposition to the attack on immigrants been waged by any of the parties of the affluent middle class. On the contrary, in Spain and Greece, Podemos and Syriza have led attacks on immigrants, treating inflatable rafts full of refugees escaping US imperialism’s wars in the Middle East and North Africa as though they were enemy frigates.

Therefore, we must clarify here that politically blocking the ruling class from developing a fascist movement against immigrants means distinguishing ourselves totally from pathetic liberal humanitarian appeals or moral condemnations of those workers who voted for Trump. The Socialist Equality Party (US) is fighting to connect the defense of immigrants with a revolutionary economic program capable of addressing the urgent needs of workers of all backgrounds. Only in this way can workers be won from the lowest common denominator politics of anti-immigrant chauvinism, which is all the more absurd and reactionary given the international character of global production and a degree of social and technological interconnectivity that would have been shocking to the man on the street even 30 years ago.

Counterposing a policy of social division and state repression with a policy of working class unity and socialist internationalism is a programmatic and practical necessity of socialism in the 21st century. This is not as a tactical question but a strategic one. The development of socialist consciousness in the working class today requires confronting and exposing the nationalist conceptions many workers have about

immigrants and fighting in all the schools and workplaces for a defense of immigrant coworkers as a means to develop class consciousness and forge the unity of the working class.

To wage this political struggle, we must better understand the long experience the ruling class has accumulated in using political xenophobia as a bludgeon against the working class, against democratic rights and against socialism. Nowhere is this history clearer than in the United States, where 98 percent of the population is non-indigenous.

Immigration in the period of bourgeois revolution

In the historical period associated with its emergence as a revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie established the issue of the right to immigrate and the related right to asylum as a matter of natural rights.

Many of the revolutionary ideas popularized in the course of the American Revolution were brought and fought for by immigrants arriving in what was then an unprecedented wave of migration to the North American colonies. In his book *Voyagers to the West*, Bernard Bailyn notes that “In the years after 1760 transatlantic migration reached levels beyond anything seen before in British America, which is to say, beyond anything seen in the entire history of Europe’s and Africa’s connections with the Western hemisphere.”^[2] Bailyn estimates that 700,000 people immigrated to the US from the beginning of British settlement to 1760, and that another 221,500 came during the 15-year span from 1760 to 1775.^[3]

Emigration from Scotland and Ireland, in particular, posed a great problem to the British crown. As the colonial crisis intensified, the crown reacted with increasing hostility to efforts by the colonies to induce immigration from the British Isles.

In 1767, the British government vetoed an act by the colony of Georgia to increase immigration from Europe, and in 1771, the Earl of Hillsborough, then the crown’s secretary of state for the colonies, vetoed a similar act from North Carolina. In April 1773, as the colonial crisis was intensifying, the Privy Council prohibited crown officers from making land grants in the American colonies until the crown had sufficiently blocked emigration.^[4] In September 1773, Benjamin Franklin attacked a proposal in Parliament to block immigration to the American colonies, explaining that the bulk of emigrants were fleeing feudal despotism and denouncing the absentee landlords for raising rents and driving paupers off their land: “If the poor folks are happier at home than they can be abroad,” he said, “they will not lightly be prevailed with to cross the ocean. But can their lord blame them for leaving home in search of better living when he first sets them the example?”^[5]

The monarchy’s efforts to suppress land sales in the colonies and depress immigration led Jefferson and the signatories to list immigration restrictions as the seventh grievance against the king in the Declaration of Independence:

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

George Washington wrote at the war’s conclusion in 1783 that in the new nation, “America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.”^[6] The Constitutional Convention of 1787 broke with Britain’s conception of fixed gradations between *denizen* and *citizen* and instead established a “uniform rule of naturalization” allowing immigrants to become citizens. At the same time, the convention rejected calls for a requirement that all officeholders be born in the United States, limiting such restrictions only to the offices of president and vice president.

During the debate on this question, James Madison expressed a desire not to “discourage the most desirable class of people from emigrating to the US,” and at the convention Franklin challenged the claim that those not born in the US could not be sufficiently loyal to serve in government, saying:

When foreigners after looking about for some other Country in which they can obtain more happiness, give a preference to ours, it is a proof of attachment which ought to excite our confidence and affection.

The first attempt to expel immigrants, the 1798 Alien and Sedition Act, was a short-lived and broadly hated act advocated by the monarchist elements in the Adams administration, which gave the executive the power to jail critics and deport French citizens on the grounds that they were supporters of the French Revolution and would sow revolutionary fervor in the United States. Thus, the first post-revolutionary effort to restrict immigration was inseparable from the attack on democratic rights and the suppression of revolutionary ideas. The new ruling class was acquiring valuable experience.

There was a clear class component to the Federalist anti-immigrant policy that became a substantial political liability in the coming decades. Reactionary Congressman Harrison Gray Otis expressed the Federalist desire to exclude those immigrants more inclined toward egalitarian views, explaining that the United States “did not wish to invite hordes of wild Irishmen” to enter the country.^[7] The Hartford Convention of 1814, an aristocratic reaction against Jeffersonianism, advocated barring citizens not born in the US from serving in office in order to minimize the influence of the Irish on the American political system.^[8]

Immigration, Know-Nothingism and the American Civil War

The emergence of a domestic working class marked the end of the bourgeois “Era of Good Feelings” that followed the Revolution. Class tensions were erupting to the fore. Emerging American manufacturing required cheap labor, which the agricultural crisis in Europe, especially in Ireland, Scotland and Germany, could provide.

