

The New Global Capitalism and the War on Immigrants

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By William I. Robinson (/author/itemlist/user/48751), Truthout (<http://truth-out.org>) | News Analysis



A police officer takes a member of the immigration reform group We Belong Together into custody after a sit-in on Independence and New Jersey Avenues on Capitol Hill in Washington, September 12, 2013. (Photo: Gabriella Demczuk / The New York Times)

When the US congress reconvenes this fall, it is expected to resume deliberations on immigration reform legislation. The House will continue to debate S.744, the bill that was passed by the Senate in June and that pundits have referred to as the "most monumental overhaul" of US immigration laws in a generation.

But immigrant rights organizations are deeply divided. Some groups have given critical support to the proposed legislation as the "best bill possible" under current conditions for the estimated 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States to normalize their status. Many others, however, have rejected what they see as a punitive Faustian bargain. They condemn the bill as an attempt to

deny rights, codify repression, legitimate the criminalization of immigrants, further the militarized control of their communities and reproduce a system of de facto labor peonage.

To understand the immigration reform debate, we need to go beyond the headlines and see the big picture of the role that immigrants play in the new global capitalism system. There is more here than meets the eye. The battle over reform legislation reflects the changing patterns of domination over the "wretched of the earth," a world increasingly under the dictatorship of corporate and military power, and the challenges and pitfalls that popular movements face in their struggles for social justice.

Global Capitalism and Immigrant Labor

The larger story behind immigration reform is capitalist globalization and the worldwide reorganization of the system for supplying labor to the global economy. Over the past few decades, there has been an upsurge in transnational migration as every country and region has become integrated, often violently, into global capitalism through foreign invasions and occupations, free-trade agreements, neoliberal social and economic policies, and financial crises. Hundreds of millions have been displaced from the countryside in the Global South and turned into internal and transnational migrants, providing a vast new pool of exploitable labor for the global economy as national labor markets have increasingly merged into a global labor market.

The creation of immigrant labor pools is a worldwide phenomenon in which growth poles in the global economy attract immigrant labor from their peripheries. Thus, to name a few of the major 21st century transnational labor flows, Turkish and Eastern European workers supply labor to Western Europe, Central Africans to South Africa, Nicaraguans to Costa Rica, Sri Lankas and other South Asians to the Middle East oil producing countries, Asians to Australia, Thais to Japan, Indonesians to Malaysia, and so on.

These transnational immigrant labor flows are a mechanism that has replaced colonialism in the mobilization around the world of labor pools, often drawn from ethnically and racially oppressed groups. States assume a gatekeeper function to regulate the flow of labor for the capitalist economy. For example, US immigration enforcement agencies, as do their counterparts around the world, undertake "revolving-door" practices - opening and shutting the flow of immigration in

accordance with needs of capital accumulation during distinct periods. Immigrants are sucked up when their labor is needed and then spit out when they become superfluous or potentially destabilizing to the system.

During the 1980s, 8 million Latin American emigrants arrived in the United States as globalization induced a wave of outmigration. This was nearly equal to the total figure of European immigrants who arrived on US shores during the first decades of the 20th century and made Latin America the principal origin of migration into the United States. Some 36 million immigrant workers were in the United States in 2010, at least 20 million of them from Latin America, some 11 million of which are undocumented (http://www.amazon.com/Latin-America-Global-Capitalism-Globalization/dp/080189834X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1378180567&sr=8-1&keywords=latin+america+and+global+capitalism).

The US economy has become increasingly dependent on immigrant labor. Although immigrant labor sustains US and Canadian agriculture, by the 1990s the majority of Latino/a immigrants were absorbed by industry, construction and services as part of a general "Latinization" of the economy. Latino immigrants have massively swelled the lower rungs of the US workforce. They provide almost all of the farm labor and much of the labor for hotels, restaurants, construction, janitorial and house cleaning, child care, domestic service, gardening and landscaping, hairdressing, delivery, meat and poultry packing, food processing, light manufacturing, retail and so on.

This dependence of the United States and the global economy on immigrant labor, presents a contradictory situation. From the viewpoint of the dominant groups, the dilemma is how to super-exploit an immigrant labor force, such as Latinos in the United States, yet how to simultaneously assure it is super controllable and super-controlled. The state must play a balancing act by finding a formula for a stable supply of cheap labor to employers, and at the same time, a viable system of state control over immigrants. The push in the United States and elsewhere has been toward heightened criminalization of immigrant communities, the militarized control of these communities, and the establishment of an immigrant detention and deportation complex.

New Axis of Inequality Worldwide

As borders have come down for capital and goods, they have been reinforced for human beings. While global capitalism creates immigrant workers, these workers do not enjoy citizenship rights in their host countries. Stripped either de facto or de jure of the political, civic and labor rights afforded to citizens, immigrant workers are

forced into the underground, made vulnerable to employers, whether large private or state employers or affluent families, and subject to hostile cultural and ideological environments.

