

A Letter from North America - Our Migrant Crisis in Canada

Saturday 18 March 2017, by [TATE "Ernie" Ernest](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2017).

This is the third of Ernie Tate's letters to Left Unity detailing and analysing the struggles against Trump as they emerge on the other side of the pond. Ernie is a lifelong revolutionary who emigrated to Canada from Northern Ireland as a young man. He was one of the most important activists of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in the 1960s and has recently produced a two volume memoir, "Revolutionary Activism of the 1950s and 1960s".

A by-product of present toxic atmosphere in the United States against immigrants and refugees has been a sharp increase in this country in recent weeks in the number of asylum seekers walking across the Canadian border, often placing themselves and their families in harm's way from our extremely harsh winter. It's also a consequence it should be noted, of the military interventions by the American empire in the Arab and African world — now greatly destabilized because of it, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union. And like everywhere else, reactionary forces here are attempting to exploit it to stoke up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment.

Canadians, these days, are seeing the refugee crises play itself out in real time every night on television. Journalists are patrolling the border to see who is coming across and interviewing those they find and even taking them to safety. The images are truly appalling, as the asylum seekers frantically try to get around Canada's "Third Safe Country" agreement with the United States, signed in 2002, the main purpose of which was to stem the flow to Canada of refugees fleeing Latin America's dictatorial regimes - especially Colombia's — when the year before, 2001, over 45,000 crossed the border. This agreement, sarcastically renamed, the "None is Too Many" agreement, alluding to a statement made by a Canadian immigration official during the Second World War about Jewish refugees seeking asylum in Canada from European fascism when many were turned away, was vigorously opposed by all civil liberties organizations, churches, refugee support groups, by lawyer's associations, by the trade unions and by the New Democratic Party.

However, there's a loop-hole in the agreement which many of those seeking to cross the border have discovered. Because Canada deems the U.S. to be "a safe third country", at legal entry points — customs and border posts - claimants for refugee status can be refused entry. And that is what usually happens. But if they're able to avoid these border stations somehow and make their way across the border, which they do usually on foot, they have a right under the Geneva Refugee Convention, of which Canada is a signatory, to make an application for asylum, no matter how they've arrived here.

Those we see on television every night are taking advantage of that loop-hole. The RCMP, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, have been arresting them as they come over. None have been charged with any offence, but they are questioned and handed over to the CBSA, the Canadian Border Security Authorities, where they can make a claim for asylum and then are released.

Crossing the border on foot, through open fields and walking the back-roads, along railway tracks

and trails for long hours through the night at so-called “illegal entry” points all along the border — but mainly in Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba — the migrants can be seen making their way into Canada, sometimes a single individual, usually young men, but mainly families, mothers and fathers frequently carrying babies and with small children by their side, pulling their bags behind them, ill-prepared for the deep snow and sub-zero temperatures.

Such are the terrible conditions, that many farmers are wondering what they’ll find in the fields once the snow melts in the spring. Recently, two young men from Ghana were discovered nearly frozen to death just outside the farming community of Emerson, Manitoba, which is close to Minnesota on the American side. Parts of their hands had to be amputated because of severe frost-bite.

We are accustomed to seeing this kind of tragedy play itself out in Southern Europe and other places, and where hundreds of thousands of desperate migrants have risked their lives on flimsy water-craft, in their attempt to find a safe haven, but never in Canada, and although not on the same scale in terms of numbers, it’s our version of that crises.

While the number of people crossing the border in this way has jumped significantly in the past few months, it had been gradually increasing in the previous years and long before Trump’s election. It’s now estimated that up to 500,000 non-status migrants are living here, and it’s only going to increase.

Because of the intolerance and the xenophobic environment south of the border, and fearful of being arrested by the security forces and having to spend many months in detention centres, people, many of whom have lived in the United States, are risking their lives to get to Canada. Last year, 7022 crossed, up 40% from the year before. And with better weather now approaching, immigration authorities are expecting many more.

But in the midst of this sadness, what has been truly heartening and awe-inspiring, is the solidarity of many local people from the small communities near the border who have been out on the back-roads, CBC television reports, frequently throughout the night, searching for migrants. They provide them with warm food, often putting them up for the night and arranging for them to be housed in local community centres or in shelters.

