

Obama Signs Law to Militarize US-Mexico Border

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President Barack Obama signed into law Friday legislation that will further militarize the US-Mexico border. It includes the deployment of Predator pilotless drones, like those used in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to conduct surveillance against immigrants crossing the border.

Obama signed the \$600 million bill without making any comment. Previously, the administration and its supporters had claimed that a crackdown on the border was a necessary precursor to comprehensive immigration reform, to include a path to legal status for undocumented workers.

The president's silence on any path to legalization only underscores that the border legislation is part of a turn to the right in the run-up to the 2010 midterm elections. The Democratic Party is preparing to compete with the Republicans in the scapegoating of immigrants by boasting of its record of police-state persecution of one of the most exploited sections of the American working class.

A statement issued by the White House said that the legislation, the Southwest Border Security Bill, would allocate the \$600 million "to enhance technology at the border, share information and support with state, local and tribal law enforcement, and increase (federal) presence and law enforcement activities at the border."

It added that the law would provide "increased agents, investigators and prosecutors, as part of a multilayered effort to target illicit networks trafficking in people, drugs, illegal weapons and money."

The bill will pay for the hiring of 1,000 more Border Patrol agents to be deployed along the Southwest border. With 20,000 such agents, the Border Patrol has already doubled in size since 2005. The government will also hire 250 new Customs and Border Protection officers and 250 Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel.

The legislation allocates \$32 million for the deployment of more Predator drone aircraft to conduct spy flights over the border. Additional money will go to set up military style bases in the border area and to assist local police agencies.

The Obama administration had already ordered 1,500 National Guard troops to the US-Mexico border. These units should all be in place within the next weeks.

A written statement issued in Obama's name on Thursday, after the Senate's passage of the legislation in an extraordinary session, emphasized the border crackdown, while making no mention of normalizing the status of some 12 million undocumented immigrant workers who are facing conditions of super-exploitation and repression within the US.

Earlier this week, the administration's Immigration and Customs Enforcement director John Morton vehemently denied reports of plans for a wide-ranging amnesty for the undocumented. Right-wing groups denounced the administration after the leaking of an internal memo supposedly contemplating the possible granting of delays in deportation to limited categories of immigrants.

"The President doesn't support amnesty, the [Homeland Security secretary] doesn't support amnesty and I don't support amnesty," said Morton, speaking to Fox News. He vowed that his agency would redouble its effort to increase deportations. "There is no administration in the history of this country that has removed more people from the United States," he said.

In his statement, Obama boasted of having made "securing our Southwest border a top priority since I came to office." He claimed that the new law would "build upon our successful efforts to protect communities along the Southwest border and across the country."

While vowing to "work with Congress toward bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform," the statement said that the purpose of such legislation would be "to secure our borders, and restore responsibility and accountability to our broken immigration system."

Gone is any reference to even the punitive measures included in a proposed pathway to legal residency for undocumented immigrants floated earlier this year. This bipartisan proposal would require these immigrants to confess to immigration crimes, pay fines and "get to the back of the line" of those applying for legal status.

Obama's secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, appeared at the White House Friday to praise the new border legislation for providing "permanent resources" for enforcement and calling the effort "a matter of national security."

While Napolitano made a brief reference to "immigration reform," she indicated no timetable for enactment of such legislation, asserting that the issue was "in the hands of Congress." In other words, having reneged on an election promise to press for immigration reform during his first year in office, the Obama White House is making it clear that it will do nothing to push for normalizing the status of the undocumented. Instead, it is joining with the Republican right in an attempt to whip up anti-immigrant chauvinism with a campaign to convince the public that immigrants are responsible for rising crime, disappearing jobs and threats to "national security."

The bill was passed under extraordinary conditions, with both the House and Senate called into special sessions. For the Senate, it marked only the second time that such a session had been held during the August recess since the vacation period was formalized in 1970. The only other time was in response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Having secured unanimous consent from both Democrats and Republicans, the formality of the vote was carried out by just two senators.