The super-exploitation of an immigrant workforce would not be possible if that workforce had the same rights as citizens, if it did not face the insecurities and vulnerabilities of being undocumented or "illegal." Granting full citizenship rights to the tens of millions of immigrants in the United States would undermine the division of the United States - and by extension, the global - working class into immigrants and citizens. That division is a central component of the new class relations of global capitalism, predicated on a "flexible" mass of workers who can be hired and fired at will, are de-unionized, and face precarious work conditions, job instability, a rollback of benefits and downward pressure on wages.

Immigrant workers are not only flexible, but are disposable through deportation, and therefore, controllable. The *condition of deportable* must be created and then reproduced - periodically refreshed with new waves of "illegal" immigrants - since that condition assures the ability to super-exploit with impunity and to dispose of without consequence, should this labor become unruly or unnecessary.

Driving immigrant labor underground and absolving the state and employers of any commitment to the social reproduction of this labor allows for its maximum exploitation, together with its disposal, when necessary. The punitive features of immigration policy in the United States in recent decades have been combined with reforms to federal welfare law that denied immigrants - documented or not - access to such social wages as unemployment insurance, food stamps and certain welfare benefits. In this way, the immigrant labor force becomes responsible for its own maintenance and reproduction and also - through remittances - for family members abroad. This makes immigrant labor low cost and flexible for capital *and also* costless for the state compared to native-born labor. *Immigrant workers become the archetype of these new global class relations; the quintessential workforce of global capitalism.*

Hence, sustaining a reserve army of immigrant labor involves reproducing the division of workers into immigrants and citizens, which requires contradictory practices on the part of states. The state must lift national borders for capital but must reinforce these same national boundaries in its immigrant policies, and in its ideological activities, it must generate a nationalist hysteria by propagating such images as "out-of-control borders" and "invasions of illegal immigrants."

In sum, the division of the global working class into citizen and immigrant is a major new axis of inequality worldwide. Borders and nationality are used by transnational capital, the powerful and the privileged, to sustain new methods of control and domination over the global working class.

The Immigrant Military-Prison-Industrial-Detention Complex

There is a broad social and political base, therefore, for the maintenance of a flexible, super-controlled and super-exploited Latino immigrant workforce. The system cannot function without it. But immigrant labor is extremely profitable for the corporate economy in double sense. First, it is labor that is highly vulnerable, forced to exist semi-underground, and deportable, and therefore super-exploitable. Second, the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and the militarization of their control not only reproduce these conditions of vulnerability, but also in themselves, generate vast new opportunities for profit-making.

The immigrant military-prison-industrial-detention complex is one of the fastest growing sectors of the US economy. There has been a boom in new private prison construction to house immigrants detained during deportation proceedings. In 2007, nearly one million undocumented immigrants were apprehended and 311,000 deported. The Obama administration presents itself as a friend of Latinos (and immigrants more generally), yet Obama has deported more immigrants than any other president in the past half a century - some 400,000 per year since he took office in 2009.

The private immigrant detention complex is a boom industry. Undocumented immigrants constitute the fastest growing sector of the US prison population and are detained in private detention centers and deported by private companies contracted out by the United States. As of 2010, there were 270 immigration detention centers that caged on any given day over 30,000 immigrants. Since detainment facilities and deportation logistics are subcontracted to private companies, capital has a vested interest in the criminalization of immigrants and in the militarization of control over immigrants - and more broadly, therefore, a vested interest in contributing to the neofascist, anti-immigrant movement.

It is no surprise that William Andrews, the CEO of the Corrections Corporation of America, or CCA, the largest private US contractor for immigrant detention centers, declared in 2008 that "the demand for our facilities and services could be adversely affected by the relaxation of enforcement efforts . . . or through decriminalization [of immigrants]." A month after the anti-immigrant bill in Arizona, SB1070, became

law, Wayne Callabres, the president of Geo Group, another private prison contractor, held a conference call with investors and explained his company's aspirations.

"Opportunities at the federal level are going to continue apace as a result of what's happening," he said, referring to the Arizona law. "Those people coming across the border being caught are going to have to be detained and that, to me at least, suggests there's going to be enhanced opportunities for what we do."

Containing the Immigrant Rights Movement

The "war on terror" paved the way for an undeclared war on immigrants by fusing "national security/anti-terrorism" with immigration law enforcement, involving designation of borders and immigrant flows as "terrorism threats," the approval of vast new funding and the passage of a slew of policies and laws to undertake the new war. This war has further escalated in response to the spread worldwide of an immigrant rights movement to fight back against repression, exploitation, exclusion, cultural degradation and racism. A major turning point in this struggle in the United States came in spring 2006 with a series of unparalleled strikes and demonstrations that swept the country.

