

Guest Work Won't Stop Migrant Deaths

By John Ross

The 14 undocumented Mexican migrants found dead on May 24 after their smuggler abandoned them in the scorching desert near Yuma, Arizona, are among the most recent of more than 600 casualties due to border patrol strategies that have upped the risks of illegal immigration since 1994. These strategies squeeze Mexican workers into the most dangerous crossings in the mountains and deserts of California and Arizona, and into the proverbial Valley of Death.

Meanwhile, U.S. President George W. Bush and his Mexican counterpart Vicente Fox are cooking up a new guestworker program to absorb the thickening flow of Mexicans willing to put their lives on the line to bust onto the bottom rungs of the decelerating U.S. economy. Next week, on June 6, the top-level team designated by Bush and Fox to review the migration quandary—U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft, together with Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda and Interior Secretary Santiago Creel—will huddle in San Antonio, Texas, to hatch a guestworker program, the size and shape of which still is being bargained about inside and outside of both countries.

The famed guestworker programs that endured for the 22 years from 1942 through 1964 resulted in 4.5 million individual contracts with Mexican laborers. Some 3 million workers were hired and about half of them were re-contracted. Influential U.S. Republican Sen. Phil Gramm is pushing for a similar volume under the new plan, with contracts for 200,000 Mexican workers a year—only half of what Fox wants.

Democrats are more cautious, and contemplate amnesty for 3 million mostly Mexican undocumented workers already in the United States before they sign on to a large-scale guestworker

initiative. The proposal for the new program, much as for the old one, is a function of comparatively low U.S. unemployment rates. Economic gurus like Alan Greenspan and George Soros insist that the U.S. economy cannot continue to grow without a substantial inflow of bottom-rung immigrant workers. Greenspan, in particular, is an advocate of expanded guestworker solutions. While Bush seems balky on the topic, Fox is typically enthusiastic: “We have the workers and you have the jobs,” he argues. Last February, on the eve of the first Fox-Bush presidential meeting at the former’s hacienda, the Carnegie Endowment issued a blue-ribbon paper supporting Fox’s position: “Mexican labor surplus has to be matched to U.S. needs.”

But for Juan Manuel Sandoval, a migration expert at Mexico’s National Anthropology and History Institute, and Ventura Gutiérrez, a farmworker organizer in California’s Coachella Valley—both sons of guestworkers—a new program is not the answer. Wages will be kept low to fuel growers’ profit margins and the new guestworkers will be used to blunt farmhand and immigrant organizing drives by the AFL-CIO and independent labor, they say. Sandoval insists a new program won’t eliminate the smugglers who leave their clients to die in the Arizona desert. “They’ll just become legal contractors,” he says.

Moreover, a new guestworker program is hardly going to stem the flood of undocumented migrants. Indeed, some studies show that guestworker programs increase the flow. Statistics from before the World War II-era guestworker programs show 8,000 Mexicans a year were deported from the United States. But in 1954, at their apex, nearly a million were sent packing as the result of the first “Operation Wetback.”

Guestworker programs target agricultural laborers, but for every field hand who comes across, 10 more border crossers head straight for McDonald's: The service sector is the largest employer of the undocumented. In the past decade, a quarter of a million Mexicans have settled in New York City, where tomato and melon fields are few and far between.

Out in the Arizona desert last week near Yuma, where he had gone to help send the dead, undocumented migrants back home, Gutierrez was laconic: "No guestworker program is going to stop the *compañeros* from dying out here in this hell hole," he said.

(John Ross, whose most recent book is The War Against Oblivion—Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000, is a frequent contributor to the publications of the Interhemispheric Resource Center's borderlands program. This commentary first appeared in the IRC's borderlines UPDATER.)

The Republican Rule

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler
Karen Hansen-Kuhn
Chris Hellman
Neil Hicks
Chris Toensing
Tomas Valasek
Carol Welch
Ian Williams

A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia
Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express
What Can We Expect from the Penatagon?
The Bush Administration and Human Rights
Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors
George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe
Republican Rule and the IFIs
The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick