

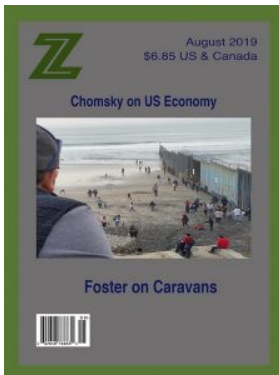
Caravan: Workers Who Want to Work

FOSTER'S:

By Kathleen Foster

August 1, 2019
[A+] / [A-]

Z Magazine



Posted in: [Activism](#), [Immigration](#), [Latin America](#), [Racism](#), [US](#), [Features](#), [ZMag](#) |
 Comments Off on [Caravan: Workers Who Want to Work](#)



Man looking out to sea. by Kathleen Foster

CURRENT ZMAG

[U.S. vs. China: From
Tariff War to Economic
War](#)

By Jack Rasmus

[Climate Tipping Points
and the Poor People's
Campaign](#)

By Ted Glick

[Fearless Cities: A
Guide to The
Global Municipalist
Movement](#)

By Steve Early

[An Honorable Course
in Iran: End Sanctions,
Resume Dialogue](#)

By Kathy Kelly

[Kushner as a Colonial
Administrator: Let's
Talk About the "Israeli
Model"](#)

By Ramzy Baroud

[Liberate Medicine from
the Profiteers](#)

In a corner of a patio, Angelica and her four-year-old son have made a temporary home beneath a tarpaulin. The mother and child store all their worldly possessions here: a small red backpack; two plastic cups, one pink, one orange; a bottle of water; and a toy train. For the young mother this makeshift shelter in Tijuana, Mexico, is the latest stop on a perilous journey to hoped-for sanctuary in the U.S., from her home in Honduras and a life of inequality, injustice, and oppression.

After her abusive husband threatened to have her killed by local gang members, Angelica and her youngest child joined a caravan of asylum seekers traveling north. When they arrived at the Tijuana-San Diego border last December, Customs and Border Protection agents prevented them from crossing over into the U.S. to apply for asylum. Instead, Angelica, along with hundreds of others, had to line up for a number and the chance to cross when it was called. Only 10 to 15

By Mark Harris

Connecting the Dots:
Insane Trade and
Climate Chaos
By Sean Keller

People in Cages on the
Border on July 4th
By Ted Glick

Economic Boom” a
Sham
By Noam Chomsky

The Farms of the Future
By Isabel Marlene

Caravan: Workers Who
Want to Work
By Kathleen Foster

Corporate Team of
Rivals
By Norman Solomon

Three Lessons for the
Left from the Mueller
Inquiry
By Jonathan Cook

“Every War Is a War
Against Children”
By Kathy Kelly

Who are Venezuela’s
Colectivos?
By Federico Fuentes

VAWA and the NRA
By Laura Finley

The Toxic Lure of
“Guns and Butter”
By Norman Solomon

Ruth Bader Ginsburg: A
Life
By Stephen Bergstein

Trump’s “Troika of
Tyranny” Meddles in
Venezuela, Cuba,
Nicaragua
By Marjorie Cohn

Chelsea Manning
Locked Down Again
By John Pilger

The Age of Pardon or

numbers are taken each day, so the wait can stretch to weeks or even months. Meanwhile, refugees sleep in shelters, on the streets, or, like Angelica, in a relatively safe space in the garden of a warm-hearted local family.

I met Angelica in January when my husband, Jose, and I volunteered with the clinic run by the New Sanctuary Coalition in Tijuana. The NSC’s mission was to provide support for people arriving in the caravan, and its slogans—“Abolish Borders,” “Abolish ICE”—had attracted hundreds of activists from around the country who are concerned about the rise of anti-immigrant racism. Our tasks as volunteers varied daily: we briefed nervous refugees on what to expect when they finally entered a processing center; stood in line with them for a number; accompanied them to the border, or to a free health center, or to the pro bono legal clinic run by *Al Otro Lado*. On most days we served meals to between 50 and 150 hungry people with food provided by local restaurants and caring individuals.



Tijuana border wall, by Kathleen Foster

Volunteers and refugees bonded easily. One evening a young Nicaraguan played the guitar and sang Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” in Spanish. Then we all joined older Nicaraguans in singing the songs of the bard of Sandinismo, Carlos Mejía Godoy. Jose, a refugee who came from Central America in 1981, felt a special affinity with the recent arrivals. “They are,” he said, “workers who just want to work,” and conditions for Central America’s working class are desperate.

Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans have been fleeing Central America since the 1970s when civil wars erupted throughout the region as insurgents attempted to overthrow repressive governments that were financially and militarily supported by the U.S. government. These early refugees traveled alone or in small family groups, secretly crossing at unguarded borders, but in the past two years Central Americans have begun to travel openly and boldly in vast caravans like the one, seven thousand strong, that left last December. Caravans start small with a group of people who decide they have to leave. WhatsApp quickly spreads the word that one is forming, and people join as the caravan makes its way from country to country. On the journey north, decisions—for example, determining the best route to take—are made collectively at public

the Age of Aggression?

By Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Trump Whacks the Middle Class & US GDP 1st Qtr 2019 Analysis

By Jack Rasmus

The Assange Arrest is a Warning from History

By John Pilger

Yellow Vests Struggle To Reinvent Democracy

By Richard Greeman

Brazilian Tailings Dam Disaster: Is Wisconsin Next?

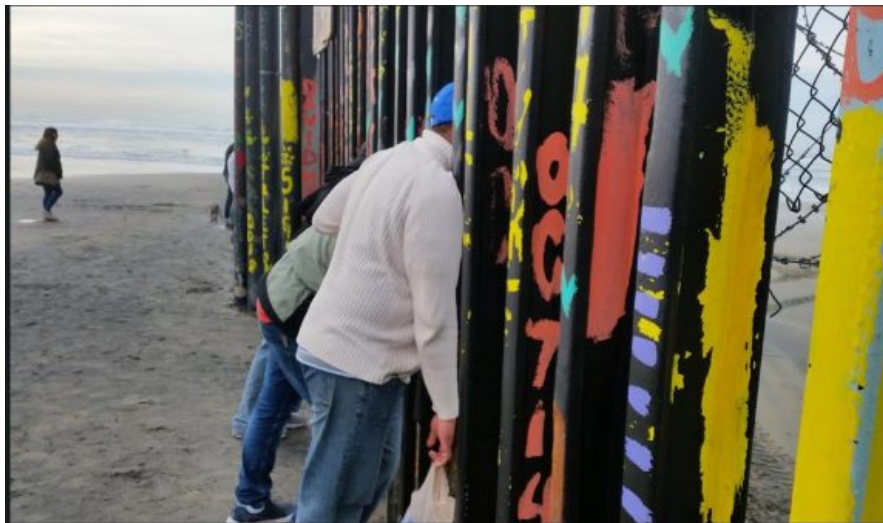
By Al Gedicks

forums. Through social media the caravaneros get out messages to the press: that they are refugees who want their legal rights to seek political asylum respected; and that they speak not as individuals but as a class of dispossessed people. Some carry handwritten signs declaring “Asylum Is a Right, No AI Fronteras.”

Immigrants, Once “Undocumented Workers,” Now “Criminals”

As a photojournalist during the war years, I interviewed campesinos who had been bombed out of their homes during the Salvadoran army’s counterinsurgency sweeps. I have searing memories of grandmothers nursing the babies of mothers who had been killed, or had joined the guerrillas, or had fled to the U.S. In Guatemala, I photographed indigenous peasants who had been displaced from the highlands and herded into prison-like encampments by the military dictator General Rios Montt after his soldiers had destroyed their villages. Back in the States, I volunteered in legal clinics helping those who had escaped the poverty and violence that followed when “peace” was declared. I knew their stories and aided their efforts to navigate the hostile U.S. immigration system and legalize their status. It was a difficult and scary process. But none of this had prepared me for what I saw and heard in Tijuana.

From the heavy militarization of the border to immigrants being brutally and inhumanely treated—detained for weeks, sometimes months, in intolerable conditions; children separated from mothers; children dying in custody; lack of medical care; blocked entry to borders—the situation has turned dramatically worse. Immigrants have gone from being classified as “undocumented workers” to being categorized as “criminals.” Asylum applications, once dealt with by the Department of Labor, are now under the jurisdiction of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), set up after 9/11 as part of the Homeland Security Administration.



Man at Tijuana beach border wall, by Kathleen Foster

The Conditions That Force Millions to Flee

Angelica came to the clinic first for information about the border crossing and, as time went on, for meals. She had exhausted her meager savings on the journey north, when she'd had to pay for food and the occasional bus ride. Ever resourceful, she had sold candy on the streets of Tijuana until someone tried to rob her. She quickly discovered that refugees had to be constantly alert to their surroundings. Another day, locals intervened when kidnappers tried to snatch her son. But most of all, Angelica and all the refugees feared being caught by members of gangs, who would hold them hostage to extort fees from their families back home.

