

Capitalism, Imperialism, and Global Displacement

written by Justin Akers Chacón | August 6, 2024



Establishment immigration politics in the United States have reached a critical departure, inching towards closer embrace between the Democratic Party mainstream and the Republican far right. The bizarre state of bourgeois capitalist immigration politics reached a series of new lows in 2024. After far-right governors Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott began to internally deport refugees to so-called “liberal sanctuary cities” like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles as a form of cruel political theater, Democratic mayors in those cities fell in line in condemning the “immigrant problem” and pursuing punitive measures to curtail and remove refugee populations in their midst.

In March 2024, both Trump and Biden took dueling trips to the border to showcase how they can try to outflank each other from the “farther right” and be more antagonistic towards refugees. The abandonment of inclusive immigrant and refugee rhetoric, and the repositioning towards one singular political voice against migrants and refugees marks a crisis of bourgeois ideology. No longer are there viable solutions to the deep crises of U.S. capitalism and imperialism afflicting society—instead only turns towards expanding the politics of extreme wealth accumulation, state repression, violence towards the vulnerable, and clamping down on the discontented. This politics of degeneration is symptomatic of a larger process taking place within other capitalist nation-states, especially in the imperialist centers of the global economy.

The capitalist politics of displacement and violence have gone international along the seams of the global imperialist system. Neoliberal and neocolonial capitalist restructuring creating extremes of wealth and poverty, trade policy impositions, and international debt inequalities; imperial warfare and neocolonial intervention and occupation, state violence, climate catastrophe, and other forms of political violence are inducing unprecedented dislocation internationally. According to UN estimates, 27.1 million people were made into refugees in 2021, increasing 30% to 35.3 million in 2022, and increasing 330% to 117.2 million more in 2023.¹ It is projected that 130 million people will be displaced by the end of 2024, a nearly 500% increase.²

Crisis of Capitalism and Imperialism Are Driving System Failure Globally

The crisis churning out rising displacement is located in the failings of the capitalist system internationally—both in its economic functions and political operations. Capitalism is the predominant mode of production globally and had been initially constructed internationally through European national conquest and accumulation of colonies in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The colonial foundations of international capitalism determined the method of “development” and “under-development” in which the rich colonizing nations accumulated their “original wealth” and made the leap into “first world” capitalism while most colonized and formerly colonized nations

languish in conditions of under-development and combined and uneven development.

The condition of becoming a “developed nation” is bound up with this history of capitalism and engendered through violent means of conquest and extraction that have included and reproduce acts of genocide, settler colonialism, enslavement and forced labor, systems of labor repression and control, formalized policies of racial, gender, and national oppression; and state carceral and police repression.

In the construction of the global order through colonialism, international capitalism further elaborated into the system of imperialism, a stage where hierarchies of the dominant and subsidiary colonial powers aligned and formed rival alliances, or empires.³ Empires formed and developed across the landscape of international capitalism to compete for preeminence in the further accumulation of territory, resources, and labor—and inevitably for the redivision and redistribution of existing colonial holdings through warfare.

Since the era of World War Two, capitalist imperialism has also developed further means to produce “neocolonialism” such as financialization and national debt-shackling, the imposition of “free-trade policies” as a means for economic re-colonization through capital export and predominant foreign ownership, and through real-time and unprecedented scales of global military intervention, armament, and installation. It is here where we locate the system failures generating displacement on an unprecedented scale.

Heightening Inequality Within and Between Nations

Twenty-first century capitalism has skewed wealth inequality between nations and within nations to an unprecedented historical level. By 2022 the world’s 10 richest billionaires, owned a combined wealth of \$1.448 trillion, a “GDP” greater than the total national wealth of 182 of the current 197 nations of the world.⁴ By 2024, the capitalist system has produced 2,781 billionaires globally, with a total official net worth of \$14.2 trillion. The top 1% now own 43% of all global financial assets. The number of billionaires is growing annually, as well as their individual fortunes, indicative of how they have built their fortunes and expansive control over national economies at the expense of other social classes.

