

Mexico and Guatemala

My Perspective:

Immigration: A reflection of economic and political realities

by Marie Des Jarlais, FSPA

Immigration. The word evokes anger or support, walls or welcome, raids or sanctuary, exploitation or opportunity, nightmare or hope. Which is it? And why?

Immigration is not a new phenomenon. People have come to the United States for political, religious and economic reasons before. What is so different today?

Capitalism is the U.S. economic model, one that searches for cheap labor and expanding markets. Under this economic model, consumers can never buy enough!

January 1, 1994, saw the implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Canada, the United States and Mexico.

How has NAFTA affected the majority of Mexicans? The market among the three countries has never been a level playing field. Here are several examples from the grassroots level.

Small farmers had hoped to be able to sell their tomatoes and fruit to U.S. consumers at a higher profit than they can receive from the internal market in Mexico. In the U.S., farmers have access to clean water and are able to irrigate crops with water that meets higher sanitary standards. In Mexico, small farmers, if they have access to water for irrigation at all, use “black water.” I have seen canals in the countryside with what looks like piles of snow floating along. The “snow” was the soapsuds from water used to wash clothes! Water from washing dishes also is channeled to the countryside. This water removes the small Mexican farmer from access to the U.S. market.

Across the road from the small land plots is a larger land owner, who has the traditional arcs of water flowing from irrigation systems. The water is clean and clear, allowing the larger land owner access to U.S. markets and greater profit.

Another reality are the *maquiladoras*, the sweatshops that line the U.S.-Mexico border. Shanty towns have mushroomed in the area. Mexicans live in shacks with no running water, no electricity, no paved streets. Mostly women are hired in the sweatshops, because women have greater manual dexterity. A typical work day may be from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with a 30 minute break for lunch. In the sweatshop there are few windows or bright lights, no air conditioning and no face protection to protect their lungs is given or worn. Oftentimes there may be three bathrooms for more than 300 women, and they are not allowed to take bathroom breaks. A supervisor may even clock time spent in the bathroom. As a result of sitting in a stable position for so many hours, and the lack of access to a bathroom, the women develop urinary tract infections. Overtime, often unannounced, is expected, and women are not paid for extra hours. The work week consists of five and one half days. Verbal and physical abuse is not uncommon.

Pay is often equivalent to around \$4.00 U.S. per day. It is not possible to support a family, even in Mexico, on this low salary.

In the past small landowners were able to feed their families on crops they could grow. Today there is a crisis in the Mexican countryside. Sometimes flowers are grown for export, providing some cash in hand to the farmer. But it is not enough to support a family. U.S. subsidies to corn growers in the USA have adversely affected Mexican food levels. Mexico is the birthplace of corn, a food staple with thousands of years of history. Now it is cheaper to buy corn imported from the U.S. than for Mexican farmers to grow their own.

The rules, according to NAFTA, have forced the Mexican government to cut subsidies to small farmers. One result has been a rise in internal migration, that is, the movement of *campesinos* (farmers) and their families to the larger cities in the hope of finding meaningful employment. Other Mexicans have migrated to areas in northern Mexico to work in the sweatshops.

A subsequent step from NAFTA was Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), initiated by former Mexican President Vicente Fox. This plan, already in operation, although slowed in recent years, seeks to establish a trade zone from the States of Puebla (central Mexico) all the way to the southern border of Panama. The plan is to build major highways into indigenous areas, install sweatshops and thus be able to move the finished products out by larger trucks. The Mexicans in these areas are accustomed to operating small farms, not working in factories.

The southern Mexican State of Chiapas is known for its beauty, abundance of natural resources and poverty. One third of all electrical power for all of Mexico is generated in Chiapas. Yet many, many indigenous communities lack fresh drinking water and electricity in their humble homes.

Another piece of the PPP is to upgrade the ports on both the Pacific and Gulf coasts in order to move goods to U.S. cities on both the east and west coasts. A “dry canal” is in the works to build major highways from the Mexican Pacific coast to the Gulf of Mexico where large boats can move products north for U.S. consumers.

Dams are being constructed in Chiapas to provide more power which can be moved to especially the U.S. eastern coast as demand rises. Thus poor Mexicans are displaced, frequently not adequately reimbursed for their loss of land, and cut off from their roots and way of life.

Large U.S. and other international corporations are keenly interested in access to lakes and other clean water sources in Chiapas. Oftentimes the indigenous people, who collectively own the land, are not consulted before decisions are made about the land and water.

