

Tricks of the Free Trade

San Jose professor's research brings brutal truth to immigration debate

MetroActive

September 16-22

By Diane Solomon

THIS summer, lawmakers are drafting legislation designed to keep undocumented immigrants from crossing our southern border. Last month, the U.S. Senate unanimously approved the spending of \$32 million dollars on more border patrol agents and resources to speed up deportations. With Senate hearings taking place this month in 13 states, it's likely that an immigration bill will travel to President Bush before the November election.

The national debate is about limiting the entry of undocumented Latino immigrants. Proposals range from initiating guest worker programs to the building of border barricades that will rival China's Great Wall. But absent from the usually anecdotal discussion is a research-based analysis of why so many Mexicans are coming here both legally and illegally.

San Jose City College professor Dr. Ann Aurelia López hopes that her research will change that. Since 1997, López has been studying Mexican farmworkers and the reasons they come here. She says that no one is talking about the role transnational corporations play in causing the largest worldwide migration in history.

López, a visiting research professor at UC-Berkeley who has been teaching botany and environmental studies at San Jose City College since 1969, has been studying farmworkers in two regions: west-central Mexico and nearby Salinas and Watsonville's Pajaro Valley. She says that campesinos are here seeking work because the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) allowed U.S. corporations to flood Mexico with cheap food products, leaving no markets for the produce of rural Mexican farmers whose lives, she found, depend on its sale.

López believes that her study is the largest and most thorough ever undertaken on the subject of immigration and international trade agreements, and she spoke to Metro about the connection.

METRO: Explain how your study is different from what people might have seen before on the immigration issue.

DR. ANN AURELIA LOPEZ: My study is of two regions: west-central Mexico and the Salinas and Pajaro Valley agricultural communities. I've worked with 33 families here and 22 in Mexico. You can dismiss findings from one region or from one family or village as unique. When you've got whole regions with all families having the same experience, it becomes more difficult to sweep it under the rug as a fluke.

What larger context can you provide for the issue of undocumented immigrants coming in from Mexico?

What I've found is really just one small strand of a whole globalization process that is modeled on the neoliberal economic model. As a result of following that model we now have 200 million immigrants living outside their countries of citizenship. This is a population larger in size than the world's fifth most populous country. The amazing thing is that, worldwide, their numbers are increasing by approximately 6 million immigrants each year. They represent a growth rate more rapid than that of the world's entire population. What we have are people leaving Africa for Europe. We've got people leaving the Pacific Islands for New Zealand. This is not just a problem or an issue between Mexico and California. This is a global issue. During the 1980s, an estimated 190,000 immigrants settled in the U.S. each year. The number is increasing now by 1 to 4 million people of all nationalities every year. These are immigrants that are intent on taking up permanent residence in the U.S. one way or another. The U.S. now has the largest population of immigrants in the world. We have almost 36 million immigrants in this country. It's the highest number ever recorded in American history.

Are these immigrants legal, illegal or both?

They are both. Mexico now has the highest emigration rate in the world. Since NAFTA's ratification millions of Mexicans have left their families and homes to come to the U.S. There is a set of statistics that I have from Mexico that indicates 300,000 to 500,000 Mexicans leave Mexico and enter the U.S. every year. Immigrants from Mexico accounted for 31 percent of all U.S. immigrants in 2004. If we look at undocumented immigrants, that population doubled in the 1990s, and at the end of 2005 was estimated to be between 11 and 12 million or 29 percent of all foreign-born residents. Now, that's one of the things you hear on the news, we have 12 million undocumented immigrants. But there's almost no discussion about how the trade policies supported by the wealthier countries have forced these people to leave their land, to leave their families under great duress and come here to survive. These are economic refugees. These are not people coming here to work to buy a car. These are people who are starving. They have no choice. They have to leave or starve. Roughly, half of the farmworkers in our country today are undocumented. 700,000 undocumented immigrants entered the U.S. every year between 2000 and 2004. In 2005, 6 million undocumented immigrants were actually employed in the U.S. It's interesting because 57 percent of those immigrants are from Mexico. Yet if we look at those who are deported, 80 percent of all deportees are Mexican. They make up 57 percent of the undocumented population but when it comes to deporting undocumented immigrants, they make up 80 percent of that group. It's interesting also that twice as many undocumented immigrants have entered the U.S. since the heavy border fortifications began in the 1990s. This state has the largest undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. One estimate I found suggests that 1,650 immigrants enter California every 24 hours.

NAFTA promised more well-paying jobs for Mexicans. What happened with the factory jobs for campesinos?

NAFTA's originators thought the corn producers were inefficient, so they figured, "Let's ship corn in from the U.S. and run campesinos off their land to work in factories so they can earn money." The farmers were never included in this discussion. Farmers saw their corn's price plunge by 70 percent. Post NAFTA the cost of food, housing and essential services in Mexico has risen 247 percent. Approximately 81 percent of Mexico's rural population now lives in poverty. I've traveled all through west-central Mexico. There is nothing. In the towns almost all of the people 17 through 60 are gone seeking work. The only place I saw employment that was preventing immigration to the U.S. was in the tourist areas. Being a campesino is a lifestyle, not a job. Similar to the Native American way, campesinos and their families are completely integrated with the natural world. Campesinos' whole lives are spent out of doors. To leave this is torture for them. This is why so many come to California. It has the most agricultural work. My study found that 100 percent would leave tomorrow if there was any way for them to be home on their land with their families.

Where does Silicon Valley fit in? How does this affect us?

Mexico and the U.S. are functionally interdependent binational states. California agriculture is completely dependent upon Mexican labor. We won't have fresh produce of any kind without campesinos. The Mexican economy is very dependent upon the remissions of money that immigrants send home. To pretend we are separate isn't right.

Your work on this issue will be published in January with the release of your book, 'The Farmworkers' Journey.' Based on what your research, what do you think needs to change in the way we talk about the issue of immigration?

Please recognize that whatever negative ideas you may have regarding Mexican immigrants, it is inappropriate and media-generated. These are economic refugees. It is a response to U.S.-promoted trade policies that have basically pushed people off of their land and have given them no choices other than starvation. It forced them to come here. We need to develop legislation that recognizes that the border must be negotiated and monitored as a binational boundary between countries with a binational labor force that regularly travels back and forth across this boundary.

Country-specific border legislation with no recognition of the common labor market is simply not working. We also need to revise NAFTA from a free trade agreement to a fair trade agreement where everyone impacted is at the negotiation table. Beyond that, I think the more important thing is to divert a small percentage of the taxpayers' dollars that's being used to unsuccessfully guard the southern border for proactive rural development programs that have a tried and true history. There is the Heifer Project, very successful worldwide. There is the Jane Goodall Institute in Tanzania and there is the Grameen Bank in India. They have been very successful in providing rural economies with jobs so that people are not forced to emigrate.