

Mass protests in Detroit area against plans for ICE detention and operational centers

Our reporters

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Hundreds of workers, students and middle class residents in Detroit's suburbs protested Monday evening against the Trump administration's plans to expand Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations across the metro area. The demonstrations in Romulus and Southfield are part of a growing wave of protests, student walkouts and public meetings erupting nationwide following the violent immigration raids and killings carried out by federal agents in Minneapolis last month.

In Romulus, an estimated 700 to 800 people gathered outside City Hall to oppose plans by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to convert a quarter-million square foot warehouse into a 500-bed ICE detention center. The proposed facility is located near the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, a placement widely understood to facilitate rapid and secretive deportation flights. If completed, the Romulus center would be one of 23 new mega-warehouse detention centers DHS plans to open across the country as part of a massive expansion of federal immigration enforcement infrastructure.

At the same time, 200 to 300 people packed a Southfield City Council meeting to protest the leasing of office space to ICE agents at the One Town Square building. City officials acknowledged last week that the U.S. General Services Administration had secured the space, claiming it would be used only to support ICE "administrative and legal services." Few in attendance found this reassurance credible.

Protesters at both locations carried signs denouncing ICE "concentration camps," fascism and Nazism, and defending the rights of immigrant workers and youth. Many attempted to enter city council chambers en masse, but Democratic Party officials relied on local police to limit access. In Romulus, chants of "let us in" echoed outside the meeting as officers blocked entry.

Students played a prominent role in the demonstrations. A student from the Caesar Chavez Academy in Detroit explained why young people had walked out of school.

"Basically, our whole school walked out because we're trying to make a change. Everything that ICE is doing is not right. People are here to live their life in a good way. Everyone's seeing what the cartel is doing in Mexico, and they wonder why people are trying to leave for a safe space."

Referring to widely circulated social media videos of the Quakertown, Pennsylvania police chief placing a young girl protesting ICE in a chokehold, she said, "That's not right. The students were speaking for people who can't speak for

themselves."

Her mother, standing beside her, defended the walkout. "They're exercising their First Amendment freedom of speech, and they're using their voice and walking out of school for a reason. When my daughter did it, I was proud of her."

Allison Bader, speaking on behalf of an immigrant rights organization, stressed the urgency of sustained public action. "It's exceptionally important to be in the streets as much as humanly possible to put pressure onto the Trump administration. We have families being absolutely torn apart, children held in concentration camps. My organization has been into the Baldwin camp seven times alone, helping people," she said, referring to the privately run North Lake ICE detention center in Baldwin, Michigan, which she called the "second largest concentration camp in the United States right now."

Bader warned that locating the Romulus center near the airport would make it "convenient to disappear human beings and continuing all the horrible stuff we know is true. ... This is no longer a Trump thing, and it's not just a Democrat or Republican. This is a human rights problem, and we have to stand up for each other."

Pointing to the immense wealth concentrated in the hands of corporate elites, she added, "The billionaires have to go. They need to be taxed at an insane amount because nobody needs a billion dollars. They buy off both sides (Democrats and Republicans). That's why they don't want the Epstein files to be released because the entire system will collapse because it's all of them."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in both demonstrations and city council meetings to argue that the defense of immigrant workers requires the independent mobilization of the working class. SEP member Jerry White, who recently returned from Minneapolis, addressed protesters in Romulus about the lessons of the mass movement that erupted there.

He pointed to the January 23 march of more than 50,000 people in Minneapolis, held despite sub-zero temperatures, as a powerful expression of popular opposition. However, he warned that the following day the Trump administration responded with "the cold-blooded murder of ICU nurse Alex Pretti." What unfolded in Minneapolis over the last month, he said, was "only a dry run for repression, the deportation of children and the murder of anti-ICE protesters" in Michigan and other states.

White emphasized that while chants against ICE expressed

genuine anger, they were not sufficient to halt the repression. “We have to mobilize the working class—the autoworkers, the Amazon workers, the truck drivers, the airline workers—in the preparation of a general strike to demand the abolition of ICE, the ending of the witch-hunting of immigrants and the holding responsible those who violate constitutional rights from the local police to the Trump administration.”

He issued two warnings: first, about the role of the trade union bureaucracy, which had blocked workers in Minneapolis from striking in solidarity with protesters; and second, about the Democratic Party. In Minnesota, Democratic Governor Tim Walz had reached an agreement with the Trump administration to deploy state troopers and Minneapolis police to arrest anti-ICE protesters and hand detained immigrants over to federal agents. This arrangement, White explained, allowed Trump to withdraw some federal agents from Minneapolis and redeploy them to other states, including Michigan.

