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American nightmare: Nine immigrants suffocate to death in trailer left in Texas parking lot

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As President Donald Trump boasted of “American pride and prestige” in a speech to sailors in Virginia on Saturday, an American nightmare was playing out in San Antonio, Texas.

Nine immigrants are dead and 19 are in critical condition after being locked in a sealed semitruck trailer for 24 hours. The trailer was parked in the sun in a Wal-Mart parking lot in 100-degree weather.

Shortly before 12:30 am Sunday morning, one of the trapped immigrants managed to break out of the trailer to ask a Wal-Mart worker for water. The worker brought water and called 911 for help.

Police and immigration officials arrived at the scene and detained the immigrants as they stumbled out of the trailer and into the parking lot. Once those still alive had been captured, police dragged out the bodies of the eight who died of heat stroke or dehydration, including two children. Another individual died at the hospital on Sunday.

The Wal-Mart store remained open on Sunday.

It is difficult to imagine the hell the migrants experienced, gasping for air in the stifling heat as death encircled them. San Antonio Fire Chief Charles Hood told the press that the survivors “were very hot to the touch.” Their heart rates were all above 130 beats per minute.

Amid reports that some of the migrants had fled the parking lot, police and immigration authorities launched a manhunt, searching the surrounding area for escaped immigrants to arrest and jail. A helicopter shone a searchlight in nearby woods and continued its search for hours as dawn broke.

Only the bodies of the dead will be allowed to stay in the United States, for burial. The survivors will be thrown into detention centers and promptly deported, most likely without the right to appear before a judge to plead their case.

Thomas Homan, the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), delivered the following statement:

“The horrific crime uncovered last night ranks as a stark reminder of why human smuggling networks must be pursued, caught and punished... These networks have repeatedly shown a reckless disregard for those they smuggle... The men and women of ICE are proud to stand alongside our law enforcement partners” to “protect the public and those who would fall victim to their dangerous practices that focus solely on their illicit profits.”

This statement will serve as a key exhibit in a future trial for crimes against humanity. Prosecutors will point out that, yes, what took place was a horrific crime. Furthermore, it is true that the criminals, driven by their drive for profit, display a reckless disregard for the lives of their victims.

However, it is not the “smuggling networks” that are primarily responsible for what took place in San Antonio. It is ICE, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and the bipartisan policies of the US government that are to blame. Like the recent Grenfell fire in London which killed dozens, the San Antonio tragedy is a case of social murder, for which the ruling class is guilty.

In the 1990s, under President Bill Clinton, Democrats and Republicans enacted programs like “Operation Gatekeeper” and “Operation Hold-the-Line,” the aim of which was to militarize urban crossing zones and force migrants to cross in the uninhabitable deserts.

In 2006, under the Bush administration, Congress passed the Secure Fences Act, which facilitated the construction of hundreds of miles of border barriers and further militarized the border. Those voting “yes” for this law included then-Senators Joseph Biden, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain and Charles Schumer. In 2010, Obama signed legislation that deployed a fleet of drones to the border and 1,500 National Guard soldiers to block or arrest immigrants. Thousands have been killed attempting to cross as a result of these policies.

Donald Trump is living up to his pledge to “unshackle” ICE and CBP and has hired fascist and white supremacist advisors to key positions in the immigration agencies. The Trump administration has already arrested over 60,000 immigrants in the first six months of 2017,

roughly 40 percent more than Obama, who was known among immigrants as the “deporter-in-chief.”

The tragedy in San Antonio has gone practically unnoticed by the political establishment. The Democratic Party response consisted of statements denouncing the smugglers, including the declaration of Joaquin Castro, U.S. Congressman from San Antonio, who said, “The smugglers responsible for the incident, who showed no regard for the lives of the people they were transporting, should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

The fact that so many migrants still embark on such dangerous journeys is a testament to the depth of the social crisis in Mexico and Central America. Devastated by a century of imperialist exploitation and military intervention, countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua have never recovered from the imprint left by US-backed dictatorships and death squads.

The same is true of migrants escaping the Middle East, where US-led wars have killed millions and forced many more to flee. Thousands have drowned in the Mediterranean. In August 2015, 71 Middle Eastern migrants suffocated in a truck trailer after attempting to cross into Austria.

The world is pulsing with people who are forced to flee their homes under the weight of decades of economic exploitation and war. According to a UN report from 2015, there are 65.3 million refugees in the world, more than the population of the United Kingdom, France or Italy.

The refugee crisis is the product of the capitalist system and requires a socialist solution. Never in history has the contradiction between the ease with which capital flows across borders and the difficulty with which human beings flee across national boundaries been so acute. As the world economy becomes increasingly interconnected through the advent of the Internet, mobile phones and integrated global supply lines, the ruling classes of the so-called democratic countries are increasingly protecting themselves, as Leon Trotsky put it, “by a customs wall and a hedge of bayonets.”

Socialists reject attempts to reconcile “left-wing” slogans with nationalist poison. Figures like Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US expose their pro-capitalist outlook when they talk about “reasonable management of migration” (Corbyn’s Labour Party manifesto) and denounce open borders as a “right-wing proposal” that “would make everybody in America poorer” (Sanders’ interview with *Vox*, July 18, 2015).

Socialists oppose the division of the world into nation-states and call for bringing the geographical organization of the world into harmony with the international character of the global economy.