Before there were any federal restrictions on immigration, corporatist political combinations, especially in New York and Massachusetts, began restricting the immigration of paupers, or poor immigrants, primarily targeting the Irish, as an effort to divide the working class and prevent the development of strikes. In the South, slaveowners fought to restrict immigration to southern ports over fear of the spread of abolitionist ideas.

State immigration restrictions were developed as an explicit attack on the international working class. The legal basis of immigration law can be found in feudal relations. Hidetaka Hirota explains in his book *Expelling the Poor*:

The roots of immigration law in America dated to the British poor laws, a seventeenth-century set of laws that established each parish’s financial obligation to support the local poor and its right to refuse to relieve the transient poor who did not belong to the parish.^[9]

The emergence of a manufacturing-based working class led the ruling class organically to treat immigration as an opportunity to divide and conquer. From Massachusetts, where an entrenched Protestant Brahmin elite ruled, a political strategy emerged. Attacks on the Irish were justified with chauvinism directed against both the immigrants’ poverty and their Catholicism. Attacks against Catholic workingmen took place in 1823,

1826 and 1828. In 1834, a mob of Protestant workers whipped up into a hysteria burned down an Ursuline convent for girls in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

A deliberate effort was made to address economic anxieties and redirect social tensions. In these years, substantial portions of previously “middling types” were being sent by the early capitalists into the new “manufactories” and being introduced to wage slavery. In the social dislocation that naturally ensued, the ruling class blamed the Irish. Hirota writes:

The introduction of a cheap foreign labor in the form of destitute Irish immigrants provided a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the deterioration of the social and economic conditions of American workers.^[10]

It is notable that at a recent campaign event in Milwaukee, Trump’s vice presidential candidate, J.D. Vance, blamed crime in the mid-19th century on “ethnic enclaves” populated by German and Irish immigrants. This was not a slip-up. It was an appeal to this reactionary political tradition.

In the South, efforts to restrict immigration were bound up with attempts to suppress the arrival of abolitionist views. Anything remotely foreign was politically suspect. States barred the migration of freed blacks from the North in the aftermath of the 1822 slave rebellion organized by Denmark Vesey, due in large part to reports that Vesey’s raid was prepared through the dissemination of abolitionist pamphlets transported by boat and distributed through the port of Charleston. Hirota explains, “After the Vesey conspiracy, South Carolina passed the so-called Negro Seaman Act, which required black seamen arriving on a vessel to be detained in jail until the ship’s departure, a policy followed by other southern states, such as Georgia and Louisiana.”^[11] The governor of South Carolina stated in 1824 that the states have “the right to interdict the entrance of such persons into her ports whose organization of minds, habits, associations, render them peculiarly calculated to disturb the peace and tranquility of the state.”^[12] Again, the attack on migration emerges as a police method for curtailing the spread of revolutionary ideas.

The scale of immigration changed from 1850 to 1860, when the number of foreign-born living in the US almost doubled from 2.25 million foreign-born in 1850 to 4 million in 1860, including 1.5 million Irish and 1.25 million Germans.^[13]

This period of mass migration coincided with the emergence of slavery as the dominant issue of American politics. The post-revolutionary party system based on Jacksonian Democracy and the Whigs was breaking up. In this vacuum came the Know-Nothings, so-called because they purported to originate as a secret society whose members had to claim they “knew nothing” of the organization, if subjected to questioning. The movement emerged rapidly in the 1854 election and represented the attempt by a section of the ruling class to utilize nativism as a means of redirecting sectional and class tensions against foreign immigrants.

Immigration historian Daniel Tichenor writes of the Know-Nothings that their “meteoric rise in 1854-55 more specifically reflected a nativist agenda that promised to unify native-born citizens polarized by slavery and sectional discord. Prevailing hostilities between fellow citizens could be redirected by political nativists against Catholics, immigrants, and other groups whose presumed foreign connections corrupted the nation.”^[14]

The Know-Nothings won 51 seats in the 1854 election and 20 percent of the vote, eclipsing the Whigs, who would cease to exist as a party in the coming years as the Republicans mounted their first national presidential campaign in 1856. Know-Nothingism was a flash-in-the-pan formation

that won support from a wide array of figures, ranging from John Wilkes Booth and Sam Houston to then-dissatisfied Whig and soon-to-be Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens, who flirted with Know-Nothingism for a time. Darrel Overdyke, in his book *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, says Known Nothingism “was in a sense an ideal solution to be able to berate, to let off steam and resentment on non-Americans rather than fellow citizens.”^[15]

?There was a self-conscious class basis to Know-Nothingism. It was directed against the most desperate Irish fleeing the genocidal famine wrought by British occupation, and the movement deliberately stoked up anger over the issue of Irish poverty. According to Hirota:

