

Gun Shows and Immigration in Portland Oregon

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We're now witness to the largest wave of human migration the planet has ever seen. Driven by a new, truly international form of capitalism, human populations are alternately violently displaced, economically pressured, invited, coerced into relocation across the globe by civil wars, low intensity wars, high intensity wars, famines, droughts, hurricanes, floods, trade policies, austerity, other countless other economic and environmental catastrophies. This is globalized capitalism. We live in a time of threatened ecological collapse and the beginnings of capitalism's greatest tragedy-the possibility of a human created mass die-off of mamallian and other forms of life.

More momentarily, we also bear witness to a possible global economic collapse and what will be the inevitable attempts at a massive restructuring and upheaval of the US working class that will result.

It is within this context that as a new focal point for the marketing of traditional white supremacist ideas that the anti-immigrant movement in the United States has mobilized. As the federal government becomes less receptive (even the McCain candidacy has refused to align itself with the Minuteman movement and its electoral counterparts) to the anti-immigrant movemen. As the federal government and its policies fall under increasing pressure and are swayed by businesses not so sympathetic to No-Match letters and workplace ICE raids, anti-immigrant organizations have focused their energy on local campaigns.

Its happening all across the United States right now. Protests and sometimes attacks at corners where Day Laborers congregate, mobilizations on state Capital steps, and a slew of state, county, and city level ballot measure initiatives further criminalizing undocumented workers and even their allies or public workers who offer services to them.

In Oregon, Oregonians For Immigration Reform(the state's most prominent and visible mainstream anti-immigrant organization) have been petitioning for a number of these ballot measures. Each month, they prioritize traveling to the 2 or 3 gun shows around the state, collecting signatures for their petitions.

Here is a quote from the front page of a flier that I picked up at the Portland Gun Show last month.

"Amid Guarantees that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) would stimulate commerce, spur job creation, curtail illegal immigration, and have no impact on U.S. independence, Congress approved it in Novermber 1993. President Clinton immediately signed the 1,700-page pact into law. That many pages has more to do with regulations than anything truly "free". NAFTA's major accomplishments include:

- The U.S. Department of Labor reports that 1.8 million American workers have applied for trade adjustment assistance after losing their jobs because of NAFTA*
- Countless U.S. factories have been closed and rebuilt in Mexico*
- The U.S. manufacturing base has shrunk dramatically and our nation is becoming a mere service provider*
- The southern border of the U.S. remains wide open and federal government promises to close it are not being fulfilled....."*

The Portland Gun Show takes place almost monthly at the Portland Expo Center. Its one of a few that happen in the region each month, a 'private' event, where anyone who wants to vend or table pays a fee, and sets up shop.

Walking the aisles, you see a lot of men in Carhart jackets, baseball caps with any number of power tools advertised on the face, and lots of guns, ammunition, and related parts, accessories, and manuals. Over the course of the weekend, thousands of (largely white), working class people will pay their eight dollars to get through the doors.

The reason that gun shows exist is that as 'private' events they used to circumnavigate state and federal laws requiring background checks and other legal demands on gun and ammunition sales. Although in Oregon laws now demand background checks on official sales at gun shows, off-the-books 'parking lot' deals are still common practice. Gun dealers and purchasers have a place where folks can buy legal weapons without registering or notifying federal authorities. If it isn't clear already, this means that beyond a possible affinity for hunting and sport shooting, the attendees at gun shows are much more likely to have something in common with many an undocumented worker: a healthy dose of suspicion towards the federal government and its agencies.

Gun shows also have a long history as recruiting grounds by white supremacist (and often) anti-semitic right wing organizations who use (a complicated, but in many ways legitimate) fear and distrust of the federal government for their organizing purposes (see Ken Lawrence's piece on Gun Shows in the 80s). They're also one of the primary places that Oregonians for Immigration Reform have decided to collect signatures for their ballot initiatives.

History's irony seems to find a shallow grave. The light-rail stop at Portland's Expo Center has a beautiful Japanese gate over its exit. During the tragedy of forced internment of Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent during WWII, Portland's Expo Center was the first collection point for over 3800 people from across the region who found their lives, property and freedom uprooted by state policies.

WHO ELSE HAD TABLES THERE?

Looking at the source literature, its not immediately obvious that the anti-nafta and subtly anti-immigrant scribe introducing this reflection was produced by America's most famous paranoid, conspiratorial anticommunist bulwark, the John Birch Society. (The Birchers recently made news in Portland, as one of their members, a Portland Police officer, was exposed as having warehoused an illegal 'red file' of 'subversives' in his home garage at the behest of the Portland Police Department leadership for close to 20 years.)¹

Across the Expo Center, not far from the Birch Society, was a Department of Homeland Security-Border Patrol recruiting station with full color photos and more shwag than an Amway convention.

Two aisles over from the Border Patrol, there were two booths selling nazi paraphanelia. The only piece of literature at one of these booths was a diatribe against immigration, nicely fit between a display case of Hitler photos and a pile of swastika patches.

