

Trump administration unleashes paramilitary ICE raids in Maine

Mike Ingram
27 January 2026

The Trump administration launched a massive immigration enforcement surge in Maine on January 20, 2026, unleashing a campaign of terror designed to intimidate immigrant and working class communities across the state. Cynically dubbed “Operation Catch of the Day” in a state well-known for its fishing industry, this offensive is part of a nationwide crackdown on immigrants, escalating in the context of mounting federal violence seen in Minneapolis following the murders of Renée Good and Alex Pretti.

To justify its campaign of state terror, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has constructed a fraudulent narrative, claiming its operation targets “the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens who have terrorized communities.” Those caught up in the dragnet include:

- Yanick Joao Carneiro: An asylum seeker from Angola who was detained without a warrant during a routine immigration check-in at the Scarborough ICE office.
- Jean-Pierre Obiang: An 18-year-old student at the University of Southern Maine and an asylum seeker from Gabon, detained after a minor traffic accident.
- Micheline Ntumba: A mother and asylum seeker from the Congo, living in the US for nearly a decade, who was arrested after dropping her child off at Portland High School.

Sarah Mehta of the American Civil Liberties Union correctly identified the operation as being “100% a dragnet approach.” Data from the Deportation Data Project confirms this assessment; of the nearly 100 people arrested in the initial days of the operation, the government’s own incomplete list showed only 13 with criminal records.

As Mehta explains, the operation is a calculated strategy of targeting those convenient to inflate arrest numbers. “The easiest people to go after are those the government already has personal identifying information about,” she notes, including “people that are checking in at their immigration interviews … people that are, again, lawfully here.” This deliberate targeting of asylum seekers, students and workers—many of whom were complying with legal immigration proceedings—is intended to inflict the maximum cruelty and chaos to intimidate the entire working class.

Across the state, agents have engaged in a campaign of terror designed to disrupt daily life and create a pervasive atmosphere of fear. Tactics used by federal agents include:

- Masked agents operating in high-traffic public areas, including a high-profile arrest in the parking lot of the Maine Mall in South Portland near the Hannaford and TJMaxx stores.
- The use of unmarked minivans with out-of-state license plates to abduct people from the streets.
- Forcibly entering homes without judicial warrants, a reversal of longstanding policy revealed in an internal ICE memo.
- Smashing car windows to extract detainees, as occurred in the arrest of civil engineer Juan Sebastian Carvajal-Munoz.
- Leaving detainees’ cars running on the street, which Cumberland County Sheriff Kevin Joyce accurately described as “bush league policing.”

On January 22, Associated Press published a video of an ICE agent seen on camera outside the front door of a resident of Biddeford, Maine. Cristian Vaca was warned, “We’re gonna come back for your whole family.” Vaca, a native of Ecuador who says he has a work permit and an upcoming immigration hearing, told AP that he was “terrified” during the encounter and it made him concerned about his son.

Also in Biddeford, five-year-old Keyli Camila Espin Vaca was left at school after her mother was seized by ICE agents on Friday, January 23. Her mother was stopped in her car, where agents demanded documentation she did not have. Mayra Vaca Latacunga, a 25-year-old single mother from Ecuador and Camila’s sole caretaker, was handcuffed and transferred to Massachusetts.

School officials escorted the kindergartner to her uncle’s house. Her mother was released Tuesday, January 27, with an ankle monitor strapped to her leg. Her family was afraid to pick her up at the Burlington field office and she had to wait for a ride to unite with her child.

The brutality of the federal operation has provoked

widespread opposition from workers and community advocates. Grassroots resistance has emerged as workers and residents refuse to be intimidated. Anti-ICE flyers have appeared in shop windows across Portland, and protesters have gathered outside the ICE field office in Scarborough to demand an end to the raids. The Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition and other community organizers have worked tirelessly to create support networks, connecting families with legal counsel. Residents have formed support networks to deliver food and supplies to immigrant families too afraid to leave their homes.

The blatant illegality and violence of the federal operation have also drawn criticism from Democratic state and local officials, who fear the social explosion it is creating. The response from Maine's Democratic officials is not a genuine defense of immigrants and democratic rights, but a calculated political performance. Their actions follow a well-worn national playbook: issue outraged press releases, hold press conferences to express concern, and demand information from the very agencies carrying out the terror. These are tactics designed to give the appearance of opposition, channeling popular anger into safe, institutional dead ends without obstructing the functioning of the federal state apparatus in any meaningful way.

Governor Janet Mills, the state's leading Democrat, at a press conference January 22, adopted a posture of defiance, declaring, "If they have warrants, show the warrants. In America, we don't believe in secret arrests or secret police." While making such declarations, her administration took no concrete action to use the powers of the state government to halt the raids.

The centerpiece of state Democrats' supposed legislative defense, bill LD 1971, limiting state and local police cooperation with federal immigration enforcement, was exposed as an equally empty gesture. Mills' own role was telling. She initially called the bill "overly broad and confusing" and only allowed it to become law without her signature in January 2026, *after* witnessing what she called "ICE's unacceptable actions." She did not campaign for the law but was reluctantly pushed into accepting it by the very crisis she refused to confront. More fundamentally, the law is designed to be ineffective against federal power.

As the ACLU of Maine itself noted, "As a state law, LD 1971 will not impact federal laws allowing federal officials to operate in Maine." It prohibits Maine police from *assisting* ICE, but it does absolutely nothing to prevent federal agents from conducting their own operations, abducting residents and terrorizing communities.

Moreover, laws such as this are no guarantee against direct collusion between police and ICE agents as was shown in Everett, Massachusetts, where a 13-year-old was transferred

directly to ICE by Everett police in violation of well-established legal precedents that required them to release him.

The working class, whether immigrant or native-born, can place no faith in any section of the capitalist political establishment. The experience in Maine proves that the Democratic Party is not a shield against the far right, but a key enabler of its agenda.

"Operation Catch of the Day" is not an isolated event confined to a rural state. It is an integral part of a nationwide assault by the Trump administration on the democratic and social rights of the entire working class, directly connected to the federal escalation of state violence in Minneapolis and other cities.

The defense of immigrants is an essential and inseparable component of the struggle to defend the democratic and social rights of the entire working class. The working class must reject the nationalist poison used to divide it, and unite in a common struggle against the capitalist state and its apparatus of repression. Workers everywhere should take up the call of the Socialist Equality Party for the formation of rank-and-file committees that can coordinate mass action, defend those under attack, and lay the foundations for a general strike, that is, the complete shutdown of economic activity. This is the only way to oppose the entire state apparatus—ICE, the DHS, the police, the military—which exists to defend the wealth and power of the capitalist oligarchy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact