

Immigrant surge is tied to the failure of NAFTA

The trade agreement left rural and urban Mexicans worse off than they'd been.

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By Octavio Ruiz

The 12 million Mexicans working in the United States who will be criminalized by proposed immigration legislation are the same people who were promised the possibilities of a decent living with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

It is ironic that House conservatives who want to execute these anti-immigrant policies are the same ones who signed the trade agreement, which only has brought poverty to the Mexican people for the last decade and years to come. No level of heightened criminalization will reduce the flow of immigrants to the United States when we endorse trade agreements that give people little choice but to leave the countries of their birth.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of immigrants to the United States from Mexico actually decreased by 18 percent in the three years before NAFTA's implementation. But 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 resulted in a flood of subsidized corn being imported into Mexico from the United States. The effect in rural areas was that some 1.5 million rural families -- and some researchers claim twice that -- were driven out of business. Their only 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 did not provide Mexican workers with gains in workplace rights, the trade deal also hurt urban workers. Deprived of their ability to join unions or to organize, Mexican manufacturing workers saw their real wages fall by more than 20 percent over NAFTA's first five years. Today, workers in the country's vast export manufacturing sector, the maquiladora factories, earn from one-fourth to half of their previous wages. Such pay does not even provide very basic necessities for a family. 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 the failure of NAFTA, many in Congress who now insist on a draconian response -- including James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, author of the mass-felony bill passed by the House -- voted last year to extend NAFTA to Central America and the Dominican Republic via the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). These conservatives are also about to vote on the NAFTA-styled Andean Free Trade Agreement that includes Peru, Colombia and

Ecuador. They're doing this despite sources as diverse as the U.S. International Trade Commission and the Catholic Bishops of Central America warning that CAFTA would displace millions of rural people in the region.

If these lawmakers want to address the social and economic costs of the growing number of undocumented immigrants -- or, as they call them, illegal aliens -- 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" and excluding worker rights from our trade agreements, we need one based on raising the standard of living in all nations. 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 immigrate north.

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