Angelica's story is heartbreakingly similar to those of so many other women in Central America—a region with the highest femicide rates per capita in the world; in 2018 a woman was murdered every 24 hours. Domestic violence and sexual exploitation of women, children, and LGBTQ people are tactics used by armed gangs to control their territories. Unemployment figures for women are even higher than those for men, and women's wages are significantly lower. At home, Angelica was only able to find work picking coffee beans, seasonal labor that paid poorly. She had one option left: joining the caravan with the hope of finding a better life in the U.S. (Refworld, "El Salvador: Information Gathering Mission Report, Part 2: The Situation of Women Victims of Violence and of Sexual Minorities in El Salvador.")

Every day we listened as refugees—some exhausted from lack of sleep and fearful of the future, others defiant and determined to fight for their rights—repeated the same reasons for being there: fear and the need for work that pays a living wage. Young men face a harrowing choice: to leave or to join a gang. Everyone knew someone who had been killed for defying a gang or government. Three men traveling together talked about their struggle for better working conditions, how they had been photographed at an antigovernment demonstration and feared for their safety. "We knew so many workers like us who had been arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed," one said. "We had to leave."

In 2017, a Social Watch report noted that violence and repression of workers is on the rise worldwide. Corporations employ gangs to threaten, intimidate, and even kidnap and kill workers who organize for better conditions. In 2016, two internationally known activists were killed: Brenda Marleni Estrada Tambiento of the Union Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala; and Berta Isabel Caceres Flores, indigenous leader of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (ITUC Global Rights Index).

In the 1980s, the Salvadoran poet and revolutionary Roque Dalton wrote, "the president of the United States is more president of my country than the president of my country." Forty years later, the U.S. dollar is the official currency of El Salvador, and the president of the United States is the de facto president. The Federal Reserve Bank decides the country's interest rates and fiscal policies. Today, 60 percent of the Salvadoran population is underemployed, unemployed, or working in the informal sector, and El Salvador is one of the poorest countries in the region.

One day, an older couple from El Salvador, arrived at the NSC clinic. They were exhausted and very hungry. The man reminded me of a small farmer I had met in the early 2000s. Gesturing at his pocket-

sized plot of infertile land, he opened his palm to show me a handful of seeds. The local landowner had increased his rent, and the cost of seeds and fertilizer had become unaffordable. “How can I feed my family on this?,” he asked angrily.

U.S. imperialism, with its long history of supporting brutal dictatorships in the region, continues to exploit the Central American working class, helping to create the conditions that force millions to flee. The North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 allowed U.S. and Canadian multi-nationals and local capitalists to take over land and resources from small farmers for mining and growing cash crops for export. Corporations like Fruit of the Loom, Hanes, Gildan Activewear, Nike, and Adidas, operate in free-trade zones where they pay no state or local taxes and their workers receive barely subsistence wages. Once I photographed inside a clothing factory in San Salvador. Women in tightly packed rows sat before loud, fast-moving sewing machines while an armed guard watched over a pile of blue jeans the women had produced. Not one worker looked up. The guard’s menacing stance, his weapon at the ready, dictated the speed at which they were forced to work. So much as a glance away from the racing needles could mean an injury to fingers or hands, and also losing one’s livelihood.

Remaining in Mexico

Angelica’s number came up after we left Tijuana, and she crossed over the border into a detention camp. Then President Trump announced a new policy, the “Remain In Mexico” program. All applicants for asylum would be returned to Mexico to wait for their interviews. Angelica was sent back to Tijuana with a new interview date for four weeks later. Trapped indefinitely in Tijuana, Angelica rejoined the homeless population—around 1,800, according to the city’s public safety ministry, with thousands more camping out in shacks, often without running water or electricity, and exposed to crime and police harassment. The caravan arrivals, together with migrants from Mexico’s southern states and the thousands of undocumented immigrants deported by ICE in recent years, have strained the city’s municipal and church shelters and soup kitchens.

On Sundays, families visit the U.S.-Mexican border wall that runs down the beach in Tijuana to the Pacific Ocean. They peer through the 20-foot steel posts, hoping for a glimpse of loved ones on the San Diego side. But all they see is an empty, wide no-man’s land patrolled by border agents in SUVs—President Trump’s latest addition to the militarization of the border. Political artwork covers the wall with messages of unity in English and Spanish. People come from all over the world to help paint the brightly colored names that transform the wall into a monument to loved ones—those who have died attempting to cross the border, missing family members, and those separated by harsh immigration laws.



Names of the disappeared, by Kathleen Foster

Goods Can Cross Borders, Why Can't People?

Meanwhile, it's business as usual at the Tijuana-San Diego border crossing as trucks transporting merchandise produced in Tijuana's thriving industrial valley stream through without inspection. This is the busiest land border in the world, with around 50,000 vehicles and 25,000 pedestrians crossing every day into the U.S. More than two million people work in the maquiladoras on the Mexico side of the border. Here, U.S. manufacturers produce goods for pesos, and sell them in the U.S. for dollars.

A few days after we returned from Tijuana, 70,000 workers in 40 factories producing auto parts (including General Motors and Ford plants) went on strike in the industrial city of Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. The settlement won by these workers, many of whom earned as little as \$9 a day, included a 20 percent increase in wages and a one-time bonus of about \$1,700. Their actions encouraged the diverse workforce in other maquiladoras along the border—Mexican nationals (particularly migrants from the country's impoverished southern states); refugees from Central America, Haiti, the Caribbean, and even Africa; and Mexicans taken to the U.S. as children and deported by the Obama and Trump administrations—to fight for and win pay increases.

At the end of May, Trump announced that he would impose 5 percent tariffs on all goods imported from these factories—on food, medical devices, cars, clothing, machinery valued at nearly \$360 billion in 2018, according to the Wall Street Journal (May 31, 2019)—until the Mexican government took action to stem the flow of so-called illegal aliens across the southern border. This policy, notes Ravi Ragbir, executive director of the New Sanctuary Coalition, would have resulted in “higher prices for food and everyday goods, which will hurt the average person on both sides of the border.” Trump, he argues, “is once again using the hot issue of immigrants as a threat to national security to rally his base and support his presidential aspirations.” He abandoned his plan when the Mexican government agreed to stop refugees on its southern border and to aid in effecting his Remain In Mexico policy.



Clamor Por Los Que No Lograron El Sueno, by Asylum Seeker

The Wall Built to Divide Has Become a Bridge

Angelica's interview date was again delayed for another two months. A new report from the Department of Homeland Security revealed that severe overcrowding at one immigration facility posed an immediate risk to the health of detained migrant children. Ragbir warns, "We are close to witnessing a repeat of Nazi Germany when detention centers [the camps] couldn't house the thousands of people detained."

Rumors abound in the refugee community that there will be mass deportations back to countries of origin and no one will be allowed to cross the border. The Mexican government continues to comply with the bargain they made with Trump: the police and National Guard pick up people on the slightest pretext.

Men also roam the streets offering to help people cross. One man tried to strike a deal with Angelica: he'd smuggle her to California in exchange for her moving in with him. "I'm desperate," she told us, "but not that desperate." She is resilient, determined, and at the moment relatively safe. She has become a leader in a small community of refugees, migrants, volunteers, and concerned Tijuana neighbors who share living space and resources and welcome new arrivals. Angelica and hundreds of others are still waiting in Tijuana more than six months after arriving at the border. In reality, Angelica's journey is just beginning and her future uncertain. I listen to her and wonder if she realizes how long it will be before she sees her other son and family again.

One of the NSC volunteers in Tijuana, Jason Wu, described the network of asylum seekers, migrants, and volunteers on the border as people "linked in a common struggle." Recalling a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese workers from entry into the United States, Wu commented: "If I don't stand up for these refugees now, it will be me in the future." To which Ragbir adds: "Trump is hell-bent on ethnic cleansing. He will expand anti-

immigrant policies to include blacks and browns, and other citizens.”

In early July, activists, locals, and, with commendable courage, asylum seekers held a vigil that went on into the night at the Tijuana beach wall. They were there to memorialize the Salvadoran man and his daughter and the young boy from Syria, all of whom had drowned while trying to cross the border.

The indisputable irony is that a wall built to divide instead serves to connect people from different backgrounds and continents. In the tradition of the Underground Railroad, anti-racist solidarity is propelling many to take action to free the refugees.

Z



Clamor Por Los Que No Lograron El Sueno, by Asylum Seeker

*Kathleen Foster is a photojournalist and filmmaker best known for producing socially engaged art to support grass-roots movements for change. Her photography has documented the war years in Central America. Her award-winning documentaries include *Afghan Women: A History of Struggle*; *Coal Wars: The Battle in Rum Creek*; *Nicaragua: Reclaiming the Revolution*; and most recently, **PROFILED**—a Paul Robeson Award recipient at the 2018 Newark Black Film Festival.*