The global rich have taken more nationally-generated wealth than the bottom half of the population in nearly every country in the world. Since 2020, nearly five billion people, 60% of the world’s population, have become poorer.⁵ By 2023, 24% of the world’s population, 1.9 billion people, lived in “poverty and dire circumstances.”⁶ World Bank estimates show that a total of 324 million extremely poor people reside in 33 countries classified as fragile and conflict affected, where average per-capita incomes are expected to further decline in years ahead.⁷ When it comes to wealth distribution between nations, more than two-thirds (69%) of global wealth is held by the “developed nations,” while less than a third can be found in the developing world⁸—although 83% of the world’s population lives in “developing countries.”⁹

The heightening concentration and expansion of wealth at the top of the class structures in each nation is not the result of “individual hard work,” but rather how capitalists have engineered state policy in their favor and at the expense of the global working classes within the nation state. This includes concocting policies within the framework of “neoliberal structural adjustment” to wage class war through the state to erode working-class programs and protections,¹⁰ weaken union organization,¹¹ and repress social movements.¹²

This broad array of class war and counter-reform policies have worked to defund and dismantle equitable tax regimes, social and public welfare, labor guarantees and protections, and other

protective and redistributive mechanisms that were gained by the working classes in their respective countries during previous epochs of class struggle—and for which the capitalist ruling class was compelled to pay a larger share. This process is then internationalized through the articulation and imposition of neo-colonial “free-trade agreements” (FTAs), most typically emanating from within imperialist nations and blocs and then implanted into other nations through different means of compulsion.

The capitalist phenomenon of opening FTAs, especially in countries of the global south and the formerly colonized countries, is a neo-colonial strategy to forcibly reassert and restore the domination of international capital over subject nations. Through imperialist state agents imposing new trade policies, corporations and investment bankers are enabled to export capital into once protected or restricted economies of the developing, or formerly colonized nations of the world. Through FTAs, international capital opens, implants, and concentrates investment and ownership over key sectors of the economy and leverages their power within these nations to further shape neoliberal policy development to increase their profits, remake political parties and systems, and otherwise legitimize neo-colonialism into a new orthodoxy.

The implementation of FTAs has been one of the main catalysts of displacement—especially from the formerly colonized and neo-colonized world to the imperialist centers. As capitalist instruments for wealth accumulation, they require structural changes in law that prioritize the rights of capital akin to the those in the imperial center, provoke mass privatization, induce domestic deindustrialization, reward land and wealth concentration, and foment economic re-organization for export instead in the place of production for local exchange, economic, and consummatory needs. Displacement due to neoliberal and neo-colonial restructuring has had some of its most detrimental impact on Caribbean and Latin American nations.

The number of displaced nearly doubled from 8.3 million in 2010 to 16.3 million in 2022, with many moving into neighboring nations or to the United States.¹³ Over seven million people have been displaced from Mexico coinciding with the staged implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, now United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement) since 1994. Nearly four million have been displaced from Central America since 2010 and the full implementation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).¹⁴ Most recently, an estimated 7.3 million Venezuelans have been displaced since 2014,¹⁵ although this phenomenon is more attributable to an economic crisis induced by destabilizing U.S. economic sanctions placed on Venezuela to punish that nation for exiting all U.S.-led FTAs and trade regimes in the region in 2006. Haiti, a long and recurrent victim of U.S.-led invasion, occupation, and imperialist meddling, has seen a new wave of mass displacement in recent years. By early 2024, 852,000 Haitians had migrated to the United States, and 141,000 in Mexico,¹⁶ especially increasing after the assassination President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, and the subsequent collapse of the nation’s governing institutions installed after the U.S. invasion and occupation of Haiti in 2004.¹⁷

Wherever FTAs have been enforced, sites of struggle and resistance by the popular classes have erupted and flared. State repression of growing social protest and labor movements has taken place in this context, where more authoritarian and repressive measures are deployed against those resisting or opposing these class-based attacks on rights, wages, and programs that maintain or contribute to a standard of living. One study shows that the total number of people incarcerated globally has increased by 25% since 2000, from 9.3 to 11.7 million people, and a third of those are detained without charge or conviction.¹⁸ There has been a marked rise in state violence, political violence, social protest and unrest, and other forms of political crisis.¹⁹ Displacement occurs in the context of how working-class, indigenous, and oppressed communities within capitalist nation-states successfully or unsuccessfully oppose the state policies that harm or undermine their standard of

living. This version of “fight or flight” plays out at some stage and in some capacity in each circumstance of displacement and migration.

Spiking inequality and working-class precarity and social and economic dislocation and displacement has been further exacerbated by perpetuating crises in the global capitalist system, and the growing role of states to bailout the capitalist owners of the economic system using the national treasury to fund and prop up whole industries to sustain their profitability—while leaving working-class and poor people to fend for themselves.²⁰ The dysfunctionality of the global capitalist system, especially since the Great Recession of 2008-10 has also exacerbated and accelerated tensions and fractures within the international imperialist system. This is driving rival imperial state actors to take more aggressive military action to assert their national, regional, and international capitalist interests vis-à-vis their rival counterparts.

