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## *The Haitian Migration Crisis: Made in the U.S.A.*



U.S. military personnel round-up protesting Haitian migrants being detained at Guantanamo, Cuba, August 1994. Photo by Sgt. Timothy E Lemaster, U.S. National Archives.

Through his administration's recent policies towards Haiti and Haitian migrants, President Joe Biden is carrying out a crime against humanity. Unfortunately, this represents continuity in a decades-long, bi-partisan policy toward Haiti.

Biden recently ordered the breakup of a camp of 15,000 mainly Black Haitian migrants under a border bridge in Del Rio, Texas. The migrants—many of whom had traveled thousands of miles—had fled to the U.S. in the hopes of being granted asylum from the

horrific oppression and exploitation they face in Haiti, Chile, Brazil, and other states in the region.

In scenes that evoked the history of U.S. slave catchers, Border Patrol agents on horseback used their reins as whips to beat the refugees they chased down and captured. Eager to join the racist frenzy, Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered the National Guard and Texas police to form a miles-long “steel wall” of patrol cars and military vehicles to block migrants from escaping Biden’s dragnet.

When these horrific scenes were caught on camera, Biden had the gall to condemn the Border Patrol for carrying out the orders he had given. But he did not rescind his policy to expel and deport the encamped Haitians based on Title 42, which Trump had previously invoked to close U.S. borders to all migrants during the pandemic. In fact, this was another in a series of actions that exposed the lies of Biden’s pre-election promises to establish a “humane migration system” and combat “systemic racism.”

From the Del Rio encampment, Biden expelled 8,000 migrants to Mexico, deported 7,000 to Haiti (many of whom had not been in the country for a decade), and admitted about 12,000 from the camp and Mexico into the U.S. Many migrants remain detained and others have been chained with tracking devices while they apply for asylum. They will likely be denied for being so-called economic migrants, not political refugees, or for having residence in a third country, and then face deportation. Once the camp was cleared of human beings, the bridge was reopened for commerce.

Biden carried out this racist repression to send a signal to tens of thousands of Haitians, who are making their way north through the Darien Gap between Panama and Colombia, that the border is closed to migrants. The Mexican state collaborated every step of the way, clearing out the encampment on its side of the border in Ciudad Acuña, deporting many to Haiti, shipping others back to southern Mexico, and promising to stop Haitians from reaching the U.S.

The manifold crises driving Haitians from their country are not natural or some quirk of history; they were caused in large part by U.S. imperialism. Instead of helping Haitians overcome those crises, the Biden administration is compounding them, shoring up the morally repugnant elite that runs Haiti, and blocking migrants’ escape routes with Washington’s racist, regional border regime.

### **The Imperialist Origins of Haiti’s Crises**

The mainstream media present the crises in Haiti that are driving migration—its poverty, so-called natural disasters, political corruption, and gangsterism—in sensationalized

fashion with ritualistically repeated and neutered phrases like “poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.” They pathologize the country as if there is something inherently wrong with it.

In fact, blame for most of these crises lies with the U.S. and other imperialist powers’ intervention in the country. From the Haitian Revolution right down to today, these powers have waged an unrelenting attack on the Haitian people’s struggle for liberation, democracy, and equality.

When the enslaved Africans overthrew their French oppressors in 1791 and declared Haiti’s independence in 1804, the great slave-holding powers of the time—France, Spain, England, and the newly independent U.S.—did everything in their powers to destroy the new Black republic. France, Spain, and England all deployed armies in a vain attempt to prevent the revolution’s victory.

After their defeat, they moved to isolate Haiti and stop it from becoming a precedent and inspiration for revolutionary risings of the enslaved in the region. France only recognized the country’s independence in 1825 on the condition that Haiti repays their former masters in reparations for the loss of their “property,” that is, their land and enslaved human beings.

To pay this “debt,” Haiti had to take out loans at usurious interest rates from French and U.S. banks, stunting its economic development. In today’s money, they shelled out \$21 billion for recognition by the great powers. Even then, the U.S. did not acknowledge Haiti’s independence until the middle of the Civil War in 1862.

The imperialist powers of the 19th century shackled Haiti with debt until its last payment in 1947, isolated it from the world system, and blocked its independent development. They made the country pay an enormous price for its liberation—poverty and structural adjustment from its birth.

