**Border abolition and the struggle against capitalism**
**Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha**

**ABSTRACT:** Immigration controls do not prevent human movement, nor do they protect citizens. In fact, borders produce many of the social harms they claim to prevent, including loss of life, inhuman and degrading treatment and multiplying inequalities. Nor do borders in any way address the conditions that shape migration processes in the first place - global disparity, the dispossession of lands and livelihoods, climate breakdown: instead, they render people on the more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse. What we call border abolition is concerned with expanding the freedom both to move and to stay. This article examines the question of immigration controls and work, and discusses how border abolition connects to the struggles of workers for better conditions and wages. It also argues that border abolition is inherently internationalist: it involves a challenge to all the relations that underpin the permanence of borders - vast global inequalities, ongoing processes of dispossession and extraction, and the mirage of 'development'. Anti-capitalists should remember that there can be no socialism in one country, and no progressive labour movement that puts 'natives' first. Because walled workers cannot unite, anti-capitalism is necessarily internationalist, which means committed to border abolition.

**Keywords**: borders, abolition, immigration, anti-capitalism, trade unions, workers' rights, internationalism, development.

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Immigration controls do not prevent human movement, nor do they protect citizens. In fact, borders produce many of the social harms they claim to prevent, including loss of life, inhuman and degrading treatment and multiplying inequalities. Nor do borders in any way address the conditions that shape migration processes in the first place - global disparity, the dispossession of lands and livelihoods, climate breakdown: instead, they render people on the move vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse.

Echoing Angela Davis in her account of prisons, we contend that immigration controls are obsolete and should be abolished.[1] Borders, like prisons, are embedded in punitive systems for managing undesirable subjects, and both institutions punish people through immobilisation and forced exile. Whatever the important differences between prisons and borders, state violence is in both cases directed towards managing and restricting movement. The struggle for freedom is therefore in both cases a struggle over movement - a struggle for *the right to locomotion*, to move freely, over fences and out of cages.

What we call border abolition is concerned with expanding this freedom, the freedom to move and to stay.[2] This does not mean advocating for free movement in the world as it is currently configured, but rather for transformation of the conditions to which borders are a response. Abolition is concerned with the *presence* of life-sustaining goods, services and practices of care as well as the *absence* of violent state practices like detention and deportation. Accordingly, border abolition seeks to dismantle violent borders, but also to cultivate new ways of caring for one another, and to nurture forms of collectivity more conducive to human flourishing than the nation states we currently inhabit. Border abolition is a revolutionary, anti-capitalist politics situated within wider struggles for economic justice, racial equality and sustainable ecologies, based on the conviction that there will be no liveable futures in which borders between political communities are violently guarded.

The richest seam of abolitionist work to date has focused primarily on what is known as the prison-industrial complex - the set of institutions and social relations that establishes caging, surveillance and punishment as the primary responses to an ever-increasing set of social problems. For prison abolitionists, the problem is not only prisons as physical sites of confinement, but all the social relations that make prisons appear necessary and permanent. These include the organised abandonment of working-class communities; the social force of racist resentment and hatred; and dominant ideas about security, punishment and war, in which imperialism and militarism work alongside various wars at home - the wars on drugs, on poverty, on the racialised poor. Mariame Kaba writes that ‘prison-industrial complex abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy’; we have sought to transpose this framework to the domain of border abolition.[3]

The abolition of borders requires that we challenge all the social structures underpinning their permanence. This means transforming the wider set of social and international relations that converge around bordering, as well as ending and

dismantling the most visible manifestations of borders: towering walls, detention centres, mass deportation flights. Crucially, border abolition must take account of the phenomena to which borders are seen as a necessary response.

Alongside prefigurative work to resource, build and practise new forms of care and community, the identification of non-reformist reforms is central to abolitionist work. Non-reformist reforms are 'those measures that reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crises it creates'.[4] The term was coined by André Gorz in 1967, in his reflections on anti-capitalist politics more broadly, and has been picked up by various groups struggling against capitalism, environmental destruction and, most notably, police and prisons.[5] While police, prisons and borders will not be abolished in a day, non-reformist reforms are the kinds of reforms that can help reduce their power in the meantime, while also making further progressive changes more likely in the future. Non-reformist reforms are the kinds of material changes that further open the way to a world without borders. In the words of Critical Resistance: 'Our goal is not to improve the system; it is to shrink the system into non-existence'.[6]

Non-reformist reforms can be contrasted with the liberal politics of reformism. Reformist reforms are tweaks that make some kind of change while ultimately maintaining, or even expanding, the oppressive structures they seek to improve. Reforms that claim to blunt the oppressions of the border regime may in fact extend its reach: training and new technology for immigration enforcement officers; expanded use of electronic tags for immigration detainees on bail; replacement of human decision-makers with AI. A key problem of reformism is that it means our energies, resources and time are expended in fighting for changes that ultimately move us no closer to the world we want to see, and that in many instances may actively block our path. For those who can be contented with nicer, more liberal immigration regimes, such reformist reforms might suffice. But for those of us for whom abolition is a long-term goal, the task of distinguishing reformist from non-reformist reforms is a vital one.

