

ICE releases migrants across Louisiana with no support

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Voces Unidas protest outside ICE office in New Orleans, 2019.

Demand the release of all ICE detainees with adequate support, including vaccine access!

Immigrant rights activists in Louisiana have decried the chaotic way that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is releasing detained migrants throughout the state. Organizers with Voces Unidas: Louisiana Immigrants Rights Coalition have called the handling of the releases “inhumane,” and have stated that “ICE is dropping them off in the middle of nowhere with no support.”

Already overworked advocates like those with Voces Unidas are scrambling to deal with the crisis situation caused by the federal agency. Their efforts are nothing short of heroic.

An instance in Baton Rouge has been covered by local media. On July 16, an ICE representative called up the Society of St. Vincent de Paul—without any prior notice—informing them that 60 immigrants were being sent to their shelter. These individuals were dropped off at the Greyhound bus station without any supplies.

St. Vincent de Paul President Michael Acaldo told WAFB Channel 9, “Our shelter at that time had all filled up.” The society’s volunteers nevertheless gave the released detainees supply bags. Fortunately, volunteers with Louisiana Advocates for Immigrants in Detention were able to provide shelter. The organization also filed a civil rights complaint against ICE.

Similar scenarios have played out across the state, including in rural areas with far fewer resources than Baton Rouge. Even mayors and congresspeople have complained, alleging that they are not being given notice.

Dangers of COVID-19

According to ICE data, only about 20 percent of detainees passing through its facilities across the country had received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine as of the beginning of July. This is at a time when the number of people crowded into facilities (including children, as in the tent compound at Fort Bliss, Texas) has swelled to 26,000, all during Joe Biden's tenure. During that period of increase, ICE reported over 7,500 new coronavirus cases in custody.

ICE is putting all these people in danger by releasing them without support during the current virus surge, dominated by the highly transmissible Delta variant. Released migrants are in danger of homelessness. They may end up in crowded shelters and other places where social distancing is impossible.

It's also plausible that released detainees could face further criminalization, should they be picked up for vagrancy. We must demand that ICE provide all detainees with vaccine access and coordinate their release with safety as the top priority.

Louisiana: a detention epicenter

Currently, more migrants are detained in Louisiana than in any other state besides Texas. As of July 8, there were 2,347 detainees, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse.

The boom in the state's immigrant detention industry came when the Trump administration ramped up detentions across the country. After some state criminal justice reform legislation in 2017, there was a modest decrease in the number of inmates. But with the profit motive still in place, Louisiana sheriffs and mayors have made deals with ICE, bringing in new streams of federal money.

Private prison corporations are especially benefitting. For example, the LaSalle immigration detention facility near Jena, La., has a capacity of 1,160 inmates. LaSalle is owned by GEO Group, Inc., a publicly traded real-estate investment trust,

operating in multiple countries. GEO's revenue in 2019 was \$2.5 billion, with \$4.3 billion in total assets.

Racism and the capitalists' drive for profit are at the heart of this cruel system, which workers of all nationalities should oppose.

