

Immigration under capitalism: Life and death along the US-Mexico border

Part Two

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In part one, the WSWs spoke with Victoria, a young migrant woman who was detained with her two children crossing the border from Mexico. Part two examines the deadly risk of crossing the border, the difficulties of securing legal relief, and the super-exploited character of immigrant working class life in the United States.

Many immigrants consider themselves lucky to make it through the desert to the United States. Enrique Morones, the founder and director of the non-profit group Border Angels, described the fate of one young immigrant to the World Socialist Web Site:

“Marco Antonio Villasenor was five years old when he died crossing into Texas with his father. He had asked his father, ‘can I have some water?’ but his father wouldn’t give him any. One-by-one, he asked the other 18 men he was traveling with for water, but none of them would give him any, either. Do you know why? They were all dead. All of these people, including Marco, suffocated to death in the back of a semi truck in May 2003.”

Horror stories are all too common along the US-Mexico border, and conditions are so rough that officials often have difficulty identifying the remains of those who have died from heat exhaustion or dehydration.

Morones explained that 11,000 migrants have died crossing into the US since 1994 when President Bill Clinton implemented Operation Gatekeeper, which increased security at key crossing points along the border. The plan was initiated to stem immigration in border cities, but overwhelming economic pressure caused millions of migrants to cross through the desert instead. By comparison, roughly 150 people were killed attempting to cross the Berlin Wall separating East from West Germany in three decades.

“The US-Mexico border is 2,000 miles long and a third of it—700 miles—has a wall,” Morones said. “There are no visas, so people have no choice but to cross the borders to feed their families, not just in the US but all over the world. Ninety percent of the people who die did not qualify for a visa. The waitlist for a visa can be 20 years or more.”

It is not only US border policy which is to blame for the deaths of migrants in the desert: “The people fleeing Latin America do so because of the US and their role in the region for decades,” Morones said. “It’s the same with the immigrants coming from Iraq and Syria. The US is greatly responsible for that situation but

the government doesn’t welcome them. Since Trump took power, it’s been insane. There has been a rise in hate crimes against immigrants and there is a tremendous fear in the community. People are showing up to our offices en masse because they don’t know what is going to happen.”

The government patrols the borders with a ruthlessness that parallels or exceeds the Israeli Defense Forces occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. A resident of a border town told the WSWs that the county sheriff encourages locals to “shoot migrants and roll their bodies into the river.”

While traveling near the border WSWs reporters witnessed the aftermath of Border Patrol officials pursuing immigrants on a high-speed car chase. Two immigrants were reported dead on the scene after being ejected 20 yards from their cars.

Under Trump’s new immigration policies, immigrants captured in the desert will be detained in a network of prisons even as their claims for relief are adjudicated. The majority of immigrants will be deported without ever appearing before a judge. Those who are released in the US will be among the most “fortunate.”

Sister Norma Pimentel is the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, which has served tens of thousands migrants who were recently released from detention facilities. The influx of migrants has been markedly lower since the election of Trump, she says.

“Our organization takes in people at the bus stations who get released and have no money and no food. They are dehydrated, the kids are hungry, and they are exhausted and dirty,” she told the WSWs.

Sister Pimentel explained that the election of Trump has provoked a widespread response among workers in Southern Texas who wish to help the migrants. “In the past two or three weeks we have seen about 300 immigrants a day coming in. The response here of the people, of poor people who want to help, has been extraordinary. The whole Rio Grande valley is one of the poorest areas in the US and yet people are willing to give what they can—not only Hispanics but we’ve received help from all over the country, from white people who are US citizens.”

Those who make it to Sister Pimentel’s respite center feel that they have escaped a close encounter with death. “One time I spoke with a father, a big man who came with his child, and I asked him, ‘How are you?’ And this big, strong man started crying like a

boy. He said, 'It was so hard, so difficult, the journey from my country and all we went through.' These people have no choice but to leave. It's devastating."

One of the greatest challenges immigrants confront is obtaining legal representation. Unlike the US criminal system, there is no established right to free legal representation in immigration court proceedings, even though the penalty of deportation is often worse than criminal conviction. Attorney costs can be expensive, with quality representation costing up to \$5,000 or \$6,000 for an asylum application and court representation.

Immigrants who cannot afford a quality attorney are often tricked by *notarios* who lie and say they are attorneys before fraudulently filling out false paperwork and absconding with the money, causing irreparable harm to their legal cases.

Winning an asylum application is extremely difficult. The five immigration judges in El Paso, Texas, for example, heard 1042 asylum requests between 2011 and 2016 but granted less than 40 applications. One judge, Sunita Mahtabfar, rejected 158 of 159 asylum petitions during that period.

The Obama administration's policy was to bar even child immigrants from free legal representation. Head Obama Justice Department official Jack Weil, a former immigration judge, told the ACLU in 2016: "I've taught immigration law literally to 3- and 4- year olds...They get it."

Sister Pimentel said, "I don't know how the Obama administration could justify making children appear before a judge on their own. I couldn't defend myself without a lawyer and I'm an adult. How can a child do this? The asylum process is very difficult—saying 'I need to work' is not enough and they're making it even more difficult.

"How can you prove you meet the legal standard, that you were persecuted because of race, gender, political opinion, sexual orientation, or membership in a persecuted social group? You would need to get all of this proof from your home, but when you flee for your life you're not thinking about how to gather evidence for a legal case."

It is the working class that risks death to travel to the United States. Wealthier people have multiple options for avoiding the fate of Victoria and immigrant workers like her.

The EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program is one such example. A Department of Justice website explains that a foreign investor can become a legal permanent resident if they invest \$1 million in a "new commercial enterprise" and create 10 jobs. In this way, a wealthy person can simply transfer money to a trust or holding company and enter the US with limited wait time.

Those migrants who cannot afford investor visas but who succeed in making it to the United States work under conditions of extreme exploitation, largely in the service or agricultural industries. The situation facing farmworkers in California's Napa Valley is typical. Though home to some of the wealthiest people in the country, Napa's grape production relies on the exploitation of cheap labor, largely from Mexico and Central America.

Angel Calderon leads the *Casa de Guanajuato* immigrant rights center, which focuses on providing farmworkers in the Napa Valley with affordable housing. Calderon came as a farmworker from Mexico decades ago.

"I've seen groups of 40 workers sleeping under bridges here in Napa. They can't afford the rent and there isn't enough housing. There are 26,000 farmworkers in Napa alone. This is a tourist area and it is very rich, yet these farmworkers live in horrible conditions. Many workers come all the way from Stockton every day, a town which is 2 hours from here. Workers sleep 30 people to a 3-room apartment and they pay \$300 each for rent. Then the slumlords charge them \$15 to drive them to work, where they work 10-12 hours a day making \$12 an hour. Counting transit, that's 14-16 hour days. That's the situation workers face making wine that can go for up to \$200 or \$300 a bottle."

Many farmworkers send between 80 and 90 percent of their earnings back to their families in Mexico and Central America. When the work stops in Napa, they are forced to migrate to Washington State or to California's Central Valley.

The deplorable conditions these workers confront on a daily basis are the product of repeated betrayals by the United Farm Workers Union.

"The Mexican community does not trust the union," Calderon said. "The UFW doesn't really protect them and to join the union costs money each month, which farmworkers can't afford to pay and they don't want to. The leaders of the unions are not strong, they don't have the capacity to organize anyone, and they don't win any demands. People tell me they have no confidence in the union and they don't see their officials as honest people.

"Look, the union doesn't give anyone any benefits and so farmworkers see it as something that's going to take their money in exchange for nothing. The officials just want to live off of their wages. I'm in favor of workers organizing themselves and fighting for our rights, and so are all farmworkers, but the UFW just doesn't do this."

To be continued

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