The immediate trigger for these mass protests was the introduction in the US Congress of a bill, known as the Sensenbrenner bill, which called for criminalizing undocumented immigrants by making it a felony to be in the United States without proper documentation. It also stipulated construction of a militarized wall between Mexico and the United States and the application of criminal sanctions against anyone who provided assistance to undocumented immigrants, including churches, humanitarian groups and social service agencies.

In one "day of national protest" on March 25, 2006, between one and two million people demonstrated in Los Angeles - the single biggest public protest in the city's history - and millions more followed suit in Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Washington, DC, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Tucson, Denver and dozens of other cities. Then, on May Day, 2006, trade unionists and social justice activists joined immigrants in "The Great American Boycott 2006/A Day Without an Immigrant." Millions - perhaps tens of millions - in over 200 cities across the country skipped work and school, commercial activity, and daily routines to participate in a national boycott, general strike, rallies and symbolic actions. Hundreds of local communities in the South, Midwest, Northwest and elsewhere, far away from the "gateway cities" where Latino populations are concentrated, experienced mass public mobilizations that placed them on the political map.

These protests defeated the Sensenbrenner bill, and at the same time, frightened the ruling class, sparking an escalation of state repression and racist nativism and fueling the neofascist anti-immigrant movement. The backlash involved, among other things, stepped-up raids on immigrant workplaces and communities, mass deportations, an increase in the number of federal immigration enforcement agents, the deputizing of local police forces as enforcement agents, the further militarization of the US-Mexico border, anti-immigrant hysteria in the mass media and the introduction at local, state and federal levels of a slew of discriminatory anti-immigrant legislative initiatives.

Blatantly racist public discourse that only a few years earlier would have been considered extreme became increasingly mainstream and aired on the mass media. The paramilitary organization Minutemen, a modern day, Latino-hating version of the Ku Klux Klan, spread in the first decade of the 21st century from its place of origin along the US-Mexican border in Arizona and California to other parts of the country. Minutemen claimed they must "secure the border" in the face of inadequate state-sponsored control. Their discourse, as well as that of the Tea Party and other such groups, beyond racist, was neo-fascist.

Such racist hostility toward Latinos and other immigrants may be intentionally generated by right-wing politicians, law-enforcement agents and neofascist anti-immigrant movements. They may be the effect of the structural and legal-institutional subordination of immigrant workers and their communities, or simply an unintended (although not necessarily unwelcomed) byproduct of the state's coercive policies.

White middle- and working-class sectors in the United States have faced downward mobility and heightened insecurities as the welfare state and job stability have been dismantled in the face of capitalist globalization. These sectors have been particularly prone to being organized into racist anti-immigrant politics by conservative political groups housed inside and outside of the Republican Party. Anti-immigrant forces have tried to draw in white workers with appeals to racial solidarity and to xenophobia and scapegoating of immigrant communities.

The scapegoating of these communities reached a zenith in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse and the onset of crisis. The crisis intensified anti-immigrant hysteria, fueled by a right-wing, racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant movement. Dozens of state and local governments around the country passed repressive anti-

immigrant legislation, among them, Arizona's SB1070 and Alabama's HB56, both of which institutionalized racial profiling and the terrorization of immigrant communities.

The magazine Mother Jones built a database of hundreds of repressive local and state level anti-immigrant laws introduced around the United States in the wake of SB1070, including 164 such laws (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/03/john-tanton-anti-immigration-laws>) passed by state legislatures in 2010 and 2011 alone. The database uncovered as well the extensive interlocking of far-right organizations comprising the anti-immigrant movement, other neofascist organizations in civil society, government agencies and elected officials (local and federal), politicians, and corporate and foundation funders, lobbies and activists.

Obama and the Democrats: Demobilization and Cooptation

The state's repression of the mass immigrant uprising of 2006 resulted in a significant split in the immigrant rights movement. In broad strokes, the Latino middle class and professional establishment found that their class interests were threatened by an uncontrolled self-mobilization of immigrant masses. Clustered in well-funded NGOs and in local, state and federal elected and appointed government positions, the Latino Establishment has attempted to wrest leadership from the grassroots base, achieve its hegemony over the movement, direct protest toward lobbying for legislative reform and align with the Democratic Party.

The Obama presidential campaign of 2008 effectively combined with the political aspirations of the Latino Establishment and the state's repression to co-opt and neutralize, at least momentarily, the mass movement. The radical grassroots camp was not against lobbying or attempting to penetrate the halls of power, but insisted on prioritizing a permanent mass movement from below that subordinates alliances with liberals to the interests of the disenfranchised majority of immigrant workers and their families. This camp has also insisted on the need to link the immigrant rights movement more openly and closely with other popular, labor and resistance struggles around the world for global justice.

