

18 migrant workers die in Texas

Victims of a brutal border policy

Bill Vann
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The shocking deaths of 18 Mexicans and Central Americans trapped in a stifling trailer in Texas have laid bare once again the human cost of Washington's brutal policy toward immigrant workers.

At least 62 people and perhaps as many as 100 had been packed into the trailer of an 18-wheeler. While the vehicle was a refrigeration truck, the cooling unit was apparently not turned on, and it soon turned into an oven. As temperatures reached over 90 degrees Fahrenheit outside—and well over 105 in the trailer itself—some tried to claw their way through foam insulation and broke out tail lights in a desperate attempt to let in fresh air. Heat rose to unbearable levels in the trailer after it was abandoned by smugglers, or *coyotes*, as they are known in the border area. Apparently, after the protests from the trailer grew louder, they panicked, fearing that the noise would attract attention from police or border patrols.

“The human traffickers put so many people in the trailer that there wasn't enough oxygen,” Mexico's Houston Consul General Eduardo Ibarrola told the *Houston Chronicle*. He said survivors had told him “they were pounding on the walls and yelling” to get out of the trailer. “I have just seen the most horrible thing of my life,” Ibarrola told the press after viewing the bodies of the dead. “It's terrible, indescribable.”

Among the dead were a six-year-old boy who suffocated together with his father and a 91-year-old man. Most were young workers, the majority from Mexico, headed north in search of jobs. Six others were hospitalized in serious condition. Survivors also included workers from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

As many as 40 immigrants may have fled after the door to the truck was forced open, according to authorities in Texas. Hospitals in the area were bracing for the possibility that some of these individuals may be found suffering from severe dehydration and heatstroke.

The migrants were crowded into the truck on Tuesday in the border town of Harlingen, Texas, expecting to reach Houston, where they were going to take their separate ways.

Some were making their first border crossing, while others were returning to jobs and homes in the US after visiting families in Mexico or Central America.

A man charged with having driven the truck was arrested in Houston Wednesday and has been charged with “transporting and harboring aliens.” Two others are being sought, according to federal prosecutors. The suspect, a legal immigrant from Jamaica who regularly drove shipments of milk from New York, returning with watermelons from Texas, was reportedly offered \$5,000 to transport the immigrants.

“This grim discovery is a horrific reminder of the callous disregard smugglers have for their human cargo,” said Asa Hutchinson, under secretary for border and transportation security at the Department of Homeland Security. He described the *coyotes* as “ruthless criminals, who put profit before people.”

Hutchinson's remarks were typical of the self-serving attempt by the US government to attribute the mounting death toll on the border to the *coyotes*. While there is no doubt that these individuals are motivated by profits and are willing to sacrifice their human cargo to save their own necks, the reality is that the loss of thousands of lives in recent years can be traced directly to US immigration and border policies.

At least 2,300 immigrant deaths have been documented since 1995, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service instituted its “Operation Gatekeeper” in southern California, introducing a militarized enforcement along stretches of the border. Similar operations were subsequently begun in Arizona and Texas. Critics have charged that these efforts are politically motivated, concentrated in urban areas to create an image of a controlled border. In reality they have merely pushed the problem out of sight into areas where crossings are more dangerous and deadly.

On average, one migrant worker dies every day. They fall victims to dehydration, heatstroke, drowning, hypothermia, suffocation or, as in several recent cases, gunfire from anti-immigrant vigilante groups. The increased enforcement has

also made the immigrant workers more dependent upon the *coyotes* to find a means of getting across. They in turn have raised their fees, charging \$1,500 a person or more.

Studies by both the US General Accounting Office as well as private research groups have concluded that the border crackdown has had little effect on the number crossing the border. Fluctuations in immigration are tied far more directly to changes in the economy.

The reality is that the US economy depends upon a steady flow of cheap labor from Mexico—it is estimated that between 3 million and 5 million of the country's citizens are living and working in the US without visas. Undocumented labor, in large part Mexican, has become a substantial section of the work force in service industries, meat-packing plants, construction and many other industries. Paid substandard wages and denied basic benefits, these workers have become an important factor in reducing the costs and boosting the profits of American capitalism.

As former INS Commissioner Doris Meissner explained last year, “in the global economy a degree of undocumented labor must be tolerated in order for the US to keep competitive.”

Conditions in Mexico itself ensure a continued exodus. Unemployment has risen steadily over the past several years, while the opening up of the country to US agricultural imports under the North American Free Trade Agreement and the slashing of Mexican state agricultural aid has devastated rural areas, forcing large numbers to abandon the land.

The deaths on the border drew expressions of concern from the Mexican government and renewed anger among Mexican workers.

“This lamentable incident shows the need for and importance of achieving safe conditions on the border for migrants, and the need for safe, legal and orderly migration,” Mexico's Foreign Relations Department said in a press statement.

Washington has stonewalled requests for a regularization of immigration relations between the two countries, shrugging off promises made by Bush shortly after his inauguration to Mexican President Vicente Fox. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the US government rejected any liberalization of the restrictions on immigrants, instead turning to even tighter enforcement, despite the fact that Washington has yet to link Mexican immigration to terrorism.

Relations between the two governments have grown cooler ever since, particularly over the refusal of Mexico, which held a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council, to support Washington in its campaign for a UN resolution in support of US aggression against Iraq.

A recent proposal by a US congressional panel to link any immigration amnesty for Mexicans residing in the US to Mexico agreeing to open up its state-owned oil sector to US investment provoked outrage in Mexico, where it was described as an “oil for migrants” deal.

The resolution passed by the House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee described the state oil company, PEMEX, as corrupt and inefficient, and insisted that only through privatization and its effective takeover by US-based oil firms could it be run properly.

While the resolution, backed by the panel's Republican majority, was not binding, it sparked charges of “blackmail” from Mexican politicians and editorial boards. Fox himself told the press that PEMEX “is not and will not be up for sale.”

What the Mexican government has pushed for is the creation of a large-scale “guest worker” or “bracero” program for new migrant workers and the legalization of those already residing in the US. The issue is of vital importance to the Mexican economy, which depends on an estimated \$8 billion in remittances from Mexicans working in the US.

Support within the administration has evaporated for either measure. While the bracero pact would provide a regularized flow of cheap labor—workers who would largely be at the mercy of their employers, subject to deportation once they are fired—the amnesty would presumably provide a section of workers who today have virtually no legal rights with the minimal protections of US labor codes. There is little backing among US employers for such a measure.

The tragedy in Texas is the worst on the border since 1987, when the bodies of 18 undocumented Mexican workers were found in a sealed railway boxcar near the southwest Texas town of Sierra Blanca. Last October, the decomposed remains of 11 immigrant workers were found in an air-tight railway car in Denison, Iowa. Apparently the workers had hid in the car to cross the border but found themselves sealed in after the train reached the US.



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