

So far from God, so close to the United States...

The second Mexican presidential debate and the crisis of bourgeois rule

By Rafael Azul
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On Sunday, May 20, the second of three Mexican presidential debates took place at the Tijuana campus of the National Autonomous University not far from the California-Mexico border.

Out of the five initial candidates for president on the official ballot, four remain and were all present: the leader in the polls, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, commonly known as AMLO, of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena, Together We Will Make History Coalition); Ricardo Anaya of the National Action Party (PAN, Mexico to the Front Coalition); José Antonio Meade Kuribreña (representing the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, Everyone for Mexico Coalition)); and former PRI member Jaime “El Bronco” Rodríguez Calderón (governor of Nuevo Leon state), running an independent campaign.

The debate, organized around the theme “Mexico in the world,” was divided into three segments: commerce and investment, border security and transnational crime, and migrant rights.

Much of the discussion on trade and trade war involved competing claims as to which candidate could best defend Mexican interests against the US president.

The debate included six questions from audience members from Tijuana said to be as-yet-undecided voters. The seriousness and passion of these questions, reflecting the concerns of ordinary border residents, including questions having to do with the minimum wage, the protection of border residents against gang attacks and police extortion, and the plight of Central American immigrants in Mexico, were in sharp contrast to thin gruel of the candidates’ answers.

Wages

One questioner, Diego Dominguez Sanchez, a 38-year-old worker, described working in the United

States for wages that were more than double for an 8-hour day than he now receives in Tijuana for a 12-hour day. The current minimum daily wage in Mexico is about 80 pesos (just over US\$4). On average, a Mexican worker takes home 15 pesos an hour (76 US cents).

Dominguez pointed out that both the US and Canada are currently demanding that Mexico raise its wages, as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) currently being renegotiated at Trump’s demand. He asked the candidates to address that issue.

This very basic question left the four candidates struggling for an answer. Meade avoided the question altogether; none of the other candidates proposed any significant increase that even approaches the US minimum wage. López Obrador limited his response to a proposal to double the minimum wage along the border, without providing any specifics. Anaya proposed raising the daily minimum wage to 100 pesos (US\$5) in 2018 and 200 pesos in two years, and abolishing payroll taxes on those that earn less than 10,000 pesos (US\$500) per year.

In the same breath, he stated that living above the poverty line in Mexico required a daily minimum of 335 pesos (US\$17).

Rodríguez Calderón called for abolishing the minimum wage entirely and all forms of social welfare, which he said destroys the work ethic and productivity of Mexicans. This assertion that the forces of *laissez-faire* capitalism would bring wages up, once workers were left with no protections, went unchallenged by the other candidates.

Nor did any candidate address the gross income and wealth inequality that characterizes Mexican society.

Border crime

Teresa Anaya, a 72-year-old questioner who lives in

Tijuana near the border fence, denounced the common practice of extortion and attacks by police and gang elements in cahoots with each other. She declared that she had personally witnessed such repeated extortions and assaults.

Without providing any concrete proposals, the candidates' answers ranged from combating white-collar corruption (López Obrador), to denouncing a current Morena candidate for lower office who allegedly had committed extortion (Meade), to creating more opportunities for youth, such as sports activities, and blocking the smuggling of US weapons (Anaya and Rodríguez Calderón), to cutting off the hands of white-collar criminals (Rodríguez Calderón).

Attacks on refugees

Teresa Mercado, a young woman, asked the candidates for their view of how to resolve the immigrant crisis along the borders between Mexico and Central America, in which government-encouraged xenophobia has combined with genocidal activities and human trafficking along the *via crucis* of Central American immigrants. Ms. Mercado demanded that the candidates answer how they would protect these immigrants and refugees entering México.

Expanding on this question, one of the moderators of the debate indicated that Mexico deports more Central American immigrants than the US, and that president Trump has praised the Mexican government's militarization of the southern border.

As one would expect, all the candidates gave lip service to treating Central American immigrants humanely, while repeating in their responses almost word for word the language of this Southern Border Project that today serves as an umbrella for xenophobic persecution.

The Southern Border Project (*Plan Frontera Sur*) was inaugurated in July 2014 by the current government of President Enrique Peña Nieto, following a meeting and an agreement with US President Barack Obama, shortly after the US president had declared a "crisis" of immigration into the US. The Project is an outgrowth of the Merida Initiative, signed in 2007 between President Felipe Calderón (PAN) and US President George W. Bush, which linked up the US and Mexican military.

Since the electoral campaign officially began on April 10, there has been a marked increase in xenophobic hysteria, such as charges that the current wave of Central American refugees is linked to the infamous criminal gang MS-13, echoing Donald Trump. For example, on May 10, *Diario del Sur*, the daily newspaper of

Tapachula, in Mexico's southernmost Chiapas State, declared the border "Mara [MS-13] territory." "There is a general atmosphere of xenophobia stirred by the institutional and corporate discourse, that connects being a foreigner with organized crime," declared Salvador Lacruz, a leader of the Fray Matías human rights center in Chiapas.

PRI candidate Meade, in his answer to Ms. Mercado, spoke of the link between organized crime and immigration, while Rodríguez Calderón called for containing the movement of Central Americans so that they do not "invade" northern México.

Defense of immigrants in the US

Tijuana resident Gerardo Osuna asked another important question, putting his finger on the fact that the Mexican government remains largely indifferent to the defense of Mexicans in the US. "Mexico exports immigrants to the US; why do we not defend them?" asked Osuna, calling for an "action plan."

Once again, while all the candidates indicated their sympathy with the plight of undocumented workers now being deported, much of the discussion centered not on their right to live and work in the United States, but rather on helping the deportees adapt to their return home, together with their US-born spouses and children.

In this regard, Meade proposed working with US state governors and mayors to provide legal aid to such immigrants. López Obrador proposed appealing to the United Nations and including this demand in the negotiations over a new free trade agreement. Anaya attacked López Obrador and Meade as hypocrites for suggesting that President Obama's deportation policy was similar to Trump's, insisting that there a big difference and that the former was not related to the latter.

No candidate bothered to mention the Trump policy of separating families from their children, the interment of immigrants in camps and jails, or the denial by US courts of the right of immigrants to bail and legal representation.

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