The portrayal of immigration enforcement as some kind of national crisis is based entirely on right-wing anti-immigrant propaganda fomented by the Republican Party and abetted by the Democrats.

The recent passage of anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona—ruled unconstitutional last month by a federal court—has been followed by a proposal floated this week in Florida for

an even more reactionary state law. Like its Arizona counterpart, the Florida law would order state law enforcement personnel to investigate the immigration status of state residents where there existed a “reasonable suspicion” that they are undocumented.

The legislation, proposed by Florida State Attorney General Bill McCollum, in an attempt to outdo an even more right-wing rival for the Republican gubernatorial nomination, would impose 20-day jail sentences for even legal resident aliens if they are caught not carrying their documents. It also would allow judges to impose stiffer criminal sentences on immigrants than they would on citizens.

The claims that such measures are justified by an immigration-driven crime wave, the stock-in-trade of Republican politicians like Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, have no factual basis whatsoever. Arizona itself has seen its crime rate drop 12 percent over the last year; between 2004 and 2008 it fell by 23 percent, even as its undocumented immigrant population rose.

And, according to FBI figures, the four US cities with populations over 500,000 that recorded the lowest rates of violent crime—San Diego, California, Phoenix, Arizona and the Texas cities of El Paso and Austin—are all in the border states that are now being treated by Washington as the scene of a national emergency.

There is a deliberate attempt by both parties, aided by the media, to associate immigrants with crime, drug-trafficking and the ongoing war between the Mexican military and the drug cartels. They deny the essential reality: that millions of people worldwide are driven to leave their homelands by intolerable economic and social conditions created by transnational banks and corporations that subordinate everything to profit.

Obama is outdoing the Bush administration in the brutality of the crackdown by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) against undocumented immigrants. According to recently released ICE figures, during the first nine months of the present fiscal year, the US government deported 279,035 people. This represents a 10 percent jump compared to the same period for Fiscal Year 2008—the last full fiscal year of the Bush administration. The number of people deported today is roughly double what it was five years ago.

While the Obama administration had claimed that its deportation campaign was targeted at so-called “criminal aliens,” the ICE figures reveal that only 17 percent of those deported were accused of serious crimes. More than half—51 percent—had no criminal record, while the rest had been charged with minor offenses.

Leading Republicans dismissed the new repressive legislation backed by Obama and the Congressional Democrats as insufficient, insisting on the deployment of far more personnel and resources along the border, combined with an even more draconian crackdown on the millions of undocumented immigrants living and working in the US. The official debate on immigration moves inexorably further to the right.

Many immigrant workers are torn from their families, which often include spouses or children who are US citizens. Undocumented immigrants also hesitate to travel back to their native countries to visit relatives, for fear of arrest at a US airport and subsequent deportation. These human tragedies are a matter of indifference to both big business parties.

Rather, the entire political establishment seeks to foment and exploit anti-immigrant chauvinism as a means of diverting rising popular anger over record unemployment and falling living standards away from their source, the profit system.

At the same time, the police state and militarized measures being employed against immigrants pose a grave threat to the democratic rights of all sections of the working class. There is no reason to believe that the Predator drones flying the border areas of the Southwestern US will be limited to spying on immigrants. They could well be used for the Afghanistan-style "targeted killings." That is well within the realm of possible policy decisions by a White House that has already claimed the right to assassinate US citizens abroad.

The fight to defend democratic rights, jobs, wages and social conditions of working people in the US can only be waged successfully by unifying all sections of the working class – native-born and immigrant alike – against the reactionary, pro-capitalist policies of both the Democrats and the Republicans. This struggle must include the defense of immigrant workers against raids, deportations and sweat-shop exploitation by the employers. Working people must oppose the militarization of the US borders and uphold the right of workers from every country to live and work in the land that they choose.

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