

USA: Camp Bliss ? More Like Camp Hell

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More than 4,300 teenaged children are presently interned in an "emergency shelter" at the Fort Bliss military base in El Paso, Texas. 12 huge tents are packed with hundreds of bunk beds in close proximity. Recent accounts given undercover by shocked staff members to BBC reporters and confirmed by reports in the El Paso Times, reveal conditions which are an absolute disgrace to the richest democracy in the world.

The camp is in hot desert terrain, regularly blasted by sandstorms, against which the tents give grossly inadequate protection. An employee reported, "By the end of the day, we are all just covered in dust from head to toe".

As well as the dangerous overcrowding, with covid and influenza rampant, inmates report being given undercooked meat which made them ill. All complain of a lack of clean underwear and long waits for showers and medical attention. The camp is infested with lice, but delousing kits are in short supply.

No wonder many of the young people are in acute mental distress and numbers are self-harming. Children are being detained in these conditions, sometimes for more than a month. The camp is run by private subcontractors and there are reports not only that some staff are completely lacking in any training but that children have been subjected to racist and sexual abuse.

All this despite the Biden administration's boasts that it had moved the children from shocking Border Patrol warehouses and had relaxed the regulations allowing unaccompanied children to join relatives already resident in the USA, providing they can be found.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which employs private contractors to run the camp, says it is committed to transparency, but the BBC was denied access to the camp. The HSS also claims it is "providing required standards of care for children such as clean and comfortable sleeping quarters, meals, toiletries, laundry, educational and recreational activities, and access to medical services." Yet, after a four-hour visit to the camp, US Representative Veronica Escobar (Democrat-El Paso) said:

"When I went into the boys' tent, there were literally hundreds of boys in these very low-to-the-ground bunk beds. I think having that many people all together in one space is risky to their health and their safety. I think it makes supervision and oversight nearly impossible.

"My other area of deep concern," she said, "is the fact that we have kids who have been in that facility for a significant period of time. I met children who had been there for over 40 days. That is absolutely unacceptable, and it is deeply alarming." (El Paso Times)

Camp Bliss is just one of a network of more than 200 shelters that the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement operates nationwide to temporarily house children who have crossed the US-Mexico border

without a parent or legal guardian.

Meanwhile, Fox News and the Republicans continue to accuse Biden of being soft on migrants, insisting that his policy changes encourage people smugglers to bring ever more unaccompanied children to the border.

Yet the real cause of the flow of migrants from Latin America, North America's "backyard", is the endemic violence from military-police regimes, aimed at rural and indigenous communities, the vicious gangs involved in the drug trade and the grinding poverty due to centuries of underdevelopment. In all these countries, US corporations and successive administrations have played a major role in exploiting their agriculture and extractive industries, devastating their environments and propping up repressive regimes of their elites.

Wherever governments have tried to improve their peoples' miserable living standards, they have been destabilised, even militarily overthrown. This bullying and blockading continued under Obama as well as Trump and will continue under Biden, too.

When parents try to save their children from the drug gangs or the corrupt police and send them to relatives or friends who have made it to the land, whose Statue of Liberty promises:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

What they find, instead, is a hell called Camp Bliss.

Socialists, trade unionists, antiracists and feminists need to redouble their efforts to put an end to the atrocious conditions on the country's southern borders, closing these dreadful camps and giving their inmates decent and humane care and accommodation. They must also be given real help to find their relatives. We must demand that the country opens its borders to all refugees and calls a halt to policies like the war on drugs, the super exploitation by its giant corporations and halts the trade and financial blockades on those countries that try to improve their citizens' social welfare.

To rely on Biden and the Democrats to do anything like that would be naïve in the extreme. That is why the USA needs a working class, socialist, anti-capitalist party that, as an integral part of its programme, defends the rights of immigrants and reaches out to people in Central and South America for a common struggle against US imperialism.

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