

Corporate Ag Policies Devastate Peasant Economies

by Christopher Huh

Immigration promises to be a major issue of debate in this election year. Across the nation, many voices in favor of restrictive immigration are calling for building a 300-mile border fence, or criminalizing the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the US.

Rationale for restricting immigration ranges from claims that immigrants receive more in terms of social assistance and bilingual services than they pay in taxes, that they lower wages, and that they compete with Americans for jobs.

Many favoring its restriction portray immigration as an isolated issue, perhaps because immigration is something they “see” as immigrants arrive in communities, schools and workplaces.

What is not so easy to “see” are the root causes of immigration and the ways in which trade agreements and US agricultural policy relate to the immigration issue.

Americans are probably most familiar with trade policies through recent impacts felt in the US, such as the loss of jobs as manufacturing operations move overseas, or the decline of rural areas as small farms and businesses disappear and young people leave.

One impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been the flow of cheap agricultural produce, including corn, into Mexico. US agriculture is heavily subsidized by taxpayers, with most subsidies going to giant farms and agribusinesses. These farms receive inputs like pesticides and fertilizers at subsidized prices, and so crops are produced at low cost, or even overproduced for surplus.

Subsidies also lower prices at which produce is exported. NAFTA's terms reduced export barriers and, as a result, US-grown corn is “dumped” across the border. The Oakland Institute notes that since NAFTA passed in 1994, 2 million small farmers in Mexico, most who have grown corn for generations, but cannot compete with this American corn, have been forced out of agriculture.

Another impact of NAFTA is the relocation of large US-based businesses and retailers into towns and cities in Mexico. Thousands of smaller businesses cannot compete with these transnational corporations, resulting in displacement of workers on a huge scale. As people lose their means to make a living, they migrate to cities or US-owned *maquiladora* factory sites near the border.

Millions try to enter the US. According to the non-governmental organization Witness for Peace,



Veteran social-justice advocate David Solnit encouraging people to take the power to decide. photo: Jim Tarbell

the rate of immigration from Mexico has doubled since 1994, and about two-thirds of the undocumented Mexican population in the US arrived after NAFTA came into effect.

Because NAFTA and other trade agreements are designed to benefit mega-corporations, small businesses, farmers and workers are suffering.

If those calling for restricted immigration want us to believe that their motives are not steeped in xenophobia or racism—they might shift their focus toward reshaping US agricultural policy and positions on trade agreements, rather than preventing undocumented immigrants from obtaining driver's licenses, or denying college education to immigrants' children.

Trade has the potential to create prosperity between participating countries. It is the imbalances in current trade agreement models that have led to massive economic upheavals in our country and others. Even so, in December 2007, the Peru Free Trade Agreement was approved by the Senate.

And also in December 2007, the current version of the Farm Bill was approved without proposed amendments that would have limited subsidies on US crops.

How can one make a difference? People in Mexico and other countries cannot vote in US elections. It is therefore up to US citizens to make a difference by contacting their senators and representatives, and insist they vote “no” on three pending free trade agreements — with Colombia, Panama and South Korea — that could come up for vote within the next few months.

And in 2008, we could elect as president the candidate who best understands relationships among immigration, US trade policies, and poverty. Rather than talking fearfully about barricading our country with a border fence, that leader might instead boldly steer the US in a new direction by strengthening our local economies, demanding trade justice, and engaging the world on a fairer playing field.

Christopher Huh lives in Maine, where, for over five years, he has worked to help low-income farmworkers achieve economic self sufficiency through employment and training.

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