

EXAMINING THE ROOT CAUSES *of the* CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEE CRISIS

In recent months, thousands of refugee children and their families have fled dangerous conditions in their communities, making the perilous journey through Central America and Mexico and arriving in the United States. By fleeing violence in their home countries in Central America, many become victims of trafficking, sexual abuse and further violence. They take on these risks and travel thousands of miles because staying home simply is not an option. The crime, violence, crushing poverty and failure of governments to protect the lives and rights of citizens in their home countries are so extreme that children and their families see little choice but to undertake a life-threatening journey to survive, hoping for a better future.

To begin to address this complex phenomenon, which nativists in the United States have labeled incorrectly as an “immigration” problem that only can be solved with enhanced border controls, we must target the root causes of this massive displacement. Unfortunately, flawed U.S. foreign and trade policies have exacerbated dangerous conditions in these countries, breeding desperation. The answer is not more militarization of the border or callous treatment of refugee children, but rather a reimagined approach to relations in the region.

- **The answer is not more border militarized enforcement.** The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that approximately 58% of Central American children interviewed were forcibly displaced because they suffered violence or faced threats of violence that indicated a need for international protection. The United States has obligations under national and international law to ensure these children will not be returned to dangerous situations—obligations the government cannot meet with enhanced border enforcement or expedited removals.
- **Violence, crime and corruption are widespread.** Honduras is currently the murder capital of the world, and El Salvador and Guatemala have among the highest murder rates. While powerful gangs murder and intimidate families, many government, military and police officials in these countries are notoriously corrupt. In Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, organized crime has infiltrated the police force in many areas, and the military has a long history of human rights abuses. Government corruption frequently means authorities do not properly investigate violence against workers and union activists or, worse, are complicit in such acts.
- **Poverty and inequality in the region are on the rise.** Inequality has increased in both Guatemala and Honduras over the past decade, and real wages in El Salvador actually decreased between 2004 and 2011. The majority of jobs in Central America remain in the informal sector, with no benefits and no safety net. Nearly two-thirds of people in Honduras live in poverty—the top 10% earn more than 55 times more than the poorest 10%.

- **Workers' rights violations have increased.** Trade unions in the region report that labor repression has increased, especially in the expanding *maquiladora* sector. Guatemala has surpassed Colombia as the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. In both Guatemala and Honduras, employers routinely refuse to engage in collective bargaining, avoid paying workers the wages and benefits they are due and fire and threaten workers involved in union organizing. Many Central American governments have failed to respond to these abuses, which has led to a dearth of decent work, further exacerbating the problems working families face.
- **The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has failed to create promised economic benefits for workers in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.** In 2005, amidst CAFTA negotiations, supporters of the agreement argued it would create broad economic growth and raise labor standards. These claims have proved false. The “high-skilled” jobs promised for the *maquila* sector never materialized, in part because global firms eschewed investing in Central America and instead produced in lower-wage China after the United States facilitated its entry into the WTO. Though CAFTA was promoted as “pro-development,” many of its provisions run counter to authentic development interests by doing such things as protecting extreme monopoly rights for pharmaceutical companies, restricting financial services regulations and subjecting public interest laws to challenge in secret, unaccountable “corporate courts.”
- **The CAFTA labor provisions are weak and have been implemented inadequately.** More than six years ago, in April 2008, workers in the United States and Guatemala filed a petition, arguing that the government of Guatemala was failing to effectively enforce its labor laws in violation of its CAFTA commitments. Despite six years of consultation and the implementation of an “Action Plan,” little has changed; the government continues to fail to enforce its labor laws and employers violate worker rights with impunity. Though the U.S. government finally announced in September 2014 it would proceed to “dispute settlement” over Guatemala’s failure to its workers, the lack of meaningful progress is not an isolated incident. For two years, the U.S. government has been sitting on another CAFTA complaint alleging serious violations of workers’ rights by the government of Honduras. Had the U.S. government acted promptly to address the governments’ failures in both of these cases, it already could be on the way to addressing some of the root causes of the crisis and improving the situation for workers and their families in Central America.

Central American children and their families will continue to flee their homes until they can live their lives without constant fear of violence, exercise their rights without retaliation and access decent work. The United States must reorient its foreign and trade policy in the region to focus on job creation, decent work and meaningful protection of labor and human rights to reduce the “push factors” that breed desperation and displace working families.

Read more about the AFL-CIO’s vision for trade policies that promote global shared prosperity here: www.aflcio.org/About/Exec-Council/Conventions/2013/Resolutions-and-Amendments/Resolution-12-America-and-the-World-Need-a-New-Approach-to-Trade-and-Globalization.