

COLOMBIA REPORT EDITORIAL

A New War, This Time Against Latino Immigrants

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The United States seems to be always busy declaring a new war against someone. In December 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation, known as the Sensenbrenner bill, amending current U.S. law regarding immigration. The new legislation is nothing short of a declaration of war against unauthorized immigrants to the United States, those being for the most part Mexican and Central American immigrants. The amendment would include among other things the construction of a wall along most of the United States border excepting the driest desert regions and the Rio Grande (Bravo) itself. It would also declare any immigrant found in the United States without papers to be a criminal subject to immediate incarceration and/or deportation. If the amendment passes both houses of Congress the United States, which already houses totally and proportionately the largest prison population in the world, would automatically add 10.4 million new candidates for its jails, of which 1.6 million would be children. The proposed new law cannot succeed in stopping the dramatic increase in the flow of immigrants from Latin America to the United States because it does not address the causes of the phenomenon. It is likely however to turn into a human rights crisis. For the last ten years on average more than 300 immigrants die while attempting to cross into the US across the border from Mexico, either by perishing in fast-moving canal and river waters, or of dehydration in the Arizona desert. The construction of the wall would drive immigrants into precisely the most dangerous crossing zones leading to a likely and dramatic increase in the number of immigrant's deaths. And those successful in making the crossing would find themselves persecuted and victimized as common criminals in the promised land of the U.S.

What motivates Latin Americans to attempt to cross into the United States without papers? The short answer is that the neoliberal policies imposed by the United States and sympathetic Latin American governments upon the people of Latin America, including treaties such as NAFTA and, soon, CAFTA, are causing a boom in undocumented migration. A recent article in the Washington Post noted that over 40 percent of the Mexicans who have come to the

U.S. have done so in the past 15 years. While in 1995 there were an estimated 2.5 million Mexicans without papers in the United States, by 2005 the number had climbed to over 10 million. Poverty in Mexico has shot up during those ten years. Before NAFTA Mexican wages were on average about 23 percent of U.S. wages; by 2002 they have sunk to 12 percent.

For Mexico, the over all consequences of the 1994 NAFTA have been absolutely disastrous. The agricultural base of the country has been obliterated. Millions of agricultural producers, unable to compete with cheap U.S. imports, have been forced to abandon their crops. Almost 2 million people have migrated out of the Mexican countryside since 1994. More than 600 people leave the countryside everyday. But the effects of NAFTA are not completed yet. A respected U.S. scholar Professor John Coats expects that, in the next decade, “free trade in grain under NAFTA, will force many, perhaps millions of Mexican farmers off the land...”

The source of the increased pace of Mexican, Central American and other Latin American migration to the United States is clearly found in the accelerating and widespread destruction of Mexican and Latin American agriculture and industry by U.S. corporations, banks, and U.S government policies of “free trade.” Beginning in the 1980s, dubbed “Latin America’s lost decade,” the U.S. actively promoted and pushed for ‘free trade’ policies of neo-liberalism. Pliable Latin American governments acquiesced and began to weaken protections for their agriculture and industry throughout the region. The 1990s saw an intensification of the process as the United States launched its push for “free trade” agreements, with the consequence that the decade of the 1990s and the first half of the current decade have been equally “lost.”

A recent report in the Spanish-language *La Opinión* of Los Angeles, California summarized the dismal situation facing Latin America in this manner:

- The region generated 91 million new poor in the last twenty years
- There are now more than 100 million indigents
- 200 million Latin Americans cannot provide for even basic necessities
- 23 million Latin Americans were driven from the “middle class” in the last six years
- 40 million children live in the streets
- 1 of every 3 children suffer from hunger

- Children who live in the street, ancianos begging, families eating out of garbage dumps and professionals who drive taxis are part of the habitual scene in all Latin American cities
- 70% of Hondurans are poor; so are the remaining 20 million peasants in Mexico
- The small, rich elites are getting richer; the region is becoming more unequal
- These trends have been driven by the free-market initiatives supported by the United States

CAFTA is a carbon-copy of NAFTA and is guaranteed to have the same deleterious effects upon Central American agriculture, leading eventually to migration, throwing additional millions to the migration highways. Meanwhile the U.S. is busy, in cooperation with lackey governments like that of Uribe in Colombia, trying to impose similar agreements on Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. In sum, the United States is recolonizing Latin America. The process under way is only comparable to the destruction wreaked on the region's people by the European conquest that began in 1492. The main difference seems to be that under Spanish colonial rule agricultural producers could feed themselves, and their countries. Under current processes the Latin American countryside will be depopulated. The mass migration of the last few decades, if US recolonization persists, will be dwarfed by what is to come in the next twenty years.

The people of Mexico and increasingly Central and South America have seen their countries turned into prisons of poverty from which they are trying to escape en masse. Upon arrival in the United States they become the most important safety net, via remittances, for the poor they left behind. In 2004 amounted to 20 billion dollars for Mexico and nearly 8 billion for Central America. The undocumented manage this feat while laboring under the most difficult circumstances, deprived of basic rights, and living an underground existence. But apparently this is not enough: the artificers of the policies which are destroying the economies of their home countries are now trying to wage war upon the victims of those policies by trying to keep them even from eking out a miserable living as undocumented, second-tier workers in the United States by militarizing the border, building security walls that will drive them to their deaths, continuing to treat them like animals, and persecuting them as criminals.

The Colombia Report condemns this inhuman legislation. The proposed amendment fuels the fire of racist tendencies present in the United States, pitting Americans driven by irrational anger against Latin Americans driven by hunger and desperation. It hides and mystifies the true causes for the migration. The situation requires pulling together all those who realize that the proposed legislation will not solve the perceived problems at the border. On the contrary, it will create new ones. Organizations like LULAC and the National Council of La Raza have already denounced what has been termed “the all of shame.” Many NGOs, churches and other groups also oppose this absurd legislation. Many members of Congress who recently voted against CAFTA did so because of their belief that the problems at the U.S.-Mexico border became magnified with the passage of NAFTA. The struggle against this legislation is part and parcel of the struggle against nefarious free trade treaties and the neoliberal policies of the United States.