We hope that border abolition can help to bring a wider set of relations into the frame - not just immigration vans, detention centres, Frontex, ICE or deportation charter flights, but also work and family relations, as well as the uses of emergent technologies of surveillance and data-capture in contemporary border regimes.

Abolition helps break open the dichotomy that contrasts reform with revolution, and helps us think about which kinds of non-reformist reforms to pursue now. In the rest of this article, we set out in more detail our argument that struggles against capitalism must necessarily be committed to border abolition, and consider some of the theoretical and organising tools that can help guide us in this long fight.

As part of our wider exploration of how best anti-capitalism and border abolition can be articulated together - theoretically and in practice - the next section focuses in particular on the question of immigration controls and work, and briefly discusses how this connects to the struggles of workers for better conditions and wages.

## Immigration controls and work

On the morning of 4 July 2016, two weeks after the UK voted to leave the European Union, workers at the high street restaurant Byron Burgers were called in for what they were told was a health-and-safety meeting. Once in the backroom, they were accosted by Home Office Immigration Enforcement agents and asked for their papers. Thirty-five of them - from Brazil, Nepal, Egypt and Albania - were then arrested, many of them later being deported.[7] Like Deliveroo and SOAS (University of London) before them, Byron Burgers had gone above and beyond to assist the Home Office in identifying, and in this case entrapping, their undocumented workers, when they were under no legal obligation to do so.[8] Under the 'hostile environment' policy, employers are deputised to act as border agents, and face potentially unlimited fines or up to five years in prison if they are found to be employing undocumented workers without having conducted valid 'right to work' checks. But there is no obligation to facilitate surreptitious raids against one's own employees.

Employer sanctions - which are often only patchily enforced - are not the state's only means of border enforcement. Working is itself a criminal offence for undocumented employees in the UK, punishable by up to fifty-one weeks in prison, a fine, or both. Meanwhile, migrant workers who are on 'shortage occupation lists', or sponsored by their employers, are tied by their visas - which means that if they lose their job they lose their status (as under temporary labour migration statuses in the United States and Canada). Meanwhile, overseas domestic workers have no right to change employer at all, and people seeking asylum are excluded from the regular labour market altogether. On top of this, many people on work visas have to pay significant sums, in addition to income and other taxes, in order to access essential services like the NHS, while also being excluded from welfare support through a provision which gives them 'no recourse to public funds'.

Anyone genuinely concerned about labour rights needs to understand that these kinds of border controls only strengthen the hands of bosses, making it easier for them to undermine terms and conditions for everyone. It is migrants' vulnerability to immigration control - especially the power to deport - that makes them especially pliable and exploitable. The suggestion that migrant workers drive down wages - popular on the right and parts of the left - fails to account for the fact that immigration systems make workers less free and undermine their ability to assert their labour rights. If your right to remain in the country is dependent on you having a particular job, and if becoming 'illegal' means destitution and the threat of deportation, then it is very difficult to ask for a pay rise or call out unsafe labour practices. Similarly, if you have been pushed into the irregular labour market because you cannot survive on the meagre asylum support paid by the state (in the UK, £35 per week), or because you do not have the so-called 'right to work', then exposing exploitative practices, or calling the police, is not really an option, when doing so might jeopardise your asylum claim, and the police are likely to flag you to immigration enforcement The concentration of migrants - and particularly undocumented migrants - in the parts of the economy with the worst pay and conditions is an effect of their vulnerability to hyper-exploitation due to their precarious immigration status.[9] It is not necessary to explore all the wider and complex arguments about the relationship of wages to migration to understand that solidarity and organising are the way to address this issue.

It is worth restating some fundamentals of left politics here: better working conditions come from the struggles of the working class. Despite the prevalence of common-sense claims that the value of wages is determined simply by supply and demand - so that migrant workers, by furnishing more supply, cause the value of wages to fall – political economy is far more complex field than this would suggest. Not least, the capacity, or incapacity, to struggle collectively is a crucial factor in determining the value of wages. When leftists accept neoliberal ideas about 'supply and demand' in the 'labour market', they negate the potential and the force of worker agency and struggle. In short, better wages for all are dependent on the capacity for collective resistance; thus, building such capacity among all workers, including migrants, is critical. Immigration controls only weaken that capacity. Therefore, fighting for the rights and conditions of precarious migrant labourers can improve the lot of all working people. And the most effective way to do this is by building the power of migrant-inclusive trade unions.

Trade unions have often played host to virulent forms of racism: organised workers in both Britain and the United States were instrumental in the introduction of the first immigration controls in these countries, targeting Jewish and Chinese migrants respectively. But unions have also been central to anti-racist movements. For example, in the UK, the Grunwick strike of 1976-78, which was led by South Asian women from East Africa, is rightly celebrated for the ways in which it 'brought people of different races and backgrounds together in support of the rights of migrant women workers, shattered stereotypes about Asian women in Britain, and changed the face of trade unionism'.[10] Thousands of union members from around the country supported the strikers with mass pickets, even if the strike ultimately failed in its aims.

Trade unions provide space and structure for the development and articulation of collective demands. In a racist society, these demands must necessarily confront racism. Indeed, unions are able to negotiate and collectively bargain around anti-racist issues at work. Educators, for example, can work within unions to get police out of schools, or to stop education data being used for immigration enforcement, or to refuse to comply with counter-terror legislation that demands the surveillance of mostly Muslim students. By organising to resist these practices in the workplace, trade unions can take a stand against the racist policies of employers and governments. More generally, trade unions constitute an important node in the broad anti-racist movement - supporting campaigns, organising and attending protests, and helping amplify evidence of racialised inequalities.

Unfortunately, however, unions often fail in their mission to support people who experience racism in their workplaces, or to address racism within the unions themselves. The question of whether and how to support precarious and illegalised migrants has therefore been especially controversial. In the British context, some key figures in the labour movement have actively reproduced anti-migrant narratives. In 2016, Len McCluskey, then leader of the Britain's largest union, Unite, invoked the 'concerns of working people' to underline his support for ending free movement within the EU, claiming that 'workers have always done best when the labour supply is controlled and communities are stable'.[11] And yet, other large, mainstream unions - including Unison, RMT and others - have made significant efforts to provide better support to migrant workers and resist the 'hostile environment'. Indeed, there are many migrant workers organising within these established trade unions.

Nonetheless, migrant workers continue to be vastly under-represented in mainstream trade unions, largely because they tend to work in the least protected sectors - in temporary jobs that are poorly unionised and/or on zero-hours contracts. In the UK, it has been the smaller, independent unions - like United Voices of the World (UVW) and Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) - that have best represented migrants: a task that requires organising in particular workplaces and among particular groups of workers. For example, cleaners, security guards and catering staff in London universities successfully organised within IWGB to have their contracts brought in-house; many of these workers were migrants with precarious or temporary immigration statuses. IWGB has also been fighting alongside people working in the platform economy in their attempts to unionise - such as drivers for Uber and Deliveroo - thereby actively supporting and building power largely, though not exclusively, among precarious migrant workers. Meanwhile, UVW has organised with strippers and sex workers, some of whom are especially vulnerable to criminalisation, illegalisation and deportation.

Contests over the place of migrant workers within the labour movement have been just as intense in the United States. Historically, the majority of labour unions within the American Federation of Labor were strongly anti-immigration, and in the first half of the twentieth century sought to extend the terms of the Chinese Exclusion Act to other migrant workers. By the 1960s and 1970s, the United Farm Workers union was actively campaigning against 'illegal immigration' from Mexico, reporting strikebreaking 'illegal immigrants' to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.[12] And yet, at the very same time there was significant support from organised labour for the Civil Rights movement; 40,000 union members were mobilised for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, for example.

Today, unions in the United States remain sites of both racism and migrant exclusion, while at the same time being indispensable to the collective struggle against structural racism. To give one small example, while the United Brotherhood of Carpenters has admitted to reporting undocumented workers routinely to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), other unions, such as the Painters' Union, have sought to defend migrants facing deportation, and have campaigned for the release of their members from detention.[13] Similarly, the Unite Here union has hosted trainings instructing members on how to effectively stonewall ICE agents, emphasising employees' right to refuse to answer questions or show identification.[14]

We should not imagine that workers are supported by unions from on high; rather, workers *are the unions*. Consequently, when unions expand and organise with and among migrants - especially those with precarious statuses - they are able to develop radical demands that will improve the rights and dignity of all workers and all migrants. With this in mind, there are some important non-reformist reforms that can be pursued in relation to immigration controls, work and trade unions.

