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US House passes anti-immigrant measures with Democratic Party green light

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The US House of Representatives passed two anti-immigrant bills Thursday as the American ruling class's attack on immigrants gains political momentum.

The House votes came just hours before Trump's travel ban took effect. On Monday, the Supreme Court reached a shameful historic milestone when it unanimously allowed the ban to go forward, stranding thousands of immigrants in war-torn North Africa and the Middle East.

The "No Sanctuary for Criminals Act" passed 228-195 on a near-party line vote. The bill will strip federal funding from so-called "sanctuary areas," i.e., states and localities that do not turn over to federal officials for deportation immigrants arrested for criminal offenses.

Under the terms of the bill, roughly 600 localities will each lose tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants for services such as drug prevention and social programs if they do not turn over migrants in their jurisdiction for deportation. The bill also gives state and local police free rein to illegally detain immigrants at the behest of the federal government by divesting individuals of the right to sue localities. In addition, the bill will allow indefinite detention without a bond hearing for immigrants awaiting court proceedings.

The second bill, commonly known as "Kate's Law," drastically expands federal sentences for immigrants with criminal records who are deported and attempt to reenter the US. Already, over one quarter of all federal criminal prosecutions are for "illegal reentry." If the bill becomes law, the sentences will increase to 10 to 25 years, depending on the immigrant's criminal record.

Under the bill, an immigrant with three misdemeanor convictions for reckless driving who is deported but attempts to return to live with his wife and children in the United States will face 10 years imprisonment. The bill will also allow the prosecution of those who attempt to provide assistance to migrants.

The Democratic Party leadership gave the green light to the passage of Kate's Law, with Democratic Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Maryland) noting, "Kate's Law is a little more complicated. I'm advising members to look at it carefully and see what their conclusion is."

Legitimizing the reactionary "tough on crime" line used to eviscerate democratic rights over the past three decades, Hoyer said, "You talk to the families who have been adversely affected by that, it is a wrenching experience."

This comment was in reference to the Republicans' efforts to exploit the murder of Kate Steinle in 2015 by a previously deported undocumented man. According to two 2017 studies, one by the Sentencing Project and another by the Cato Institute, immigrants are substantially less likely to commit crimes than US citizens. After green-lighting a "yes" vote, Hoyer cynically voted "no" with the knowledge that the bill would pass anyway.

Twenty-four Democrats voted for Kate's Law, including Hispanic Texas Democrat Henry Cuellar, self-proclaimed liberals from the San Francisco Bay Area such as Jackie Speier and Eric Swalwell, Collin Peterson from rural Minnesota, Peter DeFazio from a college town in Oregon, and several others.

Speier's vote is emblematic of a whole layer of liberals who sign congressional letters denouncing the immorality of Trump's abuse of immigrants while paving the way for mass roundups and deportations. Swalwell's vote is also indicative of the right-wing and xenophobic character of the Democrats' groundless anti-Russia campaign, of which he is a leading congressional proponent.

With the Democrats' green light on Kate's Law and the four Democratic-appointed Supreme Court Justices voting to reinstate the travel ban, the Trump administration has the political initiative to intensify its anti-immigrant policies. The bills now head to the Senate.

On Friday, Immigration and Customs Enforcement unveiled a new policy to crack down on parents who pay smugglers to bring their children into the US in an effort to free them from dangerous conditions in Central or South America. Michelle Brane, director of the Migrant Rights and Justice program at the Women's Refugee Commission, said the policy is an effort to use "children as bait with the clear intent of punishing parents and deterring them from protecting their children."

Speaking Thursday at a pre-vote press conference, Department of Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, the retired commander of the US Southern Command, gloated that the government has arrested 66,000 immigrants in roundups since January, including 18,000 not convicted of any crime. Adopting the tone of a mafia boss, Kelly said he was "offended" that some lawmakers and state and local officials would support sanctuary cities.

"It is beyond my comprehension," he said, "why state and local officials sworn to enforce the laws of the nation—as I am—would actively discourage or outright prevent law enforcement agencies from upholding the laws of the United States." He then accused sanctuary cities of "prioritiz[ing] criminals over the public and law enforcement officer safety."

Kelly, who oversees a vast apparatus of domestic repression, was confirmed in January by a vote of 88 to 11, including 37 of 48 Senate Democrats. In a January 20 statement, Senator Bernie Sanders defended his "yes" vote for Kelly, claiming he was not a "right-wing extremist."

"I hope... General Kelly will have a moderating influence on some of the racist and xenophobic views that President Trump advocated throughout the campaign," the Vermont senator declared. Sanders' statement exposes not only his own political bankruptcy, but the bankruptcy of all efforts to reform the Democratic Party.

