

Brazilian immigrants denounce “torture” on US deportation flight

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As the hallmark action by the new administration of fascist President Donald Trump, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), police and military are stepping up violence against immigrants and deporting thousands of people under inhumane conditions to Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and other countries.

Last weekend, a plane loaded with 158 immigrants in ICE custody, including entire families, elderly people and children, took off from Alexandria, in the state of Louisiana, bound for Confins, in the state of Minas Gerais, in southeastern Brazil.

The Brazilians had been gathered together at an ICE “staging facility” in Louisiana, many of them having endured long bus rides from as far away as California, kept in handcuffs the entire way.

The flight itself proved a nightmare, with the chartered GlobalX Air plane struggling and failing to take off on its first attempt. Only after mechanics worked on an engine was it finally able to leave but continued to suffer repeated engine and ventilation system breakdowns.

Throughout the flight, the Brazilian immigrants recounted, they suffered continuous threats and aggressions. All the adult males were handcuffed, with their legs shackled and restraining chains around their waists. Passengers were deprived of food and water and denied use of the toilets. The breakdown of the plane’s air conditioning created unbearable conditions in the cabin.

After refueling and receiving further emergency maintenance in Panama, the aircraft was forced to land due to further technical failure in Manaus, the capital of the state of Amazonas, thousands of kilometers from Confins.

Even after landing, passengers were forced to remain inside the cabin, with the heat of the tropical region and another failure of the ventilation system causing a number of passengers to faint. At one point, the handcuffed immigrants rebelled against the ICE and private security agents, forcing open an emergency exit, where they managed to plead for help from Brazilian authorities at the airport.

One of the passengers interviewed by CNN after the

episode said: “It was practically torture what they did inside the plane. An old plane, full of problems.... When it arrived in Manaus, the plane no longer worked, and they wouldn’t let us get off. It was practically torture. It was very hot. Three hours inside a plane that was turned off, everyone sweating a lot.”

Another passenger, Jefferson Maia, shaken and clearly short of breath, reported being assaulted by the immigration agents on the plane: “I sat there until I reached my limit, I couldn’t take it anymore. People fainted. I asked to leave and he grabbed me. ... I was handcuffed at the feet and belly. There was nothing I could do. The arm where my chain was was bleeding because they kept pulling my chain, tightening it.”

The immigrants left the plane still chained and handcuffed. Lucas Gabriel, a bricklayer who was held hostage by immigration agents for hours, said indignantly: “When we arrived in Manaus, they asked them to remove the handcuffs because we were already in Brazilian territory. Because you’re not supposed to come here in handcuffs, that’s the law. And when [the plane] arrived here, when the Federal Police boarded the flight, they wanted to take the handcuffs off everyone so they wouldn’t see that we had come in handcuffs.”

Gabrielle Oliveira, a professor of education and migration at Harvard University, told BBC News Brasil: “Normally, 20 minutes before landing, passengers who are being deported are unchained, the handcuffs are removed. That’s why it was so different and shocking to see the Brazilians on Brazilian soil still handcuffed.”

These hellish deportation flights are part of the “shock and awe” campaign promoted from the first day of the Trump administration as a basis for establishing a presidential dictatorship aimed at the entire US working class. The brutal treatment of Brazilian immigrant families is reminiscent of the torture methods previously used against so-called “enemy combatants” in Washington’s War on Terror in the Middle East.

At the beginning of this century, the George Bush

administration set the precedent that anyone, including US citizens, could be arrested on charges of being an “enemy combatant,” even if they had never set foot in a war zone. Today, Trump is expanding the anti-democratic repressive apparatus created during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and turning it, in the first instance, against immigrants.

Under the pretext of a “foreign invasion” completely fabricated by Trump, who absurdly equates the movement of immigrants from Latin American countries and other regions with a foreign military invasion, this fascist terror campaign is targeting the entire working class in the US.

On Wednesday, Trump signed an executive order ordering the expansion of the Guantánamo Bay prison and declaring that the entire Latin American population is made up of criminals to justify the imprisonment of thousands of immigrants. Trump declared: “We have 30,000 beds in Guantánamo to hold the worst illegal aliens who threaten Americans.”

On Sunday, Trump demanded a minimum quota of 1,500 daily detentions of undocumented immigrants. On Monday, he declared that “every single deportee is a murderer, a drug lord, a kingpin of some kind, a mob boss or a gang member.”

The actions being promoted by the Trump administration have profoundly explosive implications for Latin America. Aware of the massive indignation that will be provoked among the populations of their countries, the Latin American bourgeois leaderships have been forced to express opposition, even if only to a limited extent, to the Trump administration’s measures.

Along with the repercussions of the episode in Manaus, Colombian President Gustavo Petro refused to receive US military cargo planes carrying immigrants deported from the US. Trump responded violently, threatening to impose crippling economic sanctions against the country. Petro eventually agreed to accept the deportees, while sending Colombian planes to bring them back. As a result, the sanctions threat was lifted.

A call by Honduran President Xiomara Castro for an emergency CELAC meeting to respond to Trump’s intensification of deportations collapsed almost immediately after the announcement of the deal struck between Petro and Trump.

The government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers’ Party (PT) in Brazil was also forced to issue an official protest against the brutal conditions faced by deported Brazilians. However, the political response of the Lula government, which banned the use of chains and handcuffs, was marked by a conciliatory tone. The government made no direct accusations against Trump, and Lula remained silent about the episode in Colombia.

Lula’s Justice Minister Ricardo Lewandowski expressed the essence of this attitude when he declared: “We had a very sober reaction. We don’t want to provoke the American government, not least because this deportation is provided for in a treaty that has been in force for several years between Brazil and the United States and which authorizes deportation.”

Sections of the Brazilian mainstream media have tried to minimize the seriousness of the deportation episode in Manaus by referring to the agreement Lewandowski cited, signed in 2017 between the Brazilian and US governments. In fact, the agreement, which states that the “treatment of returnees must be dignified, respectful and humane,” is violated on a daily basis in the US immigrant detention camps.

The concerns of the Lula government and the political establishment in Brazil are not about the violations of the rights of deported immigrants, admitted by the US government in an internal communication with Brasilia, but express the nervousness of sectors of the Brazilian ruling elite over both the threat of sanctions from Trump and the response of the working class in Brazil itself.

After Trump accused Panama, without any evidence, of charging American ships higher tariffs than Chinese ships to use the Panama Canal, the US president announced on Thursday night that he will proceed with the imposition of trade tariffs on Canada and Mexico of 25 percent. He has likewise threatened a 100 percent tariff on Brazil and the other members of the BRICS alliance.

Trump declared: “We will demand a commitment from these apparently hostile countries that they will not create a new currency or support any other currency to replace the mighty US dollar, otherwise they will face 100% tariffs and must say goodbye to sales to the wonderful US economy.”

The agreement on deportations and the silence of the Lula government will only encourage the US administration to launch further provocations in cooperation with its allies in the region, including Milei in Argentina, Bukele in El Salvador and Bolsonaro in Brazil.



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