The Know-Nothings built upon earlier nativists’ economic critique of impoverished foreigners to aggravate native-born workers’ fear of “pauper labor,” or cheap labor of poor immigrants who would work for lower wages than Americans... At a time when industrialization had already brought about the sharp deterioration of working-class Americans’ living conditions, the agitation for pauper labor increased native-born workers’ anxiety about the potential loss of economic independence.^[16]

Though the relationship of the Jacksonian Democratic Party to immigration in this period is complex, the more reactionary section of the Democratic Party was equally xenophobic. New York Mayor Fernando Wood, a vicious defender of slavery and later among Lincoln’s most reactionary opponents, denounced immigrant workers. He said, “If it be necessary to call out the forces within the power of the city government to fire on and sink every emigrant vessel coming into this harbor with pauper and criminal emigrants, I shall do so.”^[17]

Abraham Lincoln had a different response. When anti-Catholic Know-Nothings in Massachusetts in 1855 attempted to restrict the franchise to individuals with seven years’ residency, including two as a US citizen, he wrote to his friend Joshua Speed:

I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” We now practically read it “all men are created equal except negroes.” When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read “all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.” When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.^[18]

Nevertheless, even Lincoln was coy for a time about his opposition to the Know-Nothings, and the thoughts he conveyed privately to Josh Speed he did not convey publicly until somewhat later.

Ultimately, the Know-Nothings ignominiously collapsed—a casualty of the shift in the party system to the axis of the slavery question. Its electoral support fell from 51 seats and 20 percent of the vote in 1854 to 14 seats and 15 percent in 1856 and 3 percent and 5 seats in 1858. Unlike its right-wing progeny, in this bourgeois revolutionary period the movement enacted no federal restrictions on immigration. As would also happen in later generations, the revolutionary social struggles of the Civil War brought together disparate immigrant populations with the non-

immigrant and cut the legs out from under political xenophobia. The German population, consisting of many political refugees from the revolutionary struggles of 1848, served as a major source of support for the Republican Party and Lincoln, while the 450,000 Germans and 150,000 Irish fighting in the Union Army politically detonated the lie that immigrants were disloyal.

With the end of the Civil War, the freeing of the slaves and the 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment defining all born in the US as citizens, the American ruling class had exhausted its revolutionary role. The Democratic Party, in its effort to rebuild and resuscitate its image and divert the emerging working class movement away from socialist politics, turned toward a strategy combining anti-black violence in the south with anti-Native American and anti-Chinese violence in the West. The immigration issue emerged as a key element of this initiative.

Chinese Exclusion and the rebirth of the Democratic Party

The Anti-Coolie Association of California, as it was called, using a derogatory term for cheap Chinese labor, was initiated in 1867 by a leadership consisting of 51 officers of California's craft trade unions in collaboration with the California Democratic Party, which voted that year not to run candidates in many parts of the state and dissolved itself into an anti-Chinese society.

The year 1867 saw post-war recession in the local economies in the West, which led to a depression of wages that weakened the nascent trade union movement there. Organizations like the Shoemakers and Cigarmakers unions, whose leadership was prominently involved in the anti-Coolie clubs, had been transformed by the depression into professional associations.

Referring to the Democrats and trade unions, historian Alexander Saxton explains:

What both groups in effect became were anti-coolie clubs. Since white workers were being forced out, the base of activity in each trade was reduced to a scattering of white wage earners and to a small but influential group of marginal manufacturers. These were the masters of small shops who lacked capital necessary for large-scale enterprise with Chinese labor... the main thrust of trade-based anti-coolieism was turned to the preservation of a noncompetitive niche for a differentiated product.^[19]

A statement of the California Democracy in the *San Francisco Examiner* quoted by Saxton laid out the program emerging from this corporatist alliance of small producers and skilled craft workers:

We have stated before and we repeat it again, that the self-styled Union or Mongrel party [i.e., the Republicans] have but one principle, if it may be so called, distinguishing them as an organization, and that is the doctrine of universal equality for all races, in all things... The war is now past and there can be no living issue connected with its conduct. The charge of disloyalty, so flippantly preferred against the Democracy, is an atrocious lie... The Democracy are, and have ever been, the party of the Constitution, the party of the people. They are for a white man's government, constitutionally administered, against a great Mongrel military despotism, upheld by a union of the purse and the sword, and sought to be perpetuated through Negro and Chinese votes.^[20]

Four events paved the way for transforming Chinese Exclusion from a far-right extra-parliamentary regionalist movement into a national

campaign with both a parliamentary and extra-parliamentary element. First was the Paris Commune of 1871, which created the first genuine "anti-communist" hysteria in the United States. The second was the depression of 1873, which generated widespread unemployment throughout the country. Third was the election of 1876, the end of Reconstruction and the revitalization of the Democratic Party on a national scale, and fourth was the Railroad Rebellion of July 1877.

Albert Maver Winn, a prominent and affluent leader of the carpenters' craft union, expresses clearly how the Democratic Party and craft union bureaucracy began to direct class tensions against the Chinese. In a speech at an anti-Chinese convention in April 1876, Winn argued to California workingmen that wealthy Americans were not the enemy, rather, they were an ally in the struggle against the Chinese invasion. While in the old days "The complainants were poor, wealth was against them," now it was not a question of rich against poor:

There is a new element now in charge of the agitation; it is no longer the men who work by the day, but the property holders, who see—what we told them years ago—that little by little the Chinese would encroach upon their real estate and prevent it from increasing in value. I think it is policy for all classes of people to unite in the movement, and to show Congress how much they feel upon the subject, and tell how much they suffer by the introduction of Chinese cheap labor.^[21]

Indeed, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1867, the west was opened to the national labor market, making the Chinese less necessary and more useful as a target for working-class vitriol.

In 1876, the Democrats added a Chinese Exclusion plank and established a joint special committee in Congress to investigate the deleterious effects of Chinese immigration. One Republican in Congress called the Democrats "an alliance forming between those opposed on general principles to the Negro, the Chinese and the Indian, to make common cause for the purpose of razing these tribes from the face of the earth."^[22]

The 1876 election between the Republican Rutherford Hayes and the Democrat Samuel Tilden resulted in a contested race. The ruling class brokered a deal the following year giving Hayes the presidency in exchange for ending Reconstruction, pulling federal troops out of the occupied South, and revitalizing the Democrats as a national institution of bourgeois politics. With the notable exception of Charles Sumner and George Frisbie Hoar, Republicans overwhelmingly adapted to the Democrats' anti-Chinese chauvinism.

The intense political crisis caused by the contested 1876 election presaged by only a few weeks the greatest explosion in the class struggle in American history up until that point, and probably since. In July 1877, with the impact of the 1873 economic panic unabated, efforts to cut railroad wages triggered a strike that spread from Martinsburg, West Virginia throughout the entire country, touching every railway station within a matter of days. There were concerned reports that America was experiencing the beginning of a national version of the Paris Commune. Thousands of workers and young people flocked to rail yards across the country to support the strike. The response of the Democratic Party and ruling class in San Francisco is particularly revealing.

On July 23, 1877, a crowd gathered in an empty lot near San Francisco City Hall comprised of workers, women and young people in support of the strike. The First International-affiliated Workingman's Party addressed the crowd. As Saxton explains, the event was hijacked by the anti-Chinese clubs and "before the evening was over, the socialists had lost control of the movement they had initiated." He continues:

Hecklers infiltrated the crowd. A band from an anti-coolie club marched by. Swirls of young men, breaking away from the main gathering, set off to hunt for victims. That night, 20 or 30 Chinese wash houses were broken into. On the night following, there were murders of Chinese, incendiary fires, clashes between rioters and police.^[23]

Local business elites established a Vigilante Committee which set out to attack the Chinese and what California's Democratic Governor William Irwin called "a small sprinkling of Communists or Internationalists who hope to usher in the millennium by a judicious use of the torch." After a series of rampages, the ruling class grew concerned that mob violence was getting out of control. The state reached a deal with the Vigilante Committee whereby the committee would halt its mob attacks if the federal government passed laws excluding the Chinese. Several years later, the Chinese Exclusion Acts became law and were expanded to close loopholes time and time again throughout the next 15 years.

Kearneyism: A proto-fascist "America First" movement

A critical role in this movement was played by an opportunist middling business owner and former Hayes supporter named Denis Kearney. Appropriating the name of the First International, his so-called Workingmen's Party of California became a proto-fascist ward organization supporting the Democrats and committing acts of systematic violence against the Chinese, while denouncing corporate monopoly. Kearney asked a crowd in a speech on San Francisco's Nob Hill in October 1877:

Are you ready to march down to the wharf and stop the leprous Chinamen from landing? Judge Lynch is the judge wanted by the workingmen of California. I advise all to own a musket and a hundred rounds of ammunition. The dignity of labor must be sustained, even if we have to kill every wretch that opposes it.^[24]

This anti-Chinese movement was not a "bottom-up" movement of the rank-and-file. While Kearneyism drew some support from the unemployed and itinerant workers, especially those from the rural mining regions of Eastern California, Kearney's main base was from a combination of professional organizations supported by local business. Saxton explains that the trade union movement had been transformed into largely associations of journeymen and small proprietors rather than trade unions. The remainder were neighborhood or language-association anticoolie clubs. In this lies the key to the political meaning behind the official acts of repression and oratorical pyrotechnics. What Kearney was leading was a struggle for control of the clubs which largely comprised the Democratic Party's city machinery.^[25]

Kearneyites and the anti-Coolie clubs organized or created the kindling for a series of pogroms against the Chinese. In 1885, this culminated in the Expulsion Movement that spread across California and the Pacific Northwest. Tens of thousands of Chinese were frog-marched out of their homes and businesses in towns like Tacoma, Seattle, Eureka and others and forced onto steamships and transported to China or San Francisco. Those who refused to leave were beaten or killed. In the span of three months in 1885, San Francisco's Chinatown became an overcrowded ghetto as terrified Chinese fled the violence of the anti-Coolie clubs, fighting in the alleys over scarce scraps of food. Repeated efforts to burn down the Chinatown somehow failed. Dozens of Chinese workers were murdered and lynched throughout the West, including 34 Chinese miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming in September 1885.