“A new stage of resistance” was required, he said, involving the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory, workplace, school and neighborhood to organize opposition independently of both corporate-controlled parties.

Several Democratic politicians appeared at the Romulus protest, including Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist and state legislators Darrin Camilleri and Dylan Wegela. They presented themselves as opponents of Trump while encouraging attendees to channel their anger into the upcoming mid-term elections.

The Romulus City Council adopted a nonbinding resolution declaring its opposition to the detention center, primarily citing concerns about local resources, potential strain on the police department, and the possibility that the facility would “depress property values and deter business investment.” One council member suggested ICE should instead utilize one of Michigan’s “empty prisons.” Another commented on the increased cost of policing mass demonstrations.

During public comment, one speaker noted that Romulus High School students had walked out the day after news of the detention center became public and criticized Democratic Mayor Robert McCraight for initially dismissing reports as “unsubstantiated.” Another worker asked bluntly, “When did America become Nazi Germany where you have to show your papers?”

At the Southfield City Council meeting, hundreds of residents packed the chamber. The council unanimously approved a carefully worded resolution affirming “local control, community safety and the protection of civil rights,” while pointedly declaring that the city “cannot ignore federal law.”

One of the first to speak from the floor was 15-year Charles O’Neal. “I’m here because too many of you people won’t speak up for yourselves,” the teenager began, denouncing, “ICE moving into Southfield, an election denier counting your ballots,” and warning that the 2026 elections are “being taken from us.”

The teenager directed his comments to City Clerk Gabi Grossbard, an ultra-right Republican who peddled Trump’s lie that the 2020 elections were stolen and sought to invalidate the votes of more than 1 million Michiganders. Grossbard also backed, and may have directly participated in, the January 6 coup attempt in Washington D.C.

After the teenager called Grossbard out, Council President Charles Hicks, a Democrat, interrupted and reiterated rules banning “personal or impertinent attacks.” Grossbard then demanded police remove the teenager, and several officers escorted O’Neal out amid shouts from the audience that “He’s saying facts!”

Speaker after speaker rejected the characterization of the ICE office as merely administrative. Many warned that once ICE establishes a foothold in a city, it rarely withdraws.

Nadav Pais-Greenapple, whose grandfather fled Nazi-occupied Netherlands, referenced relatives murdered in the Sobibor and Treblinka death camps. “The rise of fascism in our country makes it abundantly clear that we learn as much from history as a rabbit learns from an experiment performed upon it,” he said. “ICE, our modern-day Gestapo, or slave-catchers, are not only here at our doorstep in Southfield but have been handed the keys to the house.”

He added that the facility would be “used by ICE and DHS to produce the legal justification for their attack on our community,” serving as a base from which to “track, monitor and surveil us and our neighbors.” “Fascism is not only ushered in by masked men with guns in the streets,” he warned, “it is supported by the actions of bureaucrats who sign papers, request warrants, and sign legal memoranda.”

Another resident said that if ICE entrenched itself in Southfield, the city would begin to resemble a “sundown town,” recalling her grandparents’ experience in Jim Crow Alabama and the injunction to “carry your ID every day.” Others described carrying passports to work out of fear of racial profiling.

In comments to a WSWs reporter, Alexis linked the repression to the economic system itself. “It’s all just about money, so the working class has the upper hand. A general strike would hit where they’re going to understand, where the money is.” Crystal, a Mexican American Southfield resident, stated plainly, “What ICE is doing is illegal, and it’s fascist.”

Speaking on behalf of the SEP, Phyllis Steele, a Detroit educator, pointed to the recent ICE kidnapping of 23-year-old Detroit resident Alcides Caceres, the seizure of two Amazon Flex drivers outside a warehouse in Hazel Park and an ICE operation outside of GM’s Factory Zero in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck. Nearly 250 years since the Declaration of Independence, she said, “the convicted criminal in the White House, acting on behalf of a corporate oligarchy, asserts that his power is unlimited.”

The Democrats issue statements and posture while they fund the same repressive agencies. “If this is to be stopped, it will be stopped by the mobilization of the working class,” Steele said, concluding that “Autoworkers, logistics workers, educators, healthcare workers: You have the power to shut down this machinery of repression.”



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