One key reform here would be to ensure that people are able to access labour rights and protections regardless of their immigration status. This would require, for example, enforcing labour-market standards, such as the minimum wage, in ways that are uncoupled from policing and immigration enforcement. In its 2009 'Iced Out'

report, the AFL-CIO - the largest federation of unions in the United States - articulated exactly this priority.[15]

Second, we need to secure the right for all non-citizens to be able to unionise, wherever they work. This means that trade unions should seek to include all workers, regardless of legal status. They should also make better efforts to organise groups of precarious and especially deportable workers, such as sex workers, immigration detainees and farm workers. This would help build power among undocumented workers otherwise without rights, and help challenge the idea that 'illegal immigrants' and citizens are competitors for scarce resources.

Third, we should campaign for an end to workplace employment checks, so that employers are no longer enlisted to perform border-policing functions. In the meantime, unions should pressure employers to refuse to comply with such checks.

Fourth, we should seek to abolish all crimes of 'illegal' working whereby non-citizens are criminalised for working without papers.

Finally, we should seek the ending of all immigration raids in places of work - and all immigration raids more broadly. As part of campaigning for this change such raids should be actively combatted and resisted. By organising with and among non-citizens, it is possible for unions to create places of sanctuary from immigration enforcement at work, pressuring employers to refuse document checks, resisting the incursions of border enforcement, and supporting colleagues threatened with detention and deportation. Building vibrant union movements and growing the membership among precarious migrants offer a key means of resisting immigration controls. This can and should be done while emphasising that migrants deserve dignity not because they *work hard* or *contribute to the economy*, but simply because they are exploited people sharing interests with citizen workers.

In short, trade unions are sites of struggle, and we should be fighting for and within them - as so many migrant organisers already are. As prison abolitionists Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba and David Stein point out, trade unions are perhaps the model non-reformist reformers: 'Socialists do not fight for trade unions in order to institutionalise capitalist social relations or build an aristocracy of labor. They do so in order to create durable structures that undermine the power of employers to exploit workers'.[16] In this broad fight, trade unions must ally themselves with those seeking to abolish borders, which in practice means supporting migrant workers subject to immigration controls.

This priority has broad implications for left politics. Rather than pandering to imagined nativist constituencies - the 'traditional', 'white', or 'left-behind' working class - we need instead to focus our efforts on building new constituencies and power bases. Unions will be central here, which means we must expand our understanding of work and workers - to include migrants, domestic labourers and sex workers for example - while building power among the most exploited, especially those with precarious immigration status. That said, anti-capitalism is not reducible to industrial relations. The struggle against immigration control needs to be threaded into wider struggles for decent housing, healthcare, education and welfare benefits. Taking the issue of violent borders into the heart of local struggles, where it might not already be

a central issue, is crucial in this regard. The position of illegalised migrants should be made central to our struggles on all issues of social and economic justice. As Bridget Anderson notes, 'if we don't think about it at the start, then it will be introduced as a means of undermining organising and imagining new futures later on'.[17]

**Border abolition, international anti-capitalism and 'development'**

The anti-capitalism of border abolition is inherently internationalist. If abolition means changing all the relations that underpin the permanence of borders, then vast global inequalities, ongoing processes of dispossession and extraction, and the mirage of 'development' all need to be contested. Border abolition is therefore planetary in scope, and we should look beyond the nation state as the default container for human communities. This is easier said than done, but it suggests the need to build connections and strategies with groups working in the global South - especially in the places from which migrants originate and through which they move.

People should be able to remain and flourish close to home, or to wander and travel, as and when they wish. Border abolition thus concerns not only the rights and dignity of migrants living in the global North, but also the plight of poor and oppressed people everywhere. This means the conditions that make people's lives unliveable where they are must be confronted directly. War, environmental degradation and the dispossession of people's land and livelihoods all compel migration; border abolition does not pretend that all migration is liberatory. But neither are we concerned with whether alleviating global inequalities will reduce global migration. People have always moved, and will always do so. Our project is not aimed at reducing movement, but at increasing freedom. Such a project can be sharply contrasted with the contemporary politics of development.

Contemporary development politics are defined by logics of surplus, scarcity and containment: too many people and not enough resources. The foundational assumptions underpinning development have changed; there is no longer any suggestion that countries in the global South will progress through several stages before eventually coming to resemble societies in the global North - nor even that the global poor will one day all be included in global markets. 'Development' is now a euphemism for surviving existing conditions, rather than making those conditions better. This explains all the present talk about 'resilience' (making do with what you have) and 'informal labour' (development without jobs). In fact, the dominant impulse among powerful states today is to use development policies to try to *contain* the global poor in places of scarcity. To give a key example, many African states now receive development funds on the condition that they comply with EU border control efforts. Since the so-called migration crisis of 2015, much of this support has been channelled through the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which is designed to 'tackle the root causes of irregular migration'.

