



# Comment: NAFTA took jobs, workers from Mexico

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Conservatives in the House want to criminalize 12 million undocumented immigrants and millions of citizens who interact with them.

Ironically, many of these same lawmakers spurred increased flight from Mexico by voting for NAFTA, a trade deal that made it far harder for Mexicans to earn a decent living in their homeland. The drastic rise in undocumented immigration from Mexico during the past decade is largely a matter of NAFTA blowback.

Last year many of the same lawmakers voted to replicate the problem for Central Americans through the Central America Free Trade Agreement. And they are now looking to extend it to Peru and Colombia with yet another NAFTA-style trade agreement.

No level of heightened criminalization will impact the flow of immigrants when we give people little choice but to leave the countries of their birth.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of people immigrating to the United States from Mexico decreased by 18 percent in the three years preceding NAFTA's implementation. However, in the first eight years of NAFTA, the annual number of immigrants from Mexico increased by more than 61 percent.

The cause was twofold. First, NAFTA's agricultural provisions subjected millions of Mexican small farmers to a flood of subsidized corn imported from the United States.

The effect in rural areas was huge. Some 1.5 million rural families — some researchers claim twice that — were driven out of business. Their options were to move to the cities and seek whatever work, at whatever wage, could be found or to cross the border. A very large number chose the second option.

Because NAFTA's labor rules ensured Mexican workers would not gain workplace rights, the trade deal also hurt urban workers. Deprived of the ability to join unions of their own choosing, Mexican manufacturing workers saw their real wages fall by more than 20 percent during NAFTA's first five years. They remain lower today than before NAFTA.

Today, workers in the country's vast export manufacturing sector, the maquiladora factories, typically earn between one-quarter and one-half what it costs to provide very basic necessities for a family. Not

surprisingly, many of these workers eventually choose the hardships and uncertainties of crossing the border over the certainty of long hours in unhealthy conditions for below-subsistence wages.

Despite this experience with NAFTA, many of those in Congress who now insist on a draconian response — including James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, who authored the mass-felony bill passed by the House — voted last year to extend NAFTA to Central America and the Dominican Republic via CAFTA.

They did this despite sources as diverse as the U.S. International Trade Commission, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Food and the Catholic Bishops of Central America all warning that CAFTA would displace millions of rural people in the region. Like the NAFTA-displaced, they will have few real options other than to try to make it into the United States.

And now these same members of Congress are seeking to pass NAFTA-like trade deals with Peru and Colombia. Perhaps they believe doing the same thing over and over will somehow produce different consequences. It won't.

If these lawmakers want to address the growing number of undocumented immigrants in the United States, they should stop passing trade deals that destroy people's livelihoods in their home countries.

It is time for a different policy for engagement with the global economy. Instead of one built on maximizing the supply of "cheap labor" by insisting worker rights be effectively excluded from our trade agreements, we need one based on rising living standards. Instead of one based on the displacement of small farmers in our trading partner nations, we need one that develops local markets for those farmers.

Otherwise, we will continue to push people into a situation where they have few options other than to emigrate.

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