These efforts to direct the anger of the working class against immigrants

helped pave the way for the explosion of social inequality in what became known as the Gilded Age. In the decades that ensued, immigration policy was "federalized" by the Supreme Court, which upheld the constitutionality of Chinese Exclusion on the grounds that it was required as a quasi-wartime measure to halt the "invading horde," and soon exclusion was expanded to include the Japanese. American imperialism exploded on the scene of world history with its victory over Spain in the Spanish-American war, and this was accompanied by a stultifying explosion of national jingoism, which found expression in the promotion of a formally constituted national immigration restriction movement.

The American Federation of Labor and the defense of immigrants in the Second International

The American trade union bureaucracies integrated themselves into American imperialism and co-led the political attack on immigrant workers at home. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) under Samuel Gompers, himself an immigrant born in England, entered into a formal alliance with the Immigration Restriction League, a bourgeois group linking progressives with eugenicists in pushing for restriction.

For a time its chief political aim was the establishment of a literacy requirement for immigration, paralleling literacy tests for voting in the South. Daniel Tichenor notes that "Throughout the Progressive Era, the AFL's Washington office made 'literacy test/immigration restriction' a centerpiece of its legislative agenda."^[26]

Gompers and the AFL overrode substantial rank-and-file opposition and forced through support for literacy test legislation and restriction. Gompers argued that "freedom" for workers across the world required "those devoted to the cause to remain within their own countries and help in national struggles." Gompers' position, Tichenor explains, was that "national labor movements were the only means of protecting domestic workers from 'low wages and bad working conditions.'" In 1902, the AFL published a pamphlet titled "Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion" filled with racist claims about Asian immigrants. Notably, the Industrial Workers of the World took an explicitly pro-immigrant position and attracted substantial support among non-immigrant workers in precisely the same areas where Kearneyism had sought to mobilize workers against the "Yellow Peril."

The nationalist position taken by the AFL was supported by the right wing of the Socialist Party and its leadership, including Morris Hillquit, an émigré from modern-day Latvia. Along with the Australian and British sections of the Second International, the Socialist Party in the United States advocated that the International take anti-immigrant positions at conventions at the Amsterdam and Stuttgart Congresses of 1904 and 1907, respectively. The debate directly presaged the struggle between the nationalism of Stalin's socialism in one country and the internationalism of the theory of permanent revolution.

Speaking during the plenary debate in Amsterdam in 1904, Hillquit had likewise said immigrants were being imported by the tens of thousands in order to destroy trade union organizations: "That is why American unions promulgated a ban on importing Chinese. This measure can be called reactionary, but it is absolutely necessary to keep the coolies away if we do not want to destroy the trade unions."^[27]

In Stuttgart in 1907, Hillquit argued against immigration in the following way:

The basis of the class struggle within every country is the organization of the native working class. Within each country we make a distinction between the organized working class and strikebreakers. We cannot tolerate strikebreakers from our own country, nor can we allow them to come from other countries. That is why we Americans have up to now been opposed to the immigration of strikebreakers.^[28]

This view was supported in 1907 by Victor Kroemer of the Australian delegation, who said:

White immigrant workers are easily organized while dark-skinned workers are resistant to organization. This is what has led the Australian Labor Party to impose a White Australia policy against the yellow invasion. Asians are the only ones excluded as they are unable to become part of the organized working class.^[29]

The Second International overwhelmingly rejected these positions.

American delegate Nicholas Klein, speaking against Hillquit in Amsterdam in 1904, said the anti-immigrant position will bring discord into the working class, contradicting the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” The coolies are people too—workers—and they have the same rights as anyone else.^[30]

Kato Tokijiro, representing the Japanese delegation at the 1907 Stuttgart conference, said to enthusiastic applause:

When the Americans excluded us from California they gave two reasons: first, that Japanese workers were depressing the wages and living standards of the indigenous workers, and second, that we were taking away their opportunity to work... by talking up the dangers of Japanese immigration, the American capitalists want to appeal to certain instincts among the workers. The Japanese are under the heel of capitalism just as much as other peoples. It is only dire need that drives them from their homeland to earn their livelihood in a foreign land. It is the duty of socialists to welcome these poor brothers, to defend them, and together with them to fight capitalism. Proletarians of all countries, unite! The founders of socialism, above all Karl Marx, did not address themselves to one single country but to all humanity. Internationalism is inscribed on our banner.^[31]

The resolutions that were passed demanded “unrestricted admission of immigrant workers” including to the trade unions, and for trade union control of immigration from point of departure to point of arrival, to protect immigrants during passage from exploitation by the steamship companies and the danger of fraud on arrival.^[32]

The Russian Revolution and the xenophobic core of American anti-communism

In 1917, the US entered World War One, the Bolsheviks took power in Russia and the American ruling class launched an unprecedented attack on the rights of immigrants and the cultivation of an extreme climate of jingoism, nationalism and xenophobia. As the historian William Bernard notes, “for the first time important sections of Big Business, as a result of the fear that immigrants might propagate the ideas of the Russian Revolution, took a stand for the restriction of immigration.”^[33]

Attacks on immigrants were increasingly linked to the attack on the country’s democratic traditions. On May 16, Congress passed the Sedition Act of 1918, and on May 22 it passed an Immigration Act authorizing the president to shut immigration and deport immigrants whose presence was contrary to public safety. Throughout the war, Germans, Italians and Southern and Eastern Europeans were subject to routine brutalization and the teaching of foreign languages was banned in a number of states.