Some EUTF schemes provide loans and training to help people find work and set up businesses at home, targeting young people who are thought to be 'potential migrants', as well as those recently deported from Europe. Other schemes attempt to dissuade people from taking risky journeys - through campaigns, educational projects and awareness raising - although the effectiveness of these policies is highly questionable. The underlying premise that alleviating poverty will decrease migration

is not borne out by the evidence - people who move are rarely the poorest, and tend to be risk-taking young people moving with the support of their families, or because they feel stuck (the desire for existential mobility sometimes precedes that for physical mobility). In these circumstances, providing people with small-business loans or propagandising about the perils of the journey is unlikely to deter them.

Most troublingly, however, EUTF funds are channelled into various 'capacity-building' initiatives designed to modernise recipient states' ability to police, document and otherwise keep under surveillance people living in or moving through their territories. These schemes help strengthen police information systems, train police officers and border guards, modernise systems of national identification, improve border surveillance, and consolidate computer systems and databases in so-called 'source' and 'transit' countries of migration. In effect, 'tackling the root causes of irregular migration' means supporting African states to police, contain and immobilise unruly populations more effectively - all under the umbrella of development.

More broadly, European borders have been externalised, and prospective migrants are now apprehended long before they arrive on European shores, sometimes before they even leave home. Frontex polices the seas, working with the Libyan coastguard to prevent migrants departing from Africa, while the EU has signed agreements with Turkey to ensure the speedy return of irregular migrants. The immobilisation of the racialised global poor is not simply a national question, then, but a central preoccupation of foreign policy and diplomacy. Development policy is crucial in this project. The violence of this 'empire of borders' becomes obscured by the language of development, humanitarianism and care: we stop the boats to save lives.[18]

We must reject these 'humanitarian' conceits, and seek alternatives to development as bordering and containment. One non-reformist reform in this context would be to create and expand spaces and schemes for free movement. While free movement in the EU is broadly limited to European nationals, prioritising the movement of labour rather than of people, it is still worth defending and expanding. At the same time, if borders within Africa, Latin America and Asia were dismantled, creating vast spaces of free circulation within particular regions, then borders, walls and closed national identities might lose their hold over political imaginaries more broadly.

**A world in common**

> It is no coincidence that the word mobility refers not only to movement but also to the common people, the working classes, the mob.[19]

As many indigenous scholars and activists have stated, land does not belong to us - we belong to the land. If no one owned land, there could be no nation states, only commons - a world in common. Territory, on the other hand, belongs to the state. It is property. Citizenship, too, is a property relation: citizens belong to the state and the state belongs to citizens. Border abolition recognises that the territorialisation of labour is a key tool of racial capitalism. As Andrea Smith argues in her foreword to Harsha Walia's book *Undoing Border Imperialism*: 'For immigration to be a problem, people must live in a propertied relationship to land. That is, [where] land is a commodity that can be owned and controlled by one group of people.'[20]

It is clear that anti-capitalist projects must seek to unmake sovereign territory. There can be no freedom within the confines of the nation state, and the demand to abolish private property is necessarily a call to abolish the nation-state system itself - a call for border abolition. Ultimately, capitalism is a system that seeks to manage and control the uneven mobility of people and things. Anti-capitalism must therefore seek to provide people with greater means to exercise autonomous movement via the politics of border abolition. As William Walters reminds us: 'In certain respects the power of autonomous movement has been the hidden secret of the history of class struggle'.[21]

Anti-capitalists should remember that there can be no socialism in one country, and no progressive labour movement that puts 'natives' first. Because walled workers cannot unite, anti-capitalism is necessarily internationalist, which means committed to border abolition. Left-wing nativisms, on the other hand, offer only further means of justifying the immobilisation of the global poor, by which unknown foreigners suffer and die - but 'at home', where they belong. Migrant justice cannot be secured under capitalism. Capitalism relies on the constant reproduction of social differences and hierarchies, and trades on geographically uneven development. Global inequalities are therefore inherent to capitalism, and they are only getting worse. Thus, there can be no nice or fair way to manage migration; there is no way to make borders sufficiently 'liberal', or to put all the people in the right boxes.

Ultimately, border abolition and anti-capitalism are one and the same, and both must be global and internationalist. To abolish capitalism, we must abolish borders - and vice versa. There is no other way.

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Notes

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