### **Washington: Haiti’s Twentieth Century Overlord**

After the U.S. rose as a new imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century, it viewed the Caribbean as an “American lake.” It aimed to prevent its European rivals from encroaching on its fiefdom and treated the region’s states as vassals to be commanded and, when insufficiently obedient, subjected to military intervention and occupation.

Haiti was one of its prime targets, with devastating consequences for that country’s politics and economy throughout the twentieth century and to this day. Woodrow Wilson sent in the Marines to occupy Haiti from 1915 to 1934, seizing control of the country’s financial and economic assets as compensation for the government’s failure to make loan

payments. Wilson also wanted to ensure that U.S. corporations, and not those of Germany, would control the country's economy.

The U.S. handpicked the country's leaders, imposed forced labor on peasants, brutally repressed the Cacos rebellion, and, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ripped up the country's revolutionary constitution and imposed a new one that allowed foreign ownership of the country's land. To ensure "order" when it left, the U.S. created and backed the dreaded Haitian military, the Forces Armées d'Haïti, whose only function was to repress the country's people.

During the Cold War, the U.S. backed the brutal dictatorship of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier as an anti-communist counterweight to Fidel Castro's Cuba. The Duvaliers ruled from 1957 to 1986 through state terror carried out by its murderous paramilitary, the Tonton Macoute. With Washington's tolerance, if not encouragement, the father-son dictatorship killed as many as 60,000 people, especially socialists and advocates of democracy and social reform.

Washington used Baby Doc's regime to impose one of the most predatory structural adjustment programs in the region. It promised to remake the country's economy by privatizing state-owned industry, dismantling its welfare state, opening it up to international agribusiness, and employing displaced peasants in urban sweatshops run by multinationals. This neoliberal prescription was so life-threatening that Haitian activists called it "the plan of death."

### **Damning the Flood of Social Reform**

In one of the first rebellions against neoliberalism, Haitians rose up in a mass movement called Lavalas ("the flood" in Haitian creole) to topple Baby Doc from power in 1986. This led to the country's first free and democratic presidential election in 1990 won by Jean Bertrand Aristide. A liberation theologian, Aristide promised to rip up the roots of the old order and implement a program of social democratic reforms.

Threatened by these reforms, the Haitian army, backed by the country's ruling class and Washington, carried out a coup against Aristide in 1991. The administrations of George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton stood by while the military carried out mass repression and murder.

Infamously, then-Senator Joe Biden argued that intervening to stop the bloodshed in Haiti was not a priority and that the U.S. should ignore the humanitarian catastrophe. He stated that "if Haiti quietly sunk into the Caribbean or rose up 300 feet, it wouldn't matter a whole lot in terms of our interest."

Clinton only agreed to intervene and return Aristide to power in 1994 on the condition that Aristide abandon much of his social democratic agenda and implement “neoliberalism with a human face.” He did manage to abolish the army and resist the worst of the neoliberal program, but his hand-picked successor, Rene Preval, implemented much of it between 1996 and 2001.

Aristide again ran for and was elected president in 2001 on promises of social reform and securing reparations of \$21 billion from France for the debt it imposed on Haiti to be paid on the 200th anniversary of its independence in 2004. The U.S. under George Bush Jr. imposed an aid embargo on Haiti, stopping Aristide from implementing even a modest version of his program.

The blockage of reform demoralized the Lavalas movement and gave space for right-wing paramilitaries to mount increasingly violent opposition, which Aristide confronted with his own paramilitaries. With the country on the brink of a conflagration, the U.S., France, and Canada organized a second coup against Aristide, kidnapping and exiling him to the Central African Republic until he secured asylum in South Africa.

The U.S. deployed the UN to occupy the country from 2004 to 2017. While of course sold as a humanitarian mission, the UN forces proceeded to repress popular protest, rape women, and introduce cholera into Haiti, killing 10,000 people in an epidemic.

Meanwhile, the U.S. backed a succession of weak, quisling presidents from Rene Preval for a second time to Kompa band leader, Michel “Sweet Mickey” Martelly, to the widely despised and recently assassinated, Jovenel Moïse. Each won office in elections with collapsing voter turnout, had little to no popular support, and were widely viewed as illegitimate.

