Democratic senators visit ICE detention center as House approves more funding

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On January 20, 2026, Democratic U.S. Senators Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff carried out a carefully choreographed congressional "oversight" visit to the California City Detention Facility, the newest and largest immigration detention center in California.

Located in the Mojave Desert in Kern County, roughly 100 miles north of Los Angeles, the facility is operated by the private prison contractor CoreCivic under contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Reactivated in 2025, it has a capacity of 2,560 beds and was holding more than 1,400 detainees at the time of the visit.

The senators toured the cellblock-style housing units for several hours and spoke with detainees and staff. In public statements afterward, Padilla and Schiff gave disturbing accounts of conditions inside the facility. Schiff claimed he spoke with a detainee with diabetes who said he had not received medical treatment for nearly two months. Detainees also described foul-smelling water and food that appeared spoiled or moldy.

Several detainees told the senators they were taken into custody during routine immigration check-ins rather than criminal arrests, contradicting claims that ICE targets only "dangerous criminals." Others spoke of separation from family members. One detainee, an Afghan national who said he assisted US forces, told the senators he feared violence or death if deported and had been warned he could be sent to other countries where he has no ties.

These revelations were presented as evidence of Democratic concern for humane treatment. In reality, the visit was a political stunt aimed at damage control, designed to obscure the Democratic Party's central role in financing, legitimizing and sustaining the immigration enforcement apparatus.

Days earlier, a 1,059-page bipartisan "minibus" spending bill was presented maintaining $10 billion in funding for ICE. Democrats are requesting a few provisions, such as ICE agents wearing body cameras and undergoing additional training on how to interact with the public.

Two days after the visit, the House of Representatives approved the budget for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which includes ICE, by a 214-213 vote. Every Democrat opposed the bill, in a purely performative vote engineered by House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, who had the DHS funding separated from the main military spending bill with the understanding that no Republicans would vote against it.

This is taking place amid growing public outrage over escalating federal repression under the Trump administration. As Trump intensifies enforcement, for all the congressional theatrics, the Democrats are not opposing it. They are underwriting it.

Minority Leader Jeffries reportedly informed a private caucus of Democratic lawmakers that although he personally opposed extending funding for the DHS through the remainder of the fiscal year, the party leadership would not attempt to block or organize opposition to the measure, effectively guaranteeing its approval.

This calculated decision followed the January 7 killing of Renée Nicole Good by an ICE agent in Minneapolis and the ensuing deployment of thousands of federal agents to occupy the Twin Cities.

Representative Rosa DeLauro, the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, admitted that ICE is "out of control" while justifying the funding on procedural grounds, warning that blocking the bill could disrupt other agencies. This was a cynical excuse. ICE already operates with tens of billions in existing funds and faces no real constraints.

Padilla and Schiff's visit must be understood within the Democrats' broader strategy. Their objections to Trump's immigration policies have never challenged the

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legitimacy of mass detention or deportation. Instead, they have consistently framed their criticism in administrative terms, arguing that enforcement must be better managed to prevent political backlash.

On January 5, Padilla and Schiff joined 28 other Democratic senators in a letter complaining about the administration's "decision to strip federal law enforcement agencies of thousands of personnel that keep Americans safe and redeploy them to arrest, detain, and deport immigrants." This refers to the deployment of FBI and other federal cops to join ICE on raids. It was not a denunciation of the treatment of immigrants but a complaint about diverting the FBI from other priorities.

The concern of the Democrats is that Trump's methods risk provoking widespread opposition and destabilizing existing enforcement priorities. Trump's openly brutal tactics threaten to discredit the entire political system, something the Democrats fear far more than the repression itself.

The same logic underlies a December 2025 report released by Schiff, Padilla, Elizabeth Warren and Representative John Garamendi criticizing the diversion of funds from the Department of Defense to the DHS to support immigration enforcement. Here, too, the issue was not repression but strategy. Democrats prefer to limit highly visible domestic crackdowns that spark unrest, while channeling resources toward the military in preparation for expanding international conflicts.

This is a difference in foreign policy orientation, not principle. The Democrats oppose Trump's methods because they inflame opposition at home and interfere with imperialist priorities abroad, not because they reject authoritarian rule.

The fraud of this posture is exposed in California itself. There is no "sanctuary state" when ICE operates massive detention centers, carries out armed raids and now openly fires weapons during operations. On Wednesday morning, an ICE agent opened fire during an immigration operation in Willowbrook, California. Although no one was hit, the incident sparked an immediate response from crowds opposing ICE. Likewise, hospitals and schools are no longer protected spaces, despite repeated assurances from Democratic officials.

To get ahead of the protests, Padilla and Schiff decided to visit CoreCivic, one of the largest private prison corporations in the United States. The company derives over half of its revenue from federal contracts, primarily with ICE, the U.S. Marshals Service and the Bureau of Prisons. It owns or operates more than 70 facilities nationwide and has expanded its ICE detention contracts in recent years, pushing quarterly revenues to $538 million in 2025.

While CoreCivic's donations skew towards Republicans nationally, it maintains deep ties to the Democrats as well. It has donated tens of thousands of dollars to the California Democratic Party and Democratic candidates, including Governor Gavin Newsom.

Between 2017 and 2018, California Democrats received more combined donations from CoreCivic and GEO Group, another private prison operator, than state Republicans did. The company holds contracts in Democratic-led jurisdictions across the country and lobbies both parties aggressively.

The Democrats' role as enablers of repression is reinforced by the trade union bureaucracy. In Los Angeles, United Teachers Los Angeles, which has launched a strike authorization vote for its 35,000 members on January 27-29, has issued statements demanding "justice and accountability" from federal authorities, appealing to the same political forces responsible for the repression. This comes just weeks after Democrats joined Republicans to pass the largest military budget in US history.

As Minneapolis workers prepare for a general strike on January 23, 15,000 nurses are on strike in New York, 31,000 Kaiser nurses prepare to strike on January 26 and tens of thousands of UC workers and LAUSD teachers move toward strike authorization votes. The greatest danger is political containment. The Democratic Party and the union bureaucracies are working to isolate and control these struggles.

Workers cannot defend democratic rights or oppose authoritarianism by appealing to the very institutions enforcing repression. The formation of independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled and unified across industries and regions, is not optional. Under conditions of escalating state violence, it has become a matter of life and death.

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