

Trump administration to send 1,600 ICE detainees to federal prisons

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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The United States government will be transferring 1,600 migrants, including asylum seekers, held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to federal prisons in the first large scale transfer of immigrants from ICE detention centers to institutions run by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The decision is part of the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" immigration policy.

The detainees, notwithstanding the absence of any prior criminal record, will be transferred to five federal prisons in Victorville, California; La Tuna, Texas; Sheridan, Oregon; Phoenix, Arizona; and Seattle, Washington. This appalling decision shows clearly that the criminalization of migrants by the US government continues to accelerate, with a new nadir reached almost every day.

Reuters, which first broke the story on Thursday, reported that the transfer is the result of a new agreement between ICE, the US Marshals Service, and BOP, as a means to "provide more bed space." The detainees are expected to be in the prisons for 120 days while ICE finds new detention facilities. While administration officials make this sound like a hospitality issue, the reality is far more frightening.

Under previous administrations, there at least existed an important distinction between asylum-seekers and other types of undocumented migrants. The former were released and allowed to remain with their families as their cases were being considered by the courts. The latter, if found to be first-time offenders were generally put through civil deportation proceedings and held in ICE detention centers or county jails while awaiting hearings.

Under the new "zero tolerance" policy, all such distinctions have been erased. All undocumented migrants, regardless of circumstances, are treated as

"criminals," and are being subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment, including mass trials, summary sentencing and forced separation of parents from children.

Even with these measures, however, the arrested migrants up until this point were held in specialized detention centers. And while the conditions of many of these places left a lot to be desired, one cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that federal prisons are distinctly different types of institutions. As Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, told Reuters, "Federal prisons are for hardened criminals. They are not physically set up for immigrant landscapers looking for a job or fleeing violence... They should not be used for immigration purposes."

John Kostelnik, the local president for the American Federation of Government Employees Council of Prison Locals union pointed out that this decision has raised serious questions about staffing and safety within the prisons. Employees are now facing the unenviable task of trying to decide how the space can safely be shared between those whose only crime might be crossing the border without the proper documents and those who have been imprisoned for serious crimes.

"There is so much movement going on," said Kostelnik. "Everyone is running around like a chicken without their head." In the Victorville prison which will hold 1000 detainees, for instance, workers were moving 500 inmates in a medium-security facility to make space for the newcomers.

The proposed measure has raised worries even amongst former ICE employees. Kevin Landy, a former ICE assistant director responsible for the Office of Detention Policy and Planning under the Obama administration, voiced his concerns about the fact that

the staff and administrators in federal prisons have spent their careers dealing with “hardened criminals serving long sentences for serious felonies.” As such, they do not have the training to deal with ICE detainees, who for the most part have no criminal records, and would thus be even “more vulnerable in a prison setting.”

The number of detainees that are intended for this kind of treatment has surged in the past month and half. In April 2018, nearly 51,000 people were apprehended at or near the southern border. Just last year, the figure for the same month was around 16,000. According to ICE, the average daily population of detainees in its facilities as of May 26 was 41,134, up from the 2017 daily average of 38,106.

The Trump administration’s anti-immigrant stance is by now a matter of record, as is its horrific and criminal treatment of migrants. Despite this, the fact that thousands of working class men and women continue to make the dangerous trek across the Southern border, often with their children, is testament to the even more horrific conditions that they are trying to escape. To criminalize and de-humanize those who are trying merely to escape poverty and violence is a preview of the tactics which the ruling class is willing to use in the coming confrontations with the entire working class.

ICE spokeswoman Danielle Bennett declared, “The use of (Bureau of Prisons) facilities is intended to be a temporary measure until ICE can obtain additional long-term contracts for new detention facilities or until the surge in illegal border crossings subsides.” However, given that there seems to be no signs of the latter according to the government’s own data, what can be expected is the creation of a network of new camp-like facilities, including the proposed use of military bases by the Department of Health and Human Services to hold the thousands of migrant children forcibly separated from their parents.

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