These distinct strategies are now being played out in the debate on immigrant reform legislation. They represent, in the broader analysis, two different class projects within the multi-class community of immigrants and their supporters: the former, those of the middle-class strata who aspire to remove racist and legal impediments to their own class and political aspirations; the latter, a mass immigrant working class

that faces not just racism and legal discrimination, but also the acute labor exploitation and survival struggles imposed on them by a rapacious global capitalism.

It is widely recognized that Obama's 2012 reelection hinged heavily on the Latino vote, and that this voting bloc is expanding rapidly - something that has caused important sectors of the Republican Party to reconsider immigration reform. It may be that the 2012 vote gave the necessary impetus to bringing together a critical mass around the reformation of the strategy and methods for reproducing and controlling a reserve army of immigrant labor.

Reform Legislation that Meets Corporate, Military and Elite Interests

Although S.744 supposedly provides a "pathway to citizenship" for immigrants, the conditions under which undocumented immigrants can legalize their status are so onerous that it is estimated that between one-third and two-thirds of the undocumented will be unable meet the criteria. This criteria include having an income of 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline, which would make millions of immigrants who now work for minimum wage or less ineligible; as well as no lapses of employment for more than 60 days during a decade of provisional status; paying hefty fees and fines; passing a criminal background check; and learning English, US civics and history.

The bill denies immigrants access to public services. It does not lift the repressive "Secure Communities" and "287g" government programs. These two federal programs establish broad collaboration between the federal government and local and state law enforcement in policing immigrant communities in raids, detentions and deportations.

The bill would mandate a universal "E-verify" system, by which workers must prove they are eligible for employment before being hired; introduce biometric ID for immigrant workers; stipulate unprecedented collaboration between local and state police agencies and the Department of Homeland Security for database sharing, detention, and transfer of detainees; and set up a "guest worker" program that amounts to little more than indentured servitude.

The current guest worker program, known as the H2A program, was established in 1986 to allow US agribusiness to hire workers in other countries. The US government provides visas that allow them to work only for this employer, and only for a set period of time - less than a year - after which they must return to their home country.

If they're fired or lose their job before the contract is over, they must leave immediately. As David Bacon shows (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/19/stand-off-in-the-strawberry-fields.html>), the use of guest worker programs would expand rapidly if the reform bill passed, with its expanded guest worker provisions, and that would result in driving wage levels and bargaining power down even further, not only for agricultural workers, but for those in industries and services heavily dependent on immigrant labor.

More ominous, the bill hinges on so-called "border security." It proposes to increase spending by nearly \$50 billion on the militarization of the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border, doubling the number of Border Patrol agents to some 40,000 (one agent for every 88 yards), adding 700 miles of fencing, deploying drones, Blackhawk helicopters, surveillance towers, sensors and former army soldiers to the border.

The bill meets the interests of the immigrant military-prison-industrial-detention complex. Military contractors, Silicon Valley, law enforcement, construction and private prison companies stand to earn billions in profits. Agribusiness and the corporate sector will continue to exploit a largely captive labor force, racialized and relegated to second-class status, especially among the millions of immigrants who will be unable to legalize their status and among new immigrants and those brought in as "guest workers." It is no wonder that along with corporate lobbyists, staunch anti-immigrant conservatives such as Arizona governor Jan Brewer, FOX News commentator Bill O'Reilly, and Tea Party icon Rand Paul have endorsed the bill.

As National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (<http://www.nnirr.org/drupal/senate-bill-dashes-hopes>) board member Hamid Khan observed, the bill is a model for the "surveillance industrial complex." Under the guise of public safety and security, "the bill is a political investment in the further strengthening and legitimization of the police state."

The Obama strategy may prove to be quite successful in establishing the conditions for a reformulation of strategies and methods of immigrant social control and political co-optation. In the wake of the 2006 mass immigrant rights protests and the fierce state repression that ensued, Washington DC-based foundations broadly funded the more moderate and mainstream of the Latino and immigrant rights organizations, while the Democratic Party set about to separate the "establishment" Latino leadership from the radical organizers at the mass grassroots base and to recruit this leadership for the Obama project.

These diverse developments - state repression, anti-immigrant politics, Latino Establishment and Democratic co-optation - all came together in recent years and paid off by throwing the grassroots movement onto the defensive, bolstering Democratic Party hegemony among immigrants, and generating a critical mass for exactly the kind of conservative and repressive immigration reform legislation now in Congress. It is only the revitalization of a mass worker-based immigrant rights movement that can redirect the reform process to one that achieves a modicum of social justice.

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