Each administration introduced increasingly draconian neoliberal programs that hollowed out the Haitian state, which was so incapacitated that it barely could be said to be in control of the society, let alone regulate it and provide any services to socially reproduce it. That void of service provision has been filled by privatized services for the rich and international NGOs for everyone else.

Those NGOs were in no way beholden to the Haitian people, but to the corporations and imperialist states that bankrolled them. Indeed as Mark Schuller, Haiti became a republic of NGOs, and one under an occupation entirely controlled by foreign capitalist powers.

### **Neoliberal Disasters and Creation of a Dependent Aid State**

U.S. imperialism’s incapacitation of the Haitian state set the country up to be devastated by so-called natural disasters. Haiti had few to no regulations to ensure that buildings were

capable of withstanding earthquakes, few remaining trees to absorb winds and rain from hurricanes, and no state services ready to provide relief and reconstruction.

So, when the 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Port au Prince in 2010, it laid waste to the capital, flattening the presidential palace, destroying homes, killing as many as 300,000 people, and impacting millions more. Over the next decade, a succession of hurricanes and tropical storms ravaged the country's deforested land turning rivers into torrents that flooded lands and wiped out buildings. And, to top it all off, this August another magnitude 7.2 earthquake devastated the island's south, killing 2,200 people, injuring another 12,000, and destroying 7,000 homes.

While people of the world responded with the utmost generosity, they sent money mostly to the corrupt NGOs like the Red Cross that had collaborated in the incapacitation of the Haitian state, and much of the funds never made it to the people in need but got diverted into other projects and the salaries of bureaucrats. Meanwhile, the U.S. state and its imperial accomplices promised billions to "build Haiti back better."

Predictably, they launched yet another neoliberal development plan overseen by Bill Clinton. The states funneled \$13 billion into building more sweatshops, setting up walled-off tourist resorts, and funding more NGOs to provide services and aid. While billions were spent, conditions only got worse for the country's majority; 60 percent of the country lives in poverty, 46 percent of the population lives in acute food insecurity, and 217,000 children face moderate-to-severe acute malnutrition.

Haiti became what Jake Johnston has called an "aid state," a government entirely dependent on funds from imperial states and international donors. For the people to survive, they depend increasingly on remittances sent from their relatives working in low-paid jobs in other Caribbean countries, Latin America, and the U.S.

### **Corruption, COVID, and Political Chaos**

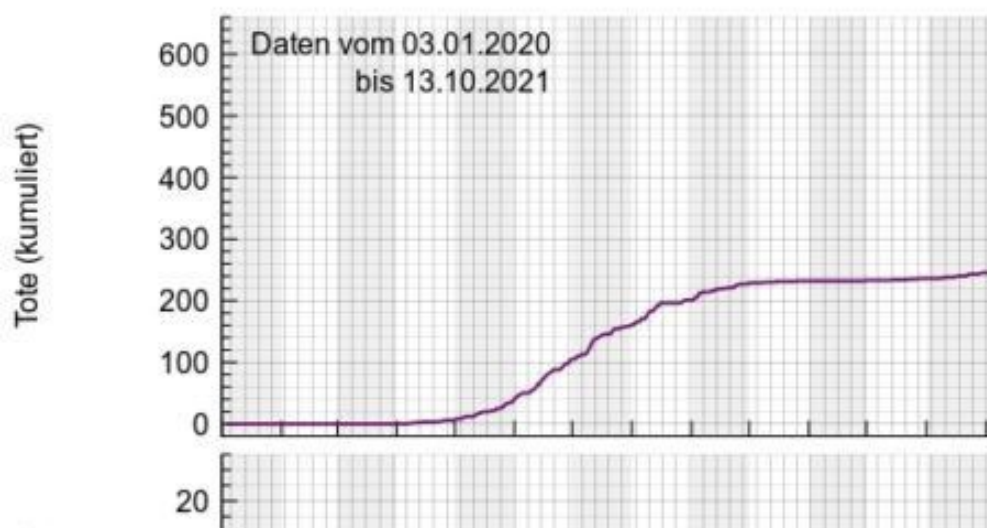
When the UN occupation ended in 2017, this dependent aid state descended into ever-worsening corruption and infighting between factions of the political elite over who would steal a bigger slice of the aid pie for their own enrichment. Their theft stoked mass anger in a population desperate for reforms to alleviate their plight.

