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The global pandemic and global war on immigrants and refugees



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, inflicting mass death and suffering on a global scale, calls by international institutions like the United Nations and the World Health Organization for global “solidarity” are falling on deaf ears, as far as the capitalist ruling classes are concerned.

In his statement on the COVID-19 crisis, Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, warned against the pandemic being used as the pretext for abolishing the right to asylum and driving back those fleeing death and oppression. “In these challenging times, let us not forget those who are fleeing war and persecution. They need—we all need—solidarity and compassion now more than ever before,” he said.

Far from “solidarity and compassion,” refugees and migrants on a global scale are on the receiving end of state violence, mass deportations, incarceration, hunger and death. As with the social inequality and intensified exploitation of the working class that pervades capitalist societies around the world, the relentless drive toward imperialist war and the turn toward authoritarian methods of rule, the coronavirus pandemic has served to accelerate, and justify, a war on refugees that was raging well before the virus claimed its first victim.

As of today, 177 countries have either fully or partially closed their borders, and the right to asylum has effectively been abrogated throughout most of the world.

Nowhere is this truer than in the United States, where the Trump administration has seized upon the coronavirus pandemic to implement sweeping anti-immigration decrees that it had planned well before the term COVID-19 was ever coined. It has invoked an obscure immigration statute enacted as a defense against communicable diseases to deport tens of thousands of people to countries where the spread of coronavirus is far less than in the US itself.

While promoting conspiracy theories about China having deliberately “seeded” the virus into the US and Western Europe, the Trump administration is doing precisely that with the summary deportation of planeloads of immigrants to impoverished countries in Central America as well as Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean. As immigrants are dragged out of detention centers, many of them run by for-profit prison corporations, where the coronavirus has spread like wildfire, these deportations have become a driving force in the spread of the pandemic in countries whose healthcare systems are quickly becoming overwhelmed.

Even Guatemala’s far-right President Alejandro Giammattei, a servile ally of US imperialism, was compelled to condemn the US deportations, telling the Washington think tank, the Atlantic Council, “We understand that the United States wants to deport people, we understand that, but what we don’t understand is that they send us contaminated flights.” His words provide an accurate reflection of his government’s contempt and cruelty towards those of his countrymen forcibly shipped back from the US.

Not even children are exempt from the US government’s sadism, with more than 1,000 of them subjected to summary deportations to Mexico and the violence-ridden Northern Triangle countries of Central America since March.

The Trump administration is notorious for its abject failure to carry out any effective policy to stem the spread of the coronavirus, leaving the US, a country that accounts for barely four percent of the world's population, with roughly a third of the world's infections and deaths. It has excelled, however, in the closing of borders and riding roughshod over US and international laws to deny essential rights to immigrants and refugees, all under the pretext of protecting America from a virus that has already spread without hinderance from coast to coast.

That such a response is not merely the product of the fascistic and criminal mind of the US president is made clear by the enactment of similar draconian crackdowns on immigrants across the globe.

In Europe, the two nations that serve as the main frontline border guards of "Fortress Europe"—Greece and Hungary, guarding, respectively, the Mediterranean and Balkan migration routes—have carried out equally barbarous policies against masses of refugees fleeing for their lives.

In Greece, hundreds if not thousands of asylum seekers have been subjected to extrajudicial deportations since the beginning of the pandemic.

Men, women and children fleeing the effects of imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere have been met at the Greek border with police firing tear gas and deploying razor wire. Refugees and migrants already in the country have been grabbed by police from the street and from detention centers, beaten, robbed of their money and cellphones, stripped of their clothes and forced across the border into Turkey. Meanwhile, coronavirus is running rampant in the overcrowded Greek refugee camps.

In Turkey itself, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, conditions are growing increasingly desperate. A survey conducted by the country's Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants found that 63 percent of refugees said that they had difficulty accessing food during the pandemic, and that more than 88 percent had no employment, compared to 18 percent before the outbreak.

Hungary last week bowed to a European Union court ruling that the so-called "migrant transit zones" on its borders, where refugees seeking entry from Serbia and Croatia were trapped, in some cases for more than a year, living in shipping containers and surrounded by razor wire and heavily armed border guards, were illegal. At the same time, it announced that it would bar access to its territory to anyone seeking asylum, a direct repudiation of the Geneva Conventions.

Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean, where 20,000 have died trying to reach Europe over the past four years, conditions have only become crueler with the pandemic. With both Malta and Italy having closed their ports to migrants on the grounds of the coronavirus threat, hundreds of refugees have been left stranded in the sea for weeks. In a shocking videotaped incident, Maltese patrol boats staged threatening maneuvers around refugees who had found themselves cast into the water from a sinking rubber boat.

Thousands of those stopped from reaching Europe have been sent back to Libya since the pandemic—with the aid of a Libyan “coast guard” funded by the EU—ending up in detention centers that are in many cases run by armed militias, where they are assaulted, starved, raped and even sold into slavery.

Driving this barbarous treatment of immigrants and refugees are the policies and interests of the ruling classes of all of Western Europe, those of Germany, France and the UK at their head.

Within country after country, from the US to Europe to the Persian Gulf oil monarchies, migrant workers face the worst conditions and account for a grossly disproportionate share of COVID-19’s victims. This includes the meatpacking plants in the US, previously the targets of ICE raids in which workers were frog-marched out of the factories, and now declared “essential services,” with workers being forced back onto production lines where hundreds upon hundreds have been infected, and many have died.

The same response of capitalism extends to the masses of South Asian workers who are now being unceremoniously thrown out of countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where they have served as the backbone of the workforce, toiling for low wages and without basic rights. And it includes the large number of Eastern European workers laboring under the worst conditions throughout the European Union.

Meanwhile, in refugee camps across the globe, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children are crowded into spaces where the admonitions of health authorities to combat the coronavirus with social distancing, hand-washing and other basic sanitary precautions are quite beyond their reach.

The fascistic conception that the coronavirus can be defeated by sealing national borders from “foreign” contagion is as unscientific as it is reactionary. The virus respects no national boundaries; it requires neither visa nor passport. As long as it persists anywhere on the planet, it will continue to threaten all of humanity.

The coronavirus pandemic poses the necessity of the working class mobilizing its immense social power independently on the basis of a socialist program, irreconcilably opposed to the economic interests of the capitalist class and the capitalist system as a whole. This requires above all the unification of the working class across national boundaries based upon the strategic perspective of the world socialist revolution. An integral part of this perspective is the unconditional defense of the right of workers from every corner of the globe to live and work in the country of their choice, with full citizenship rights, including the right to healthcare, a livable income and the ability to work and travel without fear of repression or deportation.

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