Colonial War, Inter-Imperialist War, and Displacement

The size and scale of warfare are accelerating in the context of intensifying inter-imperialist conflict and capitalist crisis, reaching 183 documented regional and local conflicts raging in all corners of the globe in 2023. According to a comprehensive study conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies:

The intensity of conflict has risen year on year, with fatalities increasing by 14% and violent events by 28% in the latest survey. The authors describe a world “dominated by increasingly intractable conflicts and armed violence amid a proliferation of actors, complex and overlapping motives, global influences and accelerating climate change.”²¹

Colonial and inter-imperialist war accounts for the single largest factor driving displacement. For example, 52% of current refugees worldwide originate from just three countries: Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine. These conflicts are emblematic of how wars of imperialist conquest and re-division are playing out in destabilizing and destroying the capacity for people to be safe and sustained. By 2030, the World Bank estimates that nearly 60% of the world’s extreme poor will live in countries affected by “[economic] fragility, conflict, and violence.”²² This reveals how the current trajectory of capitalist imperialism, expressed through one of its leading institutions, will only intensify the conditions of displacement and migration through war, invasion, and occupation.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 1991 and imposition of a decades-long brutal sanctions regime, and especially again with the second invasion and occupation of 2003, initiated the destabilization of the entire Middle East. The toppling of the Iraqi government, followed by later military interventions across the region from Syria to Libya, generated spiraling waves of war, violence, and mass displacement that have continued to the present. Between 2003 and 2023, over 1.1 million Iraqis remained permanently displaced from their country. Since the subsequent U.S. invasion of Syria in September 2014, a military operation codenamed “Operation Inherent Resolve” to ostensibly fight the Islamic State and to counter rival Russian military intervention on behalf of the embattled Syrian state, an estimated twelve million Syrians have been forcibly displaced from the region.²³ U.S.-led intervention between 2015-2019 to back anti-government forces (and to ostensibly fight the Islamic State) in Libya fueled an on-going conflict that has displaced over one million Libyans.

From 2001 to 2021, the U.S. military invaded and occupied the country of Afghanistan over two decades. During that time, the war escalated within the country between the United States and the Afghan forces of the Taliban and spread to all regions. The U.S. government’s war against the Taliban was ostensibly fought to “protect democracy” and “human rights,” but occurred in the context of increasing tensions between the United States and its allies and Russia and China. The U.S. invasion in 2001 took place in the aftermath of the defeat of Russia’s occupation and

withdrawal from Afghanistan only 10 years earlier; and amid a period of U.S.-led NATO expansion deeper into the borderlands of Russia and China. Furthermore, the colonial regime installed on behalf of the U.S. occupying force proved to be duly brutal and oppressive, engaging in widespread violations against the population and only holding power at U.S. gunpoint. Over the period of the occupation, 5.9 million Afghans were internally displaced or fled the country.²⁴

The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine has created an episode of mass displacement of Ukrainians, especially since the full-scale military assault began in February of 2022. Since then, over 14 million Ukrainians, 35% of the population, have been displaced by the war with about 6.5 million refugees fleeing to neighboring countries and the United States.²⁵ The invasion occurred amid escalating inter-imperial rivalry, rising tensions, and the irreconcilability between the regional imperial expansionist ambitions of Putin's Russia and NATO's imperial expansionism into the Indo-Pacific region as a means to contain Russia and counter China.

On-going U.S.-led funding and military support for Israel has also been a source of recurring violence and mass displacement in Palestine. Palestinians are also one of the largest displaced populations in the world due to colonial war and has been rapidly accelerating in the recent context of wars of imperial re-division. This began with the British and French occupation and re-division of the region after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, followed by the British Empire's sponsorship of the Zionist settler-colonial occupation of Palestine and the U.S.-European imperial invention of the colonial "state" of Israel in 1948. This has been followed by 76 years of on-going U.S. and European-funded and supported Zionist-led genocidal campaigns,²⁶ ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their lands into the Israeli-occupied territorial fragments of Gaza and the West Bank, and the mass displacement and forced migration of more than six million Palestinian refugees into other nations.

The new imperial scramble for Africa has seen especially the United States, French, British, Russian, and regional allies, fund and back coups, neocolonial wars, and other forms of imperialist intervention and rivalry in different African nations.²⁷ China has become the largest capitalist investor state operating within the African continent,²⁸ while Russia has also expanded its influence through economic partnerships and military intervention through proxy mercenary groups.²⁹ The strategic political and military role of rival imperialist forces and factions have initiated or exacerbated the crises that have also been a major factor of unprecedented displacement of over 25 million people across the continent by 2023,³⁰ and record numbers of refugees seeking relief abroad.³¹

The mass displacement and migration resulting from the failings of the capitalist system, and the current inter-imperial divisions and conflict driving a new generation of international war, is also expressing itself in the crisis-reconfiguration of bourgeois politics in the imperial centers. Social polarization is driving deeper ideological fissures, the decline of centrism and moderation, and pressurizing substantial shifts to the far-right in mainstream bourgeois politics amid urgent and expedient defense of capital and empire amid significant threats and challenges. In this mire, far-right and fascist parties and movements are seizing upon the crises to weaponize nationalism against their imperial rivals and ratcheting up white supremacist attacks against migrants and refugees. Even as the migrant becomes the object of scorn for racists and imperialists, their exploitation as labor has increased in significance as the means for capitalist accumulation.

The Politics and Profits of Anti-Migration

The concentration of ownership in the hands of fewer people who have control over ever-larger sectors of the means of production and the financial sector have enabled the capitalist class to leverage and wield greater and more direct power inside the architecture of the state and its

political institutions. Nevertheless, amid growing expressions of class struggle and mass protest,³² the splits and fissures taking place in the global imperial order, and the urgent necessity to prop up the current arrangements and interests of capital, formal politics are being shifted to the right inside capitalist imperialist states internationally.

Within these shifts, the crises of capitalism and attendant weakening of bourgeois ideology have enabled those on the far right of the bourgeoisie and their petty-bourgeois, neo-fascist junior partners to find common ground and push forward into the mix to present their own “solutions.” The surge of far-right forces growing through the cracks in liberal and centrist bourgeois ideology amid economic and political crisis is moving whole political systems further rightward and toward accommodation and approximation with the ascendant far rights.

Far-right and fascist political movements and parties are gaining power across the capitalist and imperialist centers, most notably in France, Germany, Netherlands, and Italy; and are building organizational capacity for social mobilization and political action, orchestrating political violence, and otherwise attempting to reframe a vigorous defense of capital and empire through repression and exclusion of migrants and refugees.³³ In the United States, both Democrats and Republicans have increasingly used the state apparatus to exclude, incarcerate, and deport migrants and refugees,³⁴ while the most extreme rightwing state governments like that in Texas are now operating independently of the federal government to block and physically harm refugees.³⁵ Far-right and fascist attacks on migrants (and people perceived to be migrants, especially Latinos) has been climbing in each of the last three years.³⁶ In Europe, a parallel process is also taking place with an increasing annual rate of deportations (including a new strategy of “third nation” deportations), rates of violence against migrants and refugees, and racist political scapegoating.³⁷

The victimization of migrants and refugees also takes place in the context of capitalist crisis and neocolonial and imperialist rivalry and conflict. Displaced peoples are disproportionately classed (or re-classed) as workers through incorporation into the economies of the capitalist and imperialist powers without bestowing citizenship, civil, or labor rights. Displaced workers are also comprising a larger percentage of the working classes in capitalist economies internationally, especially in the imperial capitalist centers due to rising labor shortages.³⁸ For instance, the foreign-born working class accounted for 18.6 percent of the total U.S. labor force, and disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid and least union-organized sectors of the economy.³⁹ In Europe, the number is smaller but growing. In 2023, 27.3 million non-citizen migrants were employed in a European Union member economy, representing a total of 6.1% of the population—a rate that has been increasing annually (with the highest national percentages in Germany, Spain, France, and Italy).⁴⁰

By using the state to keep migrant and refugee workers in a state of social and political vulnerability, the capitalist class can exploit their labor at a higher rate than those integrated as “citizens.” The racist and xenophobic standard of contemporary migration politics are also a tool to foster racial and national divisions within the national working classes, undermining the basis for class consciousness, solidarity, and unity necessary to build or rebuild unions, revitalize and empower labor movements, and group or regroup socialist and anticapitalist political organization.

The historical models of European and U.S. settler-colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism have always depended on maintaining ranks of disenfranchised and vulnerable—and thus more exploitable and disposable—labor across and within borders. If colonialism in its contemporary form can be understood as an arrangement in which the colonizer nation extracts the value of the land, labor, and natural resources of a colonized nation in a zero-sum process in which one side becomes “developed” and the other “under-developed,” so too can we locate a neotype of colonialism within the nucleus of capitalist social relations.

Because of the operational and dependent role of migrant repression as a function of capital accumulation at a time of capitalist crisis and imperialist conflict, there can be no deviation from this pathway inside the ruling bourgeois political parties. The world created by this system is overheating, cracking up, and becoming more dangerous for all of us—but especially so for the enlarging numbers of displaced and marginalized people.

Notes

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