In Toronto, almost 900 have been taken in and municipal officials are demanding that the provincial and federal governments provide assistance. In addition, and in a gesture of solidarity, several of Canada’s major cities – Toronto, Hamilton, London and Vancouver, with Ottawa and Edmonton presently considering it — have declared themselves “sanctuary cities”, more a token than anything else because they haven’t allocated resources to make it a reality, but it is meant to allow refugee claimants to apply for municipal services such as access to homeless shelters, community centres, libraries and police services, without the need to show proof of citizenship or residency.

With a population of just over 35,000,000, Canada has been much more generous than its next door neighbour on this issue. Some 300,000 immigrants will enter the country this year, out of which 30,000 most likely will be refugees. Soon after his election in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sharply differentiated himself from the previous prime-minister, the hard-right Stephen Harper, and from the Muslim-hating Donald Trump, in welcoming into the country over 40,000 Syrian refugees.

And at the announcement of Trump’s infamous anti-Muslim ban, Trudeau pointedly Tweeted to the world that, “Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith.” Nice sentiment, but it should be noted that there’s an element of hypocrisy going on here. As the National Post’s Michael Barutciski recently pointed out, “The fact that Canadian visa policy makes it impossible for most people from the designated countries to enter Canada legally is an inconvenient truth ignored by those who want

to hear a compassionate message.”

Nonetheless, the “Safe Third Country” agreement and how it is being applied, has provoked a wide-ranging discussion. Primarily because of the extreme physical danger the migrants are confronting, national civil liberties organizations, immigrant support groups, labour and the NDP – Canada’s Labour Party – are pressuring the government to repeal it. The U.S., especially with Trump’s election, they say, can no longer be considered “safe” for asylum seekers. The NDP’s leader, Thomas Mulcair, has even characterized Trump a “fascist”.

As we’ve seen in many places around the world these past few years, and Canada is no exception, opposition to refugees is an issue around which all reactionary forces are mobilizing, seeking to exploit the rise in islamophobia, antisemitism and racism generally, and even stoke it a little more vigorously with their incendiary racism. Newspapers in Canada report an appreciable increase in the number of attacks upon mosques synagogues and Jewish cemeteries. In a truly shocking expression of this, in Quebec in January of this year, where laws have been proposed to prohibit the use of the hijab by Muslim public servants, six Muslim worshippers were murdered by an anti-Muslim fanatic.

Tory politicians are supporting the “Safe Third Country” agreement but demanding from the Liberals that those crossing the border be sent back or charged with “crime”. They talk of refugees “jumping the queue”, and criticize the Liberals for not enforcing the agreement more forcefully. But it’s notable, however, that the Tories have been somewhat cautious in how they’ve approached this issue, not having quite recovered from the last election when their targeting of immigrant groups lost them many votes, contributing to their defeat.

But, Kelly Leitch, a cabinet minister in the previous government, seems to be ignoring that lesson. A candidate in the leadership campaign in the Conservative party to fill Stephen Harper’s shoes as leader, she is doing her best to imitate Trump in proposing, “in an unmistakable bit of racist dog whistling”, as the Globe and Mail writes, that all new immigrants be questioned about whether or not they subscribe to “Canadian values”, whatever those are, before they are allowed into the country.

But it is unlikely the Liberals will repeal the agreement and offend the new American administration, which is questioning NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, between Canada, Mexico and the U.S., wanting to “tweak” it, under a threat of imposing heavy import taxes on Canadian exports to the U.S. – almost two billion dollars Canadian every day. Trudeau is unlikely to do anything that will annoy the new president. And last week, Ralph Goodall, the federal government’s Minister of Public Safety, who was in Washington having talks with Trump officials about the matter, confirmed this by stating emphatically that there will be no changes to the “Safe Third Country” agreement, despite the widespread opposition to it. So it will remain as it is for now and we will continue to see on television every night refugee seekers endangering their lives as they make their way across the border.

Ernest Tate,
March 15, 2017

P.S.

* <http://lefttunity.org/a-letter-from-north-america-our-migrant-crisis/>