In summary, NAFTA has provided a surge in the number of billionaires in the U.S. and Mexico at the expense of the poor. Poverty is on the rise, people are desperate and migration is the last of desperate options.

In Guatemala, the government has signed on to CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement. The goals are similar to NAFTA: cheap labor, expanded markets for U.S. products, and cheaper products exported for U.S. consumers.

Guatemala is a country where according to some statistics, at least 60 percent of the population is rural and indigenous. There are 23 different languages spoken, although Spanish is the official language. Many indigenous women have never attended school, and do not speak Spanish.

Farmers work small plots of land growing corn, beans, broccoli, cabbage and squash. There are not enough schools or teachers, especially in rural areas. Corruption is rampant, and poverty is endemic. Hunger is on the rise and malnutrition is common.

The desperate seek a better life for their families, and like the Mexicans, see migration as their last choice for better employment. The risk is higher, as Guatemalans need to cross two countries' borders. Under pressure from the U.S. government, Mexico has placed soldiers and more police along their southern border to try to deter other Central Americans from finding their way to the U.S.

Why leave Guatemala? The sociopolitical situation is more precarious than that of Mexico; Guatemala is also a country with many youth, and there are not enough jobs that pay a living wage. One cannot provide for a family on less than \$4.00 per day. Wages in the countryside are even lower.

For example, Eduardo was a van driver for tourists and other groups to Guatemala. He had a good job, earning about \$7.00 per day. But Eduardo has a wife and three children, and the money cannot be stretched to provide for their needs. Eduardo left for the U.S., and upon crossing the Mexican border, boarded the "death train" to ride to the northern border of Mexico. Death train? Guatemalans need to run alongside the trains to board them. Some men slip, and have their feet or legs immediately amputated. The goal is to board the train, and sit atop for the ride. This is not an easy ride, as gangs see this transportation as a way to make money. The Guatemalans need to pay for the ride north, are often robbed or assaulted. Eduardo initially found work in landscaping, painting and then construction. Now he works six to seven hours a day in a fast food restaurant. His hope is to stay for four years, and then return home with some money to renovate his humble home. Meanwhile he tries to send money home for his wife and children to survive.

In contrast, Evelyn, a Kakchiquel indigenous woman, was one of about 30 women selected to travel to Quebec, Canada, to pick strawberries and other produce a year ago. She needed to secure a passport, but then a visa, plane ticket and shared apartment were provided for her and the other women. After about five months of work, she was flown home and reunited with her family. Evelyn is eligible to return to Canada to work, if she wishes.

With an aging U.S. population, it is an economic fact that more and younger workers are needed. People from the south need jobs. Like Mexico, Guatemala cannot provide enough jobs for its people.

According to a June 2007 article in *The Progressive Populist*, there are many misconceptions about migrants. The article stated that immigrant families contribute more than \$300 billion a year to our economy, and this money is used to create new jobs and finance social services. These immigrants are not eligible for welfare benefits from food stamps, Medicaid and most other public services for the poor. These migrants pay property taxes, sales taxes and other consumption taxes like everyone else does. Public schools are funded from these taxes.

In addition, nearly three-quarters of these migrants pay payroll taxes, contributing \$6-7 billion dollars to Social Security, which they will be unable to claim. Nationally only 1.5 percent of grade school children and 3 percent of middle school and high school students are from undocumented families. It is a fact that millions of these migrants have been integrated into our economy. They are our construction and agricultural workers, they work at airports and railroads, hospitals and nursing homes, in meat packing and other food production, in restaurants, supermarkets and clothing stores. Some have found jobs in the high tech industry. Their work enriches the economy to our benefit.

What is the way that we should be treating the 12 million immigrants? They are human beings. Their legal status may be illegal, but as human beings, they are not

“illegal.” Deport them all? Who would fill their jobs? The high cost of deporting all migrants is prohibitive. The path to citizenship now is so long and tough that most have no chance of success. The only sane solution is to make it possible for undocumented workers to be given permanent legal status through a new legalization program. Will we as a people be able to see this as an opportunity and not a threat?

Many U.S. citizens list their religious affiliation as Christian or Jewish. In Scripture we read that “when strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall do them no wrong, the strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself,” (Leviticus 18: 33-34). Do we even see our neighbors from the south as human beings? Are we up to this challenge to practice hospitality in a new way?

Marie Des Jarlais, FSPA, has ministered for almost 18 years with GATE, Global Awareness Through Experience. GATE offers short-term cultural immersion programs in Latin America and Eastern Europe. The face-to-face contact with people breaks down walls and encourages a new way of looking at the world and our place in it.