

An exchange with an American worker on “illegal immigrants”

1 June 2006

The following is a letter from a reader on the article “US: Pentagon prepares for ‘use of force’ on Mexican border” posted on the World Socialist Web Site May 18, 2006. It is followed by a reply from the article’s author, Bill Van Auken.

Sirs,

I visit and read everything posted on the WSWS daily. I do this because of the high level of integrity and factual accuracy of your reporting and analysis, but your presentation of the illegal immigration problem borders on disinformation and propaganda. Not once in your recent article of 5/18/06 concerning the Bush administration’s plan to employ the USA National Guard do you honestly and accurately describe the hordes of displaced economic immigrants flooding from and through Mexico as “Illegal” immigrants in violation of US national laws.

I am a senior working class male of high and astute political consciousness who detests American vampire capitalism with every fiber of my being. My wife is a legal immigrant from Europe, and we have both lived in Mexico. We know that society well and have a great deal of sympathy and understanding of the social, political, and economic causes which are the driver of this level of “illegal” immigration.

We know the complicity of the vampire capitalist plutocracy in creating the displacements caused by agreements such as NAFTA, GAT, WTO, IMF, and World Bank agendas to loot and pillage the resources, markets, and economies of nations like Mexico. But allowing the unchecked illegal immigration of displaced workers into the USA only leads to the displacement of the struggling American working class. Mexican workers face a Mexican national government which is as corrupt and hostile to their interest as we working class persons do in the USA.

Most American working class persons with a developed political consciousness sympathize with the plight of other oppressed working class persons, but we see this process as a wedge to further erode our relative economic position. We want a system based on fair law which includes reciprocity. I would not be allowed to illegally immigrate to Mexico and find gainful employment there, for Mexican law is far more restrictive and oppressive to foreign nationals than is the USA.

The working class in the USA is being divided and conquered by the policies of non-enforcement of our national immigration laws which allow and insure employers a ready supply of cheap labor which undermines the American working position. These illegal immigrants should stay in Mexico and do the political work necessary to fix their corrupt system which oppresses and exploits them, and we American working class persons need to do the same in the USA. Without rational, law-based policies on immigration which include reciprocity, all working class persons’ positions are diminished by capitalist exploitation. Please be honest in your use of descriptive language, for

when you fail in this, you mimic our common oppressor.

With all due respect,

WH

West Virginia

Dear WH,

While we appreciate your comment on the accuracy and integrity of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s reporting, your charge that our articles on immigration border on “disinformation and propaganda” is somewhat mystifying, and I believe reflects your own political disorientation on this issue.

Your initial complaint appears to be largely one of semantics. We have characterized the approximately 12 million immigrant workers who live and work in the US without valid visas or work permits as “undocumented workers,” while you insist that they be labeled “illegal immigrants.”

These terms are, of course, politically charged, but both acknowledge that these workers are in the US without the permission of the US government. The first begins with their class character and their fundamental unity with workers of all nationalities, the second with their legal status and their supposed culpability for violating US immigration statutes.

Our differences on this subject are by no means incidental, however, but rather go to the heart of the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, which is grounded on the international unification of the working class in a common struggle for socialism, in opposition to all forms of nationalism.

That these undocumented workers from Mexico, Central America and elsewhere have violated American statutes is not in dispute. The issue is what attitude class-conscious workers take towards these laws.

One could have argued, for example, that the WSWS should have referred to the New York transit workers who last December walked out in violation of the anti-union Taylor Law as “illegal strikers.” Was it disinformation for us not to do so? From what you say about yourself, I hardly think that is an argument you would make.

We defended the transit strikers against the fines and threats of dismissal and even jail, all perfectly legal sanctions against their walkout. We likewise defend these immigrant workers against detention, deportation and the threats of violence and even death on the US-Mexican border.

Those who justified the attacks on the transit workers—the politicians and the media—did so by arguing that their actions were hurting underpaid workers. It is significant that many of those who rail against the immigrants employ the very same—and equally fraudulent—pretense.

Those in the Democratic and Republican parties who appeal to anti-immigrant sentiment by claiming that they are worried about

American workers' jobs and wages are lying. Their real aim is to divert the working class from confronting the real source of the attacks on their living standards and to pit the native-born against the immigrant workers.

That immigrant workers have taken to the streets of American cities and towns by the millions to demand their rights as workers and to oppose reactionary anti-immigrant legislation has only intensified the fear and hatred of the right-wing representatives of the ruling elite. Their greatest concern is that such a mass social movement could spread to the working class as a whole.

We have always acknowledged that the ruling elite in this country pursues a contradictory policy towards immigration. On the one hand, it wants to assure itself a steady flow of cheap and easily exploited labor among the undocumented, while on the other hand it persecutes these workers and whips up nationalist demagoguery, scapegoating immigrants as the cause of myriad social ills. In reality, these policies are complementary, as relegating undocumented workers to the pariah status of "illegals" serves to maintain them as a low-paid and compliant workforce.

You write that you are sympathetic to the immigrants and aware that those who come to the US do so in large part because of the intolerable conditions that have been created by an international capitalist system which allows the US-based multinationals to "loot and pillage the resources, markets, and economies" of their countries.

Yet, you insist that "allowing the unchecked illegal immigration of displaced workers into the USA only leads to the displacement of the struggling American working class" and creates a "wedge to further erode our relative economic position."

What this boils down to is that corporations and banks are free to cross borders at will and smash down all national restrictions on their exploitation of labor, resources and markets in any country that they choose. Workers, on the other hand, must be walled off by national boundaries and subjected to the strict enforcement of draconian immigration codes that deny them the right to live and work where they choose.

The working class is an international class. It is "divided and conquered" not by non-enforcement of immigration laws, but by the nationalist policies of its leaderships, not only in the US, but throughout the world.

Millions upon millions of manufacturing jobs in the US have been wiped out over the past two decades. Are the so-called "illegal immigrants" to blame? Your letter indicates that you are from West Virginia. In your state the number of coal miners has fallen from 63,000 in the late 1970s to barely 15,000 today. Is this the fault of undocumented immigrant workers?

How can American workers successfully defend their jobs and wages against transnational corporations that are able to move their operations across national boundaries in search of