The year 1919 saw the largest strike wave in American history. David Sapos writes that the national steel strike of that year was an “immigrant rebellion” in which “hunkies” from Eastern Europe were most willing to strike, joining their non-immigrant colleagues.^[34] Philip Foner notes that

in response to the unity of immigrant and non-immigrant workers, the steel companies ran full-page newspaper advertisements that attacked the strike as un-American, and charged that the foreign workers were planning to turn the steel mills into Soviets.^[35]

During a strike by 6,000 autoworkers at the Toledo Overland plant, a judge ruled that all picketers had to be US citizens.^[36]

On November 7, 1919, a date chosen because it marked the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the Wilson administration launched the Palmer Raids, named for Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who, with J. Edgar Hoover, led police and immigration authorities on a violent, nationally coordinated series of raids continuing into January 1920. In total, over 10,000 immigrants with socialist, communist and anarchist sympathies were arrested, and many were beaten and even tortured in detention. Public outcry over the raids grew as it became clear the event was essentially an extra-constitutional police riot. In June 1920, federal judge George Anderson ordered the discharge of 17 immigrants who had been arrested without a warrant. Anderson condemned the raids, ruling, “a mob is a mob, whether made up of Government officials acting under instructions from the Department of Justice, or of criminals and loafers and the vicious classes.”

In response, Congress legalized the worst excesses of the raids. Congress passed an Immigration Act in 1920 that the chair of the Senate Committee on Immigration, Sen. Thomas Hardwick, said was “a means of keeping out Bolshevism.” Arch-reactionary Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, who found it amusing that he was now allied with the trade unions, said, “We must be now and forever for Americanism and Nationalism, and against Internationalism.”^[37]

The rebirth of the KKK at this time was formally encouraged and directed primarily against immigrants, particularly Jews and Catholics. Restrictionist and eugenicist Harry Laughlin summed up the ethos of the times when he said in 1923:

We in this country have been so imbued with the idea of democracy, or the equality of all men, that we have left out of consideration the matter of blood or natural inborn hereditary mental and moral differences. No man who breeds pedigreed plants and animals can afford to neglect this thing.^[38]

In 1924, with the active support of eugenicists and many progressives, Democrats and Republicans passed the National Origins Quota Act, aka, the Johnson-Reed bill, which restricted immigration based on race and national origin.

The communist movement in the US vociferously opposed the attack on immigrants. In a 1923 pamphlet, the Workers Party stated that it “denounces laws directed against the foreign-born” and called on “workers everywhere to organize local councils for the protection of foreign born workers,” appealing to native workers to “wage an active campaign to uproot the prejudices fostered by the capitalist class against the foreign born.”^[39]

Comrade Tom Mackaman refers to the passage of Johnson-Reed as “a watershed moment in US history” in his book *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924*. He writes:

Not only did it repudiate the long-standing open immigration policy which had been progressively eroded after decades of singling out Asians, anarchists and the infirm, it also initiated a sharp change in the composition of the working class and the advent of a new approach in labor-industrial relations that favored stability and employee loyalty over labor market flexibility.^[40]

As Comrade Tom explains in his book, the mass immigration of 1890 to 1920, the role of immigrants and non-immigrants in the struggles of 1917-1919, and the reaction of the American ruling class spoke to how mass migration undermined the capitalist order and nation-state system:

The mass worker mobility across national boundaries in the period preceding WWI, though economically indispensable, had proven to be a profoundly destabilizing factor for nation-states in the old world and new. In both the US and the “sending” countries, due to its disruption of established cultural norms, immigration had called into question social order. It is not incidental that reactionary political currents in America and Europe that emerged in the 1920s took as their first task shoring up national identity. Meanwhile at the level of political economy, the US effort to limit European migration was a manifestation of a general attempt to refortify the nation-state against destabilizing global pressures—in this case the essentially international essence of its labor force.^[41]

The bipartisan re-birth of modern anti-immigrant politics

It is not possible here to treat in great detail the development of American immigration policy from 1924 to today. The campaign against Sacco and Vanzetti represented the dovetailing of anti-immigrant chauvinism with anti-communism and ruthless state murder. In the 1930s, the US State Department, led by open antisemites like Wilbur Carr, systematically blocked the immigration of hundreds of thousands of European Jews, including an estimated 100,000 who later died in Hitler’s gas chambers, including the passengers on the SS St. Louis, which Franklin Roosevelt denied the right to land in the US in 1939.

