

US Should Legalize Mexican and Central American Migrants Now!

By Grahame Russell, 2 January 2016

Original + links: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/US-Should-Legalize-Mexican-and-Central-American-Migrants-Now-20160102-0016.html>

Legalize the 10 million, now. This is the only practical, fair and just solution to millions of Mexicans and Central Americans living and working in legal limbo in the United States.

As authorities prepare for ever more round-ups and deportations of “illegals” in early 2016, now is the time to continue pushing back across the country, demanding the government provide a legal path to permanent residency for millions of undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans living and working in the United States.

For practical purposes, this is necessary to enable people already living and working in the U.S. to begin to normalize their lives after being forced to flee their countries and then live in legal limbo and fear, even as they work hard just to get by, let alone support families back in their home countries.

Legalization will also provide increased tax revenues and decrease the unnecessary, wasteful burden on police and border security agents, attorney generals’ offices, and state and federal detention centers and jails.

But more than practical, this is the fair and just thing to do. The vast majority of the millions in the U.S., and the tens of thousands trying to cross Mexico into the U.S. now, are refugees in the clearest meaning of the word. Furthermore, the U.S. and Canada - both governments and private sectors - are contributing to and profiting from the very conditions that so many are forced to flee from, year after year, decade after decade.

It is time to put an end to the legal and political uncertainty of millions of families and it is long past time to put an end to the underlying causes of why they flee in the first place.

Underlying Causes

There are two dominant positions vis-à-vis the undocumented millions from Mexico and Central America, from “kick them all out, arm more border guards and build more jails and bigger walls,” to “treat them humanely, de-criminalize and provide due legal process.” As work and struggle continues to build on this latter position, we must keep in mind there are at least four significant and desperate phases of this forced migrant/refugee reality.

The phase that gets most of the (albeit narrowly focused) attention is the battle over what to do with people now in the U.S. As stated, the just, fair and practical position is to legalize them all, now.

Receiving less attention are the dangerous and deadly conditions people face when fleeing north across Mexico. Recently, there has been a small amount of reporting on the conditions of poverty and destitution, general and sexualized violence, drought and heat, and repression that people are victimized by as they cross Mexico into the U.S.

Receiving even less attention are the deadly situations refugees face when forcibly deported back to their home countries. There is documentation that many have been killed when deported back into the very situations they had desperately fled.

And then there are the two elephants in the room: the societal conditions in Honduras and Guatemala, and to varying degrees in Mexico – chronic exploitation and poverty, chronic violence and repression, weak democratic institutions, chronic impunity and corruption – that force tens of thousands to flee year after year, decade after decade; and the roles played by the governments of the U.S. and Canada, by the U.S. military and by North American corporations in helping cause and benefit from the unjust, violent conditions that force people to flee.

We are stuck in a mean-spirited, deadly cycle, wherein the U.S. (and to a lesser degree Canada) contribute to and benefit from the conditions that force so many to flee. Then, the refugees are criminalized, attacked and demonized if they can cross Mexico into the “safe haven” of the U.S.

Cold War Refugees

In the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. received millions of refugees from Central America (Canada also received a significant number), even as the U.S. government was funding, training, and arming military regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras that were carrying out systemic repression (including massacres, disappearance, torture, and, in Guatemala, genocide) against their own people; even as the U.S.-Contras paramilitary group was trying to overthrow the elected government of Nicaragua.

Central America was burning. Close to 500,000 civilians were killed or disappeared, millions displaced, many of whom fled to the U.S. and Canada - some as refugees, some as “illegals.” Over the years, many were able to legally normalize their situations.

Even as the U.S. and Canadian governments received a good number of people as legal refugees, there was no acknowledgement of how U.S. Cold War economic and military policies were – in partnership with military-backed oligarchies – the underlying cause of the repression, destruction and death, and the forced displacement of millions.

No Democracy To Return To

The 1990s were to usher in a “return to democracy.” This did not happen. Part of the charade is that there was no history of democracy to return to. Secondly, “the bad guys had won.” No one

in the U.S. government had been held accountable for their role in decades of State repression and terrorism in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, let alone unleashing the Contras on the people of Nicaragua. Neither was anyone held accountable in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

With as little interest in democracy, human rights and the rule of law as they had exhibited during the previous decades, the Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Honduran governments – dominated by the same elites that had carried out decades of Cold War repression - spent the 1990s and early 2000s opening their countries to global corporations and investors, particularly in the areas of mining, African palm and sugarcane production, maquiladora sweatshops, tourism, and privatized hydroelectric dams.

Through the 2000s and currently, repression has spiked again, as police, soldiers and corporate private security guards regularly used violence (illegal evictions, burning villages to the ground, shootings, killings, rapes) against indigenous and non-indigenous communities on behalf of transnational corporations invested in the aforementioned industries.

By the late 2000s, any hope of respect for the “peace agreements” of the 1990s was gone. The majority populations in these three countries, particularly Honduras and Guatemala, were confronted with the fact that little had changed, that their governments and societies remained dominated by racist, repressive economic elites involved in repressive business activities, usually in partnership with the governments of the U.S. and Canada, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies.

When Honduras tried to implement minor reforms to address the chronic exploitation and poverty, landlessness, repression, corruption and impunity, the U.S. and Canadian governments back the June 2009 military coup that ousted the government of President Manuel Zelaya. The coup was carried out by the same elites the U.S. had supported during the years of Cold War repression.

War On Drugs

And just when it seemed things could not be worse, the U.S. “war on drugs” that had been devastating Mexico since 2006, resulting in the killing and disappearances of more than 100,000 people spilled into Central America, particularly Guatemala and Honduras (which, not coincidentally, are the strongest business and political partners of the U.S. and Canada).

By the late 2000s, Honduras and Guatemala had become major drug shipment places. Narco-trafficking cartels from South America and mainly from Mexico spread into Honduras and Guatemala and corrupted and infiltrated the executive and legislative branches of government, the judiciary, police and military.

Refugees Fleeing Abusive States

Today, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have the highest murder rates in the world; Honduras and Guatemala have the highest repression, impunity and corruption rates in the

Americas. Mexico continues to be dominated by drug war repression and violence committed by the State and the drug cartels. Institutions of the State are corrupted by narco-trafficking money.

Central Americans and Mexicans are not fleeing “failed states.” They flee countries characterized by decades of violence and repression, impunity and corruption, exploitation and despair.

As U.S. authorities prepare for another year of roundups and deportations – amid shrill rhetoric about “what do to about the ‘illegals,’” we must push back and demand a legal path to permanent residency for all people in legal limbo in the U.S. now, and we must expose and change the historic and underlying causes of so much violence and death, desperation and flight.

[Grahame Russell is a non-practicing Canadian lawyer, author, adjunct professor at the University of Northern British Columbia and, since 1995, director of Rights Action (info@rightsaction.org).]

Tax Deductible Donations in U.S. and Canada

Make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations:

- Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/rights-action/>
- U.S.: <http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations> (click on “NetworkForGood”)

Donations of stock? Write to: grahame@rightsaction.org

More information: grahame@rightsaction.org

Receive print newsletter: grahame@rightsaction.org

Join Listserv: www.rightsaction.org

www.facebook.com/RightsAction.org

@RightsAction
