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USA

Child Immigration Divide American Opinion – Right and Left protests; troops to border

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On July 1 more than 100 protestors gathered in the town of Murrieta to stop buses bearing refugee children from being transferred from Texas to California. Waving American flags and carrying signs saying “Stop Illegal Immigration,” the protestors said that they wanted to stop the entry of the undocumented children who they claimed were, “criminal” and “diseased” and would become a burden to the taxpayers.

The Murrieta protests sparked a firestorm of political controversy. There were counter-demonstrations, many of them by religious liberals, in opposition to the nativist reactionaries. Republican governor Rick Perry of Texas ordered 1,000 state National Guard troops to the border. President Barack Obama urged Central Americans to stop their children from migrating to the United States.

The rapidly growing influx at the southern U.S. border of tens of thousands of unaccompanied and undocumented children, most teenagers but many under 12 years of age, created a social crisis on the border and political crisis in American society and in the Congress. Until recently, only about 7,000 unaccompanied minors crossed the border each year, but suddenly in 2014 the numbers skyrocketed. So far 47,000 children have been detained at the border this year, 7,000 of them less than 12 years old, more than 700 are younger than five years old, and it is expected that some 90,000 or more will attempt to enter the country without immigration papers this year. Three quarters of these children come from the Central American nations of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; many of the rest are Mexican. If this trend continues, the government estimates there will be 130,000 in 2015.

Under a U.S. law originally passed by Congress during the administration of George W. Bush and intended to prevent human trafficking, children from non-contiguous countries cannot simply be deported. While the Mexican children are deported immediately unless they indicate that they will be in danger back home, Central American children who enter without documents are taken into U.S. government custody. The children, many of whom are fleeing poverty, violence, and sometimes exploitation involving sex or drug trafficking, are taken by Office of Refugee Resettlement first to penal-like facilities that hold hundreds of children. About 90 percent of the children are released relatively soon to relatives in cities all over the United States. They are given immigration court dates, but many will never show up and will merge into the mass of 12 million undocumented immigrants already living in the United States.

President Barack Obama requested 3.7 billion dollars to respond to the humanitarian crisis, but also called upon Central Americans to keep their children home. “Our message absolutely is don’t send your children unaccompanied, on trains or through a bunch of smugglers,” President Obama told the media. “We don’t even know how many of these kids don’t make it, and may have been waylaid into sex trafficking or killed because they fell off a train.”

The violence in Central American nations that drives the current emigration is largely the result of U.S. policies. In 1954 the United States overthrew the elected, progressive nationalist government of Guatemala. Subsequently the United States supported military or rightwing governments in Guatemala and El Salvador against popular insurgencies for 40 years, until the civil wars ended in the mid-1990s. Washington then brought globalization and open markets, leading to plant closing and unemployment in those countries. Former soldiers with no wars to fight and few jobs often became criminals, extortionists, and drug dealers. Kidnapping and murder became common in all three countries affecting people of all social classes, but having the greatest impact on working people and the poor.

The sudden increase in children at the border has had ramifications across the country, becoming an occasion for demonstrations by rightwing groups who call for new anti-immigrant legislation. In Maryland graffiti appeared on walls

reading, “No illegals here. No undocumented Democrats.” In Michigan an anti-immigrant group marched carrying flags and signs, as well as assault rifles and handguns. In Massachusetts and Rhode Island, 2,000 miles from the Texas border, protesters demonstrated with signs reading “Stop the Invasion.” Rightwing anti-immigrant groups organized over 300 demonstrations across the country on July 19, but almost all were quite small, just handfuls of people.

With small anti-immigrant demonstrations taking place all along the 2,000 mile-long border, the Mayor of Laredo, Texas, Raúl Salinas, told the press, “I don’t want them here, we will not welcome them. If they come armed, they will be violating the law and will be arrested. We don’t need racist gun-thugs in our towns. We have the Border Patrol, the city police, and all the other authorities, and these people aren’t causing any problems.” While some leftists see in these demonstrations the beginning of fascism, in truth such nativist movements have occurred in the United States throughout its history whenever new immigrant groups appeared.

Most Americans are not rabidly anti-immigrant and many are sympathetic to the children. A coalition of religious groups, ranging from Catholics and mainline Protestants to Evangelical Christians who usually fall on the conservative side of things, has rallied to support the immigrant children. The Mormon Church and the Mormon-dominated Republican Party in Utah have also expressed sympathy for the children and said they would be welcome in the Beehive State. There is also an active protest movement by immigrant groups such as CASA in Maryland marched on the White House with banners reading “President Obama—Fight for Our Families.” In San Francisco, California the Central American Resource Center organized a march in defense of the immigrant children. Though it may not always appear so, the children at the border have more friends than enemies in America.

The U.S. left is supportive of the immigrant rights movement, but it is the corporations, the big American labor unions (the AFL-CIO, SEIU, the UFCW), and the Catholic Church that tend to shape immigration policy. That constellation of forces has tended to concede that immigration reform that must include stronger controls at the border, a long, complicated, and expensive process of legalization for the undocumented, and guest workers without full rights, policies opposed by some immigrant organizations and by the left. Ultimately it will take the willingness of the Latino community, 17% of the U.S. population or about 55 million people, the Latino immigrants and other immigrants, using their economic and political power to shape a more just policy for the 12 million undocumented people in the United States.

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