The Petrocaribe Scandal is the worst example of the venal elite's corruption. Venezuela allowed Haiti to borrow oil from it to be paid back in 25 years. That freed up over \$3.2 billion that was intended for reforms to improve people's lives. Instead, the political elite, including President Moïse, simply pocketed more than \$2 billion for themselves and their

cronies. With the money gone, Haiti still is on the hook to pay Venezuela back. Revelations of this corruption sparked mass protests, calling for Moïse's resignation.

Despite the spiraling crisis, Trump and then Biden continued to support Moïse, even after he dissolved parliament and opted to rule by decree after his term expired. With Washington's backing, he became for all intents and purposes a dictator, who deployed cops, paramilitaries, and gangs against his opponents.

At this moment of complete political chaos, COVID-19 struck a country without a functioning healthcare system and with only 64 ventilators in a country of 11 million people. Up until this summer, the government had no plans for mass vaccinations amidst relatively low rates of infection and death.



COVID-19 cases, and deaths, continue to climb in Haiti throughout the second half of 2021. Graph from World Health Organization.

When the delta surge struck, the U.S. and the Haitian government finally started a program of vaccinations, but they still only have half a million doses for a population of 11 million. Even worse, the global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic threw Haiti into a sharp contraction cutting Haitian living standards, a fact only compounded by drops in remittances from Haitians abroad who had lost their jobs during the recessions in Latin America and the U.S.

With the society coming apart at the seams, gangs began to emerge, some with the backing of the government. Armed with guns, mainly imported from the U.S., they built mobster-like fiefdoms, ran extortion rings, stole aid, kidnapped people demanding ransom often from relatives abroad, and carried out revenge killings against their rivals.

With Haiti spiraling into social and political chaos, Moïse was assassinated in July by a group of foreign mercenaries made up mostly of former soldiers from the Colombian military, many of whom had been trained at the School of the Americas. While it remains unclear who ordered the murder, it has all the hallmarks of a hit ordered by Moïse's opponents in the ruling class. To maintain some semblance of government, the U.S. has appointed Ariel Henry as president, a man who aided and abetted Washington's second coup against Aristide.

### **Washington's Border Regime Deployed Against Haitian Migrants**

U.S. imperialism's interventions and support for reactionary Haitian governments are the cause of the waves of migrants that have fled the country. The Washington-backed Duvalier dictatorship drove out hundreds of thousands of people, the first coup against Aristide sent tens of thousands out of the country, the 2010 earthquake drove tens of thousands more abroad, and now the complete social crisis in Haiti, as well as deteriorating conditions in Latin America, is triggering a new wave of tens of thousands of people fleeing to the U.S.

While U.S. imperialism was causing mass migration, it was at the very same time building an immense border regime to buttress global capitalism's state structures, block people from entering the U.S., and criminalize those that successfully evaded the border cops as racialized cheap labor in everything from agribusiness to meatpacking. Washington has used its border regime to block most Haitian refugees, only granting partial exceptions when faced with political pressure and protest.

It has subjected Haitians to xenophobic, racist, and politically discriminatory treatment. This has led to them having the lowest rate of asylum of any nationality with high rates of application.

During the 1970s, Jimmy Carter, despite his self-proclaimed support for human rights, applied a double standard to migrants from Haiti and Cuba. Because Washington supported the Duvalier dictatorship as a Cold War ally, Carter denied Haitian migrants refugee status, arrested them when they arrived in Florida, and deported them back to Haiti, while it admitted all mostly lighter-skinned Cubans fleeing the Castro regime which the U.S. opposed.

Ronald Reagan, who pushed for the neoliberal program in Haiti in the 1980s, deployed the Coast Guard to interdict undocumented migrants at sea and applied the new policy mostly to Haitians. The U.S. intercepted boats with Haitians before they reached U.S. shores, denied them the chance to apply for asylum, and returned them to Haiti. In 1987, Reagan

introduced a ban on anyone with HIV from being allowed into the U.S., even if they qualified for asylum, and used it against Haitians in particular.

