

## ***Migration Talks Must Tie in to Trade Relationship or They Will Fall Short***

by Carlos A. Heredia

*Editor's Note: This commentary is part of an FPIF series of essays by non-U.S. analysts. See <http://www.fpif.org/outside/> for more perspectives from Outside the U.S.*

Seven-and-a-half years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, the situation of Mexico's migrant workers in the United States is still being approached as if it were divorced from the two countries' trade relationship; and calls by labor, human rights organizations, church groups, and progressive political constituents in favor of a policy recognizing migration's link to trade continue to fall on deaf ears.

During the debates over the passage of the trade pact, U.S. President Bill Clinton repeatedly told members of Congress that NAFTA would create jobs and keep Mexicans at home. The fact is, however, that throughout the terms of Mexican presidents Carlos Salinas, Ernesto Zedillo, and Vicente Fox, the number of their compatriots seeking work north of the border has not diminished. Nor does a significant decline appear likely as long as the difference in the U.S. and Mexican minimum wage maintains the enormous ratio of 12-to-1.

The administrations of both Fox and U.S. President George W. Bush have stated their wish to progress through a constructive dialogue on migration.

But naturally, they have differences regarding the meaning of progress. While Washington favors broadening the guest worker program, Mexico City insists on legalization or normalization of Mexican workers in the United States. While the United States considers amnesty, Mexico does not speak the word,

which, from its perspective, implies migrants' commission of crime.

The fundamental question is what each party wants in exchange for relaxing its demands.

The U.S. government has reiterated its willingness to move beyond initial talks and increase the number of visas issued to Mexican applicants, if the Mexican government will do its utmost to deter migrants from illegally crossing in the desert or other dangerous areas. Yet any such increase likely would be insufficient to meet the avalanche of visa requests.

The Mexican government is willing to press for an improvement in the situation of migrant workers, but not to the point of straining its trade and financial ties with the United States. During Salinas' term, Mexico spent far more in Washington to promote the passage of NAFTA than to protect the millions of Mexican migrants in the United States. Mexico's NAFTA lobbying cost in excess of \$100 million, The Wall Street Journal reported at the time.

We don't have data yet to compare that with the current government's spending. But, in any event, the new administration clearly seems unlikely to assume a more energetic position linking its emigration and its human rights policies to its trade stance. The deaths of 14 impoverished Mexican migrants in the Arizona desert a few weeks back evoked merely official rhetoric and condolences, demonstrating that.

In the bilateral NAFTA dispute over trucking, Economy Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez has declared that the Mexican government might be prepared to take reprisal against the United States for failing to abide by its commitment to clear the way for the entry of Mexican truckers and trucks in the U.S. border states. We will have to wait and see how far this statement goes. But the Mexican government in no way appears poised to impose trade sanctions on the United States for its clear violations of Mexican migrants' human rights in operations such as Gatekeeper, Hold-the-Line, and others.

In the end, the future of the bilateral relationship will continue to be dictated largely by the interests of Wall

Street and U.S. corporations established in Mexico, rather than by the needs of migrant workers. All too often we have been told that the relaxation of immigration and naturalization laws is a topic that "won't fly" on Capitol Hill, or that "this isn't the time" to engage in the debate due to sluggishness in U.S. economic cycles.

Apparently the Fox administration does not intend to revisit its earlier position in favor of a "NAFTA Plus" that would include immigration and labor rights in the main section of the trade agreement.

That means continuing to ignore, hypocritically, that the U.S. economy depends on the subsidy provided by

cheap Mexican labor, whether in U.S. territory or in maquiladoras located in Mexico. It is now time for that subsidy to be acknowledged for what it is—the crux of the bilateral economic relationship, and not just a human rights issue separate from trade relations.

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