The Militia of Montana was also there with a massive literature/book sales table. During the 1990s, the Militia of Montana was central in the armed Militia movement, whose threats on fed-

¹ www.portlandtribune.com

eral officials, advocacy of armed rebellion, and stockpiling of arms won them an intense counterinsurgency campaign at the behest of then president Bill Clinton.

Their table carried an array of books with titles such as, “Guerilla Warfare From the Man Who Taught Fidel Castro,” “Weapons and Explosives Improvisation,” “Poisonous and Edible Plants of the Americas,” and “How To Hide Things in Public Places.” Tucked away in their fiction section, somewhat hidden behind a recently published novel about one man’s vigilante justice in the struggle against “the conspiracy behind reconquista and the retaking of Aztlan,” (placed so you could find it only if you knew what to look for), the Militia also had a stack of William Pierce’s, “Turner Diaries” for sale.²

At the Portland Gun Show, the far right had proponents of armed struggle against the state (the Militia of Montana), organizers of armed direct action against immigrant workers (the paramilitary Minutemen project, who patrol the borders with arms and target day labor centers for protest and harassment), and organizations oriented around electoral politics (OFIR and the Jon Birch Society). Not to be forgotten or dismissed, Ron Paul’s supporters were there, too.

These folks, by and large, are the face of a multitude of forces that has, in an organized and conscious fashion, set the terms of debate and fostered one of many legitimacy crises for the state in the past few years. Although it would be a mistake to dismiss the significant differences between many of them, the core of these groups have mobilized around ideas from the far-right which are nothing new. The current ideas are the direct heirs of white supremacist leader of White Aryan Resistance Tom Metzger’s Border Watch, David Duke’s presidential campaign, English-only initiatives, and California’s hugely successful, anti-immigrant Proposition 187.

Most recently, in 2003, Save Arizona Now Coalition escalated the debate and alongside it, the Minutemen project was born. From that moment, state and political actors have been reacting to the activity of this political tendency.

Its important to note the diversity of opinions on any number of topics within these forces. An example: the Militia of Montana’s ideologies oppose the Patriot Act, the Real I.D. Act. and the strengthening of federal policing agencies.

Here’s what the John Birch Society has to say about Real ID, “Nearly three years after the Real ID act was passed by Congress, there is little evidence of how such a law would protect American citizens from security threats. Instead, lawmakers and public activists are more concerned about how the act would place limitations on the American people by implementing a national ID card, equipped with intrusive biometric features, which would be financed primarily by the states, and would place severe limitations on any person or state that refused to accept the federally-mandated law.”³

However, OFIR’s ballot measures are contingent on the state of Oregon coming into compliance with the Real ID Act. There is a question worth asking here: with such divergent ideas on the role of the state, (and numerous other issues), where do these folks find common ground?

² From Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org) The Turner Diaries is a 1978 novel by William Luther Pierce (under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald), the late leader of the National Alliance, a white separatist organization. The novel depicts a violent racist revolutionary struggle in the United States that escalates into global genocide, leading to the extermination of all Jews and non-whites. For Pierce, this was not a dystopian outcome, but rather the fulfillment of his “dream” of a White world.”) Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh is alleged to have modelled his attack on this book.

³ www.jbs.org.

At key points in history the state and ruling class have directly utilized the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups as an instrument of terror, yet recently it has also seen necessary to attempt to reign in these tendencies, with differing levels of success. As the white nationalist Right grew increasingly militant into the 1990s, the Clinton government launched very real attacks on the militia movement and the militant wing of the anti-abortion movement. The rise and terror of “The Order,⁴” serial killings of abortion doctors, the shoot-out at Ruby Ridge, the Oklahoma City bombing all provide evidence of the potentially insurgent capabilities of these movements, and the state’s need to confront it.

This has occurred as a new, internationalist and globalized capitalism has emerged, and concurrently, the structures of white supremacy have shifted. The new, “multicultural” face of the state and official institutions under this new regimen now find tensions with an old form of white supremacy still fostered by nationalist elements. Although the leadership and core of these elements appear to be composed of a dying ‘middle’ class (landlords, cops, real estate agents and dentists), their pandering appeals to new fears and lingering white supremacist notions within white workers. Many of these groupings, initially supported by or even formed by agents of Capital and the US State, now find themselves in (or moving towards an increasingly) anti-government stances.

As the struggles of the 1960s and 70s resulted on a small minority of women and people of color taking seats at the tables of power, the grassroots Right has turned its attention increasingly towards multi-culturalism and Great Society vestiges as targets in its organizing. Of course, people of color are still disproportionately imprisoned, poor, sick, etc, but while white privilege is still a fact, economically speaking, its sum benefits have declined along with the standards of living of the rest of the working class during and since the massive restructuring begun with the oil shocks of the 70s. In the 21st century, the tangible wages of whiteness: “first hired, last fired,”: historically unprecedented wages and easy credit for homeownership are privileges that may have been preserved in a relative form, but only within a schema of collapsing wages, inflating costs of living, and a generalized collapse of the post WWII ‘social contract’ for the entire working class. The economic upheavals we’re now in the midst of will only accelerate that trend.

White privilege still does accrue material benefits, particularly a far lower likelihood of spending significant time behind bars or being killed by the police, or being excluded entirely from legal employment within a low wage, high productivity economy. However as the economic benefits of whiteness have come into relative decline, white privilege increasingly becomes a matter of “security:” real or symbolic, as juxtaposed in relation to, “crime” and, “terror”.

Gun shows are a place where a segment white working class people congregate, and have been one of the venues where multiple tendencies within a broader movement are organizing. Its clear that immigration is a topic where these tendencies find two both common ground with each other, and access to a body of workers willing to consider their ideas. It is of great importance that we study and understand the tendencies within this movement, and in particular, take serious the grievances that are capable of winning working class people over to it.

Although the leadership of these tendencies have differing views on the role of the state and on globalization, what we need to take seriously is the places where they’re successfully appealing to the disillusionment, fear, and uprooting that capitalist globalization has fostered within the white working class.

⁴ www.freetheorder.org/

ANTICAPITALIST TENDENCIES?

In Arizona a new law goes into effect Feb. 1 that suspends or revokes the business license of any business that “knowingly” hires an undocumented worker. Its not a massive task to imagine how, if enforced, this law is going to come into conflict with powerful interests-with agribusiness, with service sector employers and with numerous other businesses dependent on undocumented labor. Its worth noting that these economic forces are significant benefactors of the same Republican and Democratic parties whom have bent over backwards to collaborate in implementing free trade agreements (and war policies and repressive infrastructure necessary for their implementation). It is also worth noting that these very policies are a driving force in the greatest wave of mass human population movement in the history of the planet. This global exodus is not something that these large economic powers haven’t considered or foreseen.

Portions of this movement are speaking to the suspicions, distrust, and frustration that a portion of disillusioned (primarily white) working class people feel towards this process.

Whether genuine or opportunist in their positions, its notable that OFIR, Jon Birch, Ron Paul, and the Militia of Montana all find audiences at the gun show when they talk about environmental degradation, globalization, loss of jobs, and corporate influence on government.

A deep piece of this movement’s lore is the idea of the ‘liberal state’, acting in collusion with international capital(or corporations) to force ‘multiculturalism’ upon white “America” as it drives living conditions for white workers downward.

Whether or not OFIR succeeds with their ballot measure campaign, whether or not Democrats (or Republicans) take the helm and implement shoddy immigration reform (indentured servitude in the form of a guest worker bill), this movement from the right is learning to speak to the discontents and disillusionment of a sector of working people increasingly suspicious of free trade, of corporate power and influence, and of increasing surveillance and policing powers by a state they believe to be in cahoots with international capital in selling out the “American Dream.”

The recent launch of an immigration policy organization of Nursery owners and other business people within the state further complicates the matter, and draws out a bit more of the complexity in the debate around this struggle.

We must maintain principled politics (particularly in a commitment to organize in the demographic ponds that these folks are fishing), without confirming John Birch, OFIR, and, the Montana of Militia’s prophecy that ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘globalization’ are some sort of grand conspiracy in compliance with international capital against ‘American’ (read: white) workers?

There is a place to wade into the debate that speaks genuinely to the sentiments suspicious of the federal government, of globalization and its consequences(and of the military and ever present war apparatus necessary for its implementation), while cutting into and undermining the white supremacist core of this movement? Its important that our language and our approach(or alliances) not play into the far right’s folklore regarding the liberal state. There is certainly a way to answer to the (oftentimes) legitimate fears and distrust of white working class people against corporate business and the federal government while maintaining a priority and loyalty to the leadership of immigrant workers themselves. The question we must ask is,“where are the places where white workers are being forced, through experience itself, to engage with the question of whether they will join the rest of their class as workers, or continue to,“cling to the chains of an actual wretchedness.”

Whether given the carrot(as with the Bush government now) or the stick (as under Clinton), this movement on the other side will continue to deepen tendencies and ideologies with some of the same anti-corporate, anti-globalization, anti-free-trade, and even anti-war tendencies that we're attempting to build power around. It won't be going away either, even if the immigrant rights movement succeeds in establishing meaningful change for undocumented workers in this country.

Ron Paul's candidacy, as a protectionist, anti-war, anti-globalization, anti-immigration campaign, stands as a testament to this. One of the petitioners from the OFIR booth, a member of the Oregon Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, was wearing a Ron Paul button. The Ron Paul campaign was tabling just across the way from him, supporting gun rights, opposing NAFTA and the Iraq War, and simultaneously urging a lockdown on our Southern Border in the name of national sovereignty.

Our other challenge, then, is to draw out and expose the white supremacist thread that gives this movement its cohesion. We have to speak to the above noted sentiments in a way that doesn't pander to, or give space to neither the white supremacist notions of a stolen "American Legacy," that the right is fostering nor the genuine suspicions of the liberal state and its complicity in the decline the entire working class faces.

Lets carry that work forward.

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