Chinese Exclusion remained on the books until 1943, when US solicitation of China’s support for the imperialist war against Japan required a quiet re-writing of the immigration code. At the same time, the Roosevelt administration had interned 120,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese-American citizens, refusing to release many until over a year after the fighting in Asia had ended. In 1965, Congress lifted the national origins quota due to widespread concerns that the racial aspect was extremely damaging to American imperialism and generated support for the Soviet Union across the third world. As a result of the 1965 Act, the foreign-born population of the US began to slowly rise from its nadir of 5 percent in 1970.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a dramatic shift in American immigration policy, led by the Democratic Party in alliance with far-right sections of the Republican right. A 1990 immigration act created a Commission on Immigration Reform, and the Clinton administration picked former congresswoman and civil rights icon Barbara Jordan to lead the commission. Jordan and the bipartisan commission—comprised of an equal number of Democrats and Republicans—proposed a dramatic shift back to extreme restriction. During a 1994 speech, Jordan laid out this vision:

We’ve got to have the strength to say no to the people who are not supposed to get in... we need to make deportation a part of a credible immigration policy... we’ve got to do that balancing act. The most urgent immigration problem we face today is the unauthorized entry of 100,000s of illegals... although the illegal alien may be generally law abiding... their entry in violation of the law is a violation of our national interest.^[42]

This representative of the ruling class proposed three prongs to stop immigration. First: border management, through which the borders in urban centers were militarized, forcing immigrants to make the deadly crossing in the desert. Second: work site enforcement: “Employment continues to be the principal magnet for illegal immigrants coming into the country,” Jordan said. Third: shutting off public benefits to immigrants and their families.

Jordan said:

If a person is here unlawfully, he should be entitled to no benefits. No benefits. Why the distinction between the eligibility of legal aliens and illegals? Illegal aliens don’t have the right to be here, they broke the law to get here, they never intended to become a part of our social community, and they are not entitled to benefits. They have no intention to integrate.^[43]

Based on the Jordan Commission’s recommendation, Congress passed an extremely restrictive Act in 1996, just weeks before that year’s presidential election, with support from figures like Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer and Bernie Sanders. In the lead-up to the bill’s passage, the Jordan Commission blamed immigrants for undermining social security, accusing them of robbing from the elderly, claimed Latin American immigrants were stealing jobs from blacks in the inner cities, and said immigrants themselves were undermining working conditions and reducing wages and undoing the gains of the trade union bureaucracies. The call to kick undocumented workers off of public benefits led to California’s Proposition 187, which voters ratified by a wide margin in 1996 and which would have barred undocumented children from attending public school, were it not struck down as unconstitutional by a federal judge in Los Angeles named Mariana Pfaelzer. In 2018, Trump issued a statement honoring Barbara Jordan for paving the way for his onslaught against immigrants.

Time constraints require me to skim over the addition of a slew of “national security” restrictions on immigration carried out through the war on terror in the 2000s and 2010s. Barack Obama declared that “the 11 million who broke [immigration] laws should be held accountable” and deported more immigrants than all previous presidents combined. The path for the emergence of Trump was paved by two decades of bipartisan attacks on immigrants.

This has taken place alongside the increasing internationalization of the United States. America has always been a land of immigration, but this has never been as true as it is today. The foreign-born population is 14 percent, equal to the peaks of the 1890s and triple the rate of the early 1970s. The so-called American working class is more cosmopolitan and less organically disposed to nationalism than ever before. Consider the international character of the working class in the city of Los Angeles, where 40 percent of the population is foreign-born and well over a majority is either foreign-born or first generation US citizen.

Los Angeles is home to over 1.4 million citizens of Mexico, 450,000 citizens of El Salvador, 1.2 million Filipinos, 150,000 Guatemalans and 200,000 Armenians. The city has the largest population of Druze outside of Lebanon, Belizeans outside Belize, and Thai outside Thailand. Immigrant workers make up substantial portions of critical industries, including a third of hospitality workers, 30 percent of construction workers, and 25 percent of agricultural and manufacturing workers.

The urgent danger of Trump’s second term

Trump has made clear he plans to establish a dictatorship, using immigrants and socialists as his chief targets, as part of a full-frontal assault on the working class. The record of Trump’s first term marked a qualitative break from bourgeois legal norms. He banned travel from

predominantly Muslim countries in January-February 2017, conducted high-profile, mass workplace raids, unleashed ruthless physical and sexual assaults of detained immigrants, banned immigration from the southern border, imposed a “Zero tolerance” policy stripping immigrant children from their parents and relatives (many, as it turns out, permanently), and expanded a network of concentration camps, including the tent cities in Texas. As mentioned earlier, he plans to end birthright citizenship, prohibit undocumented children from attending schools, and impose martial law to deport millions from the cities.

Throughout Trump’s term and after, the Democrats have acceded to or even carried out the bulk of Trump’s immigration policies, in some cases going even further than Trump—for example, the imposition of an asylum ban this year and in their decision to petition in *Department of State v. Muñoz*, appealing to the Roberts-Alito-Thomas wing of the US Supreme Court for a rule that will permanently separate thousands of families of mixed immigration status. From the standpoint of the historical traditions upon which Trump now relies, it is significant that the Supreme Court opinion in *Muñoz*, made possible by Biden’s petition, referred positively to the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, the 1875 Page Act barring immigration of Chinese women on the grounds that they were prostitutes, and the 1924 National Origins Quota Act.

The Democratic Party, which, as we have seen, helped write the playbook from which Trump now draws, not only adapts to his attacks on immigrants, but is politically reliant on the attack on immigrants and democratic rights to wage imperialist war abroad.

There is no constituency for the defense of immigrants within the ruling class of any country, and in not a single country has any serious political opposition been waged in defense of immigrants, including from the middle class pseudo-left.

Nor is this a phenomenon limited to the major imperialist powers. In countries like South Africa, India, Costa Rica, Chile and elsewhere in the global South, governments of various “left” and “right” stripes increasingly borrow from the imperialist playbook. Chile’s Kast and Brazil’s Bolsonaro use demands for the expulsion of Venezuelan immigrants as a battering ram for dictatorship. Costa Rica demands the removal of Nicaraguans. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador transformed Mexico, which once could present itself the world’s last refuge for asylum seekers, into a prison for immigrants, at the behest of US imperialism.

Some conclusions can be drawn from a review of this historical material. 1) The American ruling class today is turning back to the darkest pages of its old playbook, with Trump riffing on themes developed by the Democrats with greater intensity than ever before. 2) The social basis for nationalist xenophobia historically comes from above, in alliance with a section of the petty-bourgeoisie, and not chiefly from below. 3) This does not mean workers are immune from nationalist propaganda, and there is no tendency but ours with a program to challenge the far-right. For these reasons the party must realize theoretically, programmatically and practically the centrality of the defense of immigration as the key to the defense of democratic rights and the fight for the political unity of the working class.

Ours is not a humanitarian appeal to the ruling class for kinder policies, it is a Marxist appeal to the working class for international unity. This means: 1) The defense of immigrants must be the spearhead of the defense of democratic rights of the entire working class in the global counter-offensive against social counterrevolution. 2) There can be no defense of immigrants without opposing imperialist war and the reactionary nationalist climate it inevitably fosters. 3) It is not only possible but also necessary to win over non-immigrant workers through a class appeal based on a common fight for a revolutionary economic program. 4) The defense of immigrants is not only a democratic question, it is also a question of strategic importance for the revolutionary movement. It is a

necessary prerequisite for revitalizing socialist internationalism in the working class and forging the political unity of the 21st century international working class.

Cecilia Esterline, “Project 2025: Unveiling the far right’s plan to demolish immigration in a second Trump term,” Niskanen Center, February 20, 2024.

Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution*, Knopf Press 1896, p. 24.

Ibid., p. 26.

Ibid., p. 55.

Ibid., p. 65.

Daniel Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, Princeton University Press 2001, p. 51.

Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy*, Oxford University Press 2017, p. 49.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 42.

Ibid., p. 53.

Ibid., p. 54

Ibid., p. 55.

Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, University of California Press 1996, p. 13.

Tichenor, p. 61.

Darrel Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, Louisiana State University Press 1950.

Hirota, p. 103.

Ibid., 108.

Harold Holzer, *Brought Fourth On This Continent: Lincoln and American Immigration*, Penguin Random House 2024, p. 79.

Saxton, p. 76.

Ibid., p. 81.

Ibid., p. 109.

Tichenor, p. 110.

Saxton, p. 114.

Ibid., p. 118.

Ibid., p. 119-120.

Tichenor, p. 119.

Reform, Revolution, and Opportunism: Debates in the Second International, 1900–1910, edited by Mike Taber, Haymarket Press 2023, p. 89.

Ibid., p. 102-103.

Ibid., p. 95.

Ibid., p. 89.

Ibid., p. 98-99.

Ibid., 104.

Tichenor, 142.

Philip Foner, *The History of the Labor Movement of the United States: Postwar Struggles, 1918-1920*, International Publishers 1988, p. 160.

Ibid., p. 164.

Ibid., p. 22.

Tichenor, p. 143.

Ibid., p. 144.

Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, Haymarket Press 2015, p. 175.

Thomas Mackaman, *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924*, McFarland Press 2017, p. 9.

Ibid., p. 145.

Speech of Barbara Jordan, August 12, 1995. Available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4555772/user-clip-barbara-jordans-immigration-speech>.

Ibid.

[1] Cecilia Esterline, "Project 2025: Unveiling the far right's plan to demolish immigration in a second Trump term," Niskanen Center, February 20, 2024.

[2] Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution*, Knopf Press 1896, p. 24.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[6] Daniel Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, Princeton University Press 2001, p. 51.

[7] Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy*, Oxford University Press 2017, p. 49.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 54

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[13] Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, University of California Press 1996, p. 13.

[14] Tichenor, p. 61.

[15] Darrel Overdyke, *The Know Nothing Party in the South*, Louisiana State University Press 1950.

[16] Hirota, p. 103.

[17] *Ibid.*, 108.

[18] Harold Holzer, *Brought Fourth On This Continent: Lincoln and American Immigration*, Penguin Random House 2024, p. 79.

[19] Saxton, p. 76.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[22] Tichenor, p. 110.

[23] Saxton, p. 114.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 119-120.

[26] Tichenor, p. 119.

[27] *Reform, Revolution, and Opportunism: Debates in the Second International, 1900–1910*, edited by Mike Taber, Haymarket Press 2023, p. 89.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 102-103.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 98-99.

[32] *Ibid.*, 104.

[33] Tichenor, 142.

[34] Philip Foner, *The History of the Labor Movement of the United States: Postwar Struggles, 1918-1920*, International Publishers 1988, p. 160.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[37] Tichenor, p. 143.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[39] Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, Haymarket Press 2015, p. 175.

[40] Thomas Mackaman, *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924*, McFarland Press 2017, p. 9.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[42] Speech of Barbara Jordan, August 12, 1995. Available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4555772/user-clip-barbara-jordans-immigration-speech>.

[43] *Ibid.*



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)