### **Jailing and Repatriating Refugees from Washington's Coups**

After Washington's first coup against Aristide in 1991, George Bush Sr. blocked boats filled with Haitian refugees and jailed 34,000 in vast concentration camps set up in Guantanamo, Cuba. He repatriated most of them to Haiti, some to certain death at the hands of the coup regime.

He did grant a third of them asylum, but he used Reagan's ban on HIV-positive migrants to keep 270 Haitians in a segregated camp even though they qualified for asylum. While Bill Clinton campaigned against Bush's policy, once in office he broke his promise and kept the concentration camp open. A court case forced him to finally admit the 270 HIV-positive asylees into the U.S.

After Washington's second coup against Aristide in 2004, George W. Bush threatened to interdict and repatriate any migrants fleeing Haiti. He deputized the UN to lock people in place and impose "order" on the country.

The Obama administration, infamous for deporting more migrants than any in U.S. history, treated Haitians little better. While he granted 60,000 Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Haitians in the U.S. after the 2010 earthquake and stopped deportations, it was open to review every 18 months. While he renewed TPS, Obama re-started interdictions and deportations in 2016.

### **Trump's Unleashes the Border Regime's Racism and Xenophobia**

Trump's America First agenda made explicit and more radical all the xenophobic and racist features of Washington's border regime. He placed all migrants, including Haitians, in Washington's crosshairs.

In a flurry of executive orders, some upheld by the courts and others struck down, Trump imposed a Muslim ban, implemented Remain in Mexico that forces those applying for asylum at a U.S. port of entry to return to Mexico while they await their hearings, and then in the wake of COVID-19 imposed Title 42, shutting down the borders to all migrants. He unleashed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to go after migrants, restricted to 15,000 the number of refugees the U.S. would grant asylum in 2021, and gutted the asylum system to make it difficult to process even that tiny number of applicants.

Trump attacked TPS for Haitians, Salvadorans, and several African countries, raving "why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" After noting his preference for white migration from countries like Norway, Trump raved "Why do we

need more Haitians. Take them out.” He ordered the termination of TPS for 400,000 people in the U.S., including 60,000 Haitians. Only court rulings blocked that attack.

Haitian migrants faced similar assaults in Latin America where they had fled after the earthquake to find jobs during the region’s China-fueled commodity boom. With that ended by the Chinese slowdown and global recession triggered by the pandemic, Haitians lost their jobs and became the objects of racist scapegoating in Brazil and Chile where they were concentrated in the largest numbers.

Facing desperate conditions, Haitians closely watched the U.S. presidential elections. When Biden won, they began the long trek by foot and bus to the U.S. in the hopes that they would now be welcomed.

### **Biden’s Betrayal of Migrant Justice**

Tragically, they were soon betrayed. In reality, there was little basis in Biden’s record to expect him to treat Haitians or any other migrants differently than his predecessors. His fingerprints are all over the creation of Washington’s border regime and, when he was last in office under Obama, he was an accomplice to his boss as the Vice-Deporter-in-Chief.

But, under pressure from activists who had protested Trump’s unconscionable policies, and faced with liberal challengers in the Democratic primary, Biden verbally tacked left, mouthing promises to repeal the worst of his bigoted predecessor’s executive orders, replace them with a new “humane immigration policy,” pass so-called comprehensive immigration reform, and redress the causes of migration in Central America. At the same time, however, Biden made clear that he would pair such reform with border enforcement and expansion of the border regime into Central America.

Once in office, Biden did repeal some of Trump’s executive orders, but he has enforced the closure of the border under Title 42 and Remain in Mexico. He has used these to intercept 1.5 million at the border, expel 700,000, and place tens of thousands, including families with children, in what under Trump had been called concentration camps.

While Biden introduced a proposal for comprehensive immigration reform, it included onerous and punitive conditions for citizenship and was paired with even more border enforcement, including plans for a new virtual border wall. It was a far cry from the movement’s call for unconditional legalization for all and abolition of the border regime.

Without even a fight, Biden let this bill die in Congress where it never even came up for a vote. And when the parliamentarian blocked an attempt to include it in the reconciliation bill, the Democrats capitulated obeying an unelected bureaucrat’s non-binding judgment.

