

Outrage grows over the arrest of 78 workers by Border Patrol in Kern County, California

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Last week US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents carried out mass raids and arrests of immigrants in Kern County, California, even as the fires raging across Los Angeles and southern California dominated headlines.

The operation carried out by the Democratic Biden administration in its waning days was dubbed “Return to Sender.” The raids set the stage for the incoming Trump administration which is preparing to arrest and deport millions of workers and their families from the United States as one of its highest priorities. Biden has promised the “smoothest” transition to Trump as he prepares to take office on January 20.

At least 78 workers were arrested between Tuesday and Thursday in raids that included numerous traffic stops as well as agents descending on people at gas stations, trucking companies, and Home Depot stores. CBP confirmed that those detained were from Peru, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Ecuador, Mexico and China.

Located northeast of Los Angeles and encompassing the southern end of the Central Valley, Kern County is a key agricultural region for the entire United States and internationally and is the leading oil-producing area in California. The county’s largest city is Bakersfield, with more than 400,000 residents.

Notably, the county has one of the largest Hispanic populations in the country, with nearly 55 percent of the region’s 900,000 residents identifying as such on the 2020 Census. Thus many residents know someone who is an immigrant, particularly from Mexico and Latin America, or are immigrants themselves threatened with deportation by CBP thugs.

According to a 2022 study by UC Merced, “The State’s Future: Kern County’s Young, Growing, Diverse Population and Dynamic Economy,” some 20 percent of the population in Kern County—that is, one in five residents—are immigrants who live under precarious citizenship status. An estimated 40,000 people are employed in the agriculture industry, where immigrant workers may comprise about half of the workforce. Agriculture makes up about 10 percent of Kern’s GDP, playing a critical part in the agricultural industry in the Central Valley.

Many within the county have expressed outrage at the operation aimed at workers. Local resident Alyson Zepeda told KGET news, “It’s never okay to just pull someone because he was a gardener and he thought maybe he was undocumented. There has to be a good valid reason why you pulled him over.” RJ Vasquez said, “The border is 400 miles, or however many miles away, there’s no reason [CBP agents] should be in Kern County. I don’t think it’s doing any good first of all, but I think it’s doing a lot of damage.”

Sara Fuentes, a store manager at a local Bakersfield gas station, told

CalMatters News, “It was profiling, it was purely field workers.” Fuentes stated that at 9 a.m., when the store typically experiences a morning rush of field workers on their way to work, none of her regulars showed up for breakfast. She said that two men dressed in civilian attire had arrived in unmarked vehicles and began detaining people outside. “They didn’t stop people with FedEx uniforms, they were stopping people who looked like they worked in the fields.”

Many areas within the county have experienced a sharp decline in foot traffic as residents have opted to stay home in light of the recent raids, with many saying they felt like they were in a “ghost town.” Miguel Flores, general manager of Mercado Latino in Bakersfield, told KGET he estimated that 30 percent of businesses were closed Wednesday.

A video posted on social media exposed the thuggish and heavy-handed actions of CBP officers. The video taken by Ernesto Campos showed him and his employee Isaias Alejandro being harassed and detained as CBP agents racially profiled and pulled people over along the Route 99 freeway in unmarked vehicles. Campos is a Kern County business owner and US citizen.

Upon being pulled over, Campos presented agents with his driver’s license after which the agents requested he surrender his vehicle keys, which he refused. After the refusal, agents slashed Campos’ tires, detained his passenger, Alejandro, and then proceeded to arrest Campos for “alien smuggling,” according to one of the agents.

Throughout the ordeal border agents operated with aggressive behavior, with the agent arresting Campos attempting to grab the camera from his hands stating, “If you resist we will have a fight, is that what you want?” Another agent threatened to break the windows of his truck if he did not roll them down all the way. Upon being asked why they slashed his tires the agent simply responded, “I’m not going to argue with you” and “You did what you did, I did what I did, that’s all it is.”

The raids by CBP have produced widespread panic in the region, not only for immigrants and their safety, but for the local businesses that heavily rely on their labor. Since the raids began acres of fields have sat unpicked as workers stayed home. The presence of CBP has not been limited to Kern. Residents have reported spotting patrols in adjacent agricultural powerhouse regions in the Central Valley, such as Tulare and Fresno counties, although with no confirmed arrests as of yet.

The raids have also sparked outrage and protests, including an ongoing picket at a Chevron gas station where raids took place. Among the picketers signs read, “If we don’t take action now, we’ll settle for nothing later!!” and “Film Border Patrol.”

David Villa was at the protest and told KGET, “They can’t go

around willy nilly on a hunch pulling people over because the color of your skin or the color of your hair.” Another raid witness, Alyson Zepeda, told KGET, “Don’t mess with hardworking people, they’re just trying to live.”

On the 23ABC News Instagram one commenter noted, “‘Return to sender’!?!? That is utterly disgusting. These are human beings, human lives. Their rights should never be up for debate.”

There are a number of disturbing posts on social media parading around supposed “child rapists,” including by USBP Chief Patrol Agent Gregory K. Bovino who posted photos of apprehended migrants noting, “Here in the #PremierSector we go the extra mile—or 500 of them—to protect our nation and communities from bad people and bad things. Two child rapists were caught the first day with more to come.”

These allegations, which are claimed as facts, were echoed by the mayor of Bakersfield, Republican Karen Goh, who told *Newsweek* that the CBP operations were “cartel-related,” and were part of a “targeted effort to combat narcotics trafficking and human trafficking.” Meanwhile, US Representative David Goncalves Valadao, a Republican, responded to the widespread anger within his district by making the cynical statement that he “Urges Biden to ensure CBP is prioritizing criminals.”

Many residents of Kern County have called out as a red herring the claims that those apprehended are criminals. David Villa told KGET, “I don’t think Bakersfield is coming together because they are going after criminals. I’ve seen what the border patrol said as far as they are catching criminals, and yeah they are going to catch a couple, and that’s what they are going to put and post to make it seem like what they are doing is legit.”

The continuation of such raids and the mass deportation policies planned by the Trump administration will undoubtedly be met with even more widespread opposition. However, the independent organization workers take up to defend themselves and their class brothers and sisters will be critical.

The complacency of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, which claims to represent the interest of agricultural workers, is a telling indication of the need of the working class to organize independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace, school and neighborhood to defend the rights of immigrants.

The union confirmed on X, “UFW union members are among those detained while traveling home from work yesterday in Kern County, CA. We are providing them and their families with support.” They also posted empty advice to workers on X, such as, “Don’t let yourself be intimidated! Together, we will overcome anxiety by being well-prepared,” and encouraging them to “Remember your rights.”

Beyond offering these platitudes to farmworkers, the UFW has made clear it will not wage a broader struggle, protest or mass work stoppages to halt the attacks on their farmworker membership. Last week’s raid was just one of thousands of raids which have taken place across the agricultural sector, including among field workers and dairy farmers. In fiscal year 2024, CBP estimates it carried out 2,901,142 “Total Enforcement Encounters” while Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) apprehended at least 113,431 people.

The impotence of the UFW is part of the broader inability by the nationalist trade unions to carry out a defense of the working class. Instead, the union bureaucracies, tied to the Democratic Party, have overseen and approved concessions contracts and rubber stamped attacks on working conditions.

Nowhere is this more true than in the agricultural sector, where farmworkers are routinely killed by heatstroke and the average life expectancy of a migrant worker in the US is a mere 49 years, compared to 73 for the general population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The UFW’s political history exposes the degree to which the nationalist and anti-communist organization has long capitulated to the farm owners and prevented a broader general strike of agricultural workers, rendering it entirely hostile to unification of the working class across international boundaries. As a result of their subservience to the employers, it’s no surprise that as of December 2023 the union possessed a membership of only 4,682, a massive decline from over 60,000 in the 1970s.

Trump is planning to carry out the mass deportation of at least 13 million undocumented workers, while also promising to deport entire families to “keep them together” as part of a fascistic response to wide opposition to his child-separation policies under his first presidential term. The number of undocumented will also balloon if Trump carries out his promise to end birthright citizenship. These mass deportations and the building of concentration camps for immigrants and children will cost at least \$86 billion, a sum which is to be extracted from the working class.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party is seeking to pose as defenders of immigrants, despite the fact that they have been just as brutal in their attacks on immigrants. It is common knowledge that former US president Barack Obama, a Democrat, still holds the record for overseeing the greatest number of deportations compared to his fascistic successor Trump, or his Republican predecessor George W. Bush. The fact that last week’s raid and many others are carried out in the Democratic Party stronghold of California exposes the reality that there are no “sanctuary cities,” a distinction which has allowed the Democratic Party to posture as a friend of immigrants as it seeks votes.

No moral or rational appeals to either of the two big-business parties can overcome the precarious and exploitative nature of immigrant labor in capitalist society. Any serious political struggle against the exploitation and oppression of immigrants in the modern epoch requires an international socialist solution and strategy.



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