

NAFTA: A root cause of migration



Since many Latin American immigrants to the U.S. enter the country out of reasons of financial necessity, it is important to understand the root causes of their dire economic situations.

The following article, “Free Trade Comes at a Price: Why Mexicans Immigrate,” which appeared in the Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ winter 2006 newsletter, offers a clear summary of the North American Free Trade Agreement’s (NAFTA) effect on Mexican migration to the United States.

“When NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) was signed on January 1, 1994, Canada, Mexico, and the United States were hopeful that its lifting of tariffs and regulations would be nothing but beneficial to the three countries. But they may not have considered all the effects the agreement would have.

“Since its proposal, NAFTA has received equal amounts of praise and criticism. Backed by a number of transnational corporations for its ability to lower tariffs, thereby raising profit margins, NAFTA is often the source of discontent for Canadian and U.S. labor unions that fear job losses to marginal labor costs in Mexico. But below the surface of partisan debate and economic theory lies the very tangible by-product of the agreement that has disenfranchised thousands of Mexico’s farm communities.

“Since NAFTA was enacted in 1994, the agriculture subsidies allotted to U.S. farmers have forced Mexican agricultural prices down, subsequently forcing many small farm owners of Mexico, or *campesinos*, out of business. In order to survive, many rural residents, and notably, rural farmers, have felt compelled to travel to the U.S. in search of food and work. The decade following the enactment of NAFTA directly correlates to a staggering increase in illegal immigration to the U.S. from Mexico.

“According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Labor March 2004 Current Population Survey, the number of Mexican legal and illegal immigrants in the United States has increased from approximately 760,000 in 1970 to more than 11 million in 2004. The Mexican population living in the United States has grown by greater than one half million people each year since 1994.

“Although in 2000 President Bush had entertained discussions with Mexican President Vicente Fox regarding free flow of people across the U.S.-Mexico border as a second phase of NAFTA, security issues took priority after the 9/11 attacks.” (Source: http://www.worldproutassembly.org/archives/2007/12/usmexico_border.html)

The following is a short excerpt is from “NAFTA, Inequality, and Immigration,” a special report by the Americas Program of the Center for International Policy:

“[Ten years after NAFTA’s implementation], the United States has to share some responsibility for the poverty, unemployment, and out-migration in Mexico. Consider the following:

- When NAFTA was applied, the United States offered no compensation or sector transition funds despite the huge gap between the two economies.
- The U.S. government has given Mexico an average of only \$40 million dollars in aid annually over recent years, while U.S. companies have reaped record profits, partly from their new Mexico operations and cheap illegal Mexican migrant labor in the U.S.
- Mechanisms to assure that U.S. companies pay living wages and provide decent working conditions are practically non-existent, and NAFTA prohibits performance requirements that would assure more links between foreign companies’ operations and the Mexican economy.

“... To enter into an agreement that failed to take into account the needs of vulnerable sectors of the Mexican economy and then wash our hands of the consequences is not only unfair, it entails consequences for the United States as well. Uncontrollable immigration is one of them. Although immigration is an integral component of globalization, it violates human rights when people no longer have the option of staying home and are deemed criminals in the receiving country. ...

“Much of the U.S. debate on immigration has reflected a stinging backlash against Mexicans that deepens animosity and conflict. But common problems and shared responsibilities require working together and seeing the whole picture—not as an ‘us-against-them’ scenario but as a complex and highly integrated region of persons with equal rights and similar aspirations.” (Source: <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/4705>)

Every day, Maryknoll missionaries live and work with people who are deeply affected by political and economic decisions made in the U.S. International trade sometimes feels like a very abstract concept that is far from the consciousness of most U.S. residents, but for Mexicans who are forced to leave their farms and their homeland, trade agreements like NAFTA are extremely relevant and have very personal and concrete consequences. Instead of making more agreements that force poor farmers off their land, the U.S. can reduce the need to migrate by creating more just trade policies and supporting development efforts in poor countries. Immigration reform will not be comprehensive without taking action to alleviate the root causes of immigration.

For more information:

Ask your candidates to consider their responsibility to people living in poverty, such as those whom Maryknollers accompany in their daily work. Use the Maryknoll voter reflection guide, *Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world*, for background information and talking points. Along with your friends and neighbors, urge your candidates to work for the common good in their economic and immigration policy proposals. See a comparison of the presidential candidates’ positions on NAFTA and trade at the Americas Program website, <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5065>.