With reform dead in the water, Biden abandoned his promise to impose a moratorium on deportations when it was blocked in the courts and started to repatriate people. He deputized his Vice President, Kamala Harris, herself a child of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, the new “Immigration Czar” to carry out all this border enforcement.

On her junket to Washington’s vassals in the Northern Triangle and Mexico, Harris told migrants, “Do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our borders. If you come to our border, you will be turned back.” She also announced a new initiative for Central American countries that combines neoliberal development aid, support for so-called “democratization”, and assistance for them to build up their own border regimes.

### **Haitians Collide with Biden’s Border Regime**

Haitian migrants collided directly into Biden’s border regime. Biden did extend TPS for another 18 months, but that only applied to 150,000 Haitians who had been in the U.S. before May 21st of this year, not new arrivals.

When Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas announced the administration’s decision, he declared “Haiti is currently experiencing serious security concerns, social unrest, an increase in human rights abuses, crippling poverty, and lack of basic resources, which are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.” Despite these conditions, Biden has continued to deport Haitians, the first planeloads on the first day of Black History Month.

But Haitians in Latin America observed that some were getting through the border and so continued to head north. That led 30,000 mostly Haitians at the border to try and cross into Del Rio Texas with 15,000 getting through and setting up a camp under a bridge, hoping to apply for asylum. As the world witnessed, Biden treated them with callous brutality.

To stop the next wave of Haitian migrants, he has deputized Mexico to deport Haiti from the northern border region, relocate others to Tapachula, Chiapas, and deploy its National Guard there to block Haitian and other migrants’ passage up from Latin America. The Northern Triangle states have similarly started to crack down on migrant’s passage.

Biden has also ordered the Coast Guard to intercept migrants fleeing Haiti in boats, detaining hundreds in recent days. Ominously, he has also sought out a contractor to establish a camp for migrants in Guantanamo staffed with Haitian creole speakers. Joining the quarantining of people in Haiti, the Bahamas and even Cuba has started seizing and repatriating Haitians in the Caribbean.

### **Time to Rebuild Protest Against the Border Regime**

With Biden breaking his promises of reform, deporting Haitians and other migrants, and enforcing a closed border policy, the migrant justice movement must rebuild independent mass struggle with a program of immediate reforms and long-term border abolitionist goals.

Without protests against Biden's attack on Haitians and all migrants, he will only face pressure from xenophobic Democrats and racist Republicans. Already, Republican Governors led by Texas' Abbott and his Operation Lone Star have started to encroach on federal authority and implement their own rogue border policy.

The GOP plans to make immigration a central issue in the midterm elections, portraying Biden as soft on border enforcement, even though the administration is overseeing a closed border. Without protest from the migrant justice movement, Biden will double down on racist, border enforcement to neutralize Republican attacks, selling out migrants in the process.

Already there are positive signs of protests emerging, demanding justice for Haitians and all migrants. There are demonstrations calling for Biden and Senate Democrats to override the parliamentarian and include legalization in the reconciliation bill. And the Haitian Bridge Alliance has called for a national day of action on October 14th for Haitians.

In these protests it is vital that we demand justice for Haitians and all migrants, and not allow our enemies to divide us, pitting different migrant groups against one another. For Haitians, we should demand that Biden extend TPS to all in the country and grant them unconditional, permanent legalization.

For Haitians arriving at the border, we must demand that they all be let in, granted asylum, and provided any assistance they need to rebuild their lives. We must also call on Biden to stop all deportations of Haitians back to their country amidst the full-scale political, social, and economic crisis the U.S. has caused. Instead, the U.S. should pay reparations to Haiti and its people and allow them to determine their own destiny without interference from Washington or any other imperial power.

We must force Biden to scrap Title 42 and open the border immediately. If the U.S. is concerned about COVID-19, then it should end its vaccine apartheid and provide the shots and the capacity to make them to governments in Mexico, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the rest of the Global South.

The border regime, capitalist patents on life-saving medicine, and hoarding of vaccines are the problem, not migrants. For all those migrants, we must demand unconditional legalization.

In the fight for these immediate reforms, we must raise the guiding goals for the whole movement—the defunding and abolition of ICE, the Border Patrol, and the entire border regime. Only when we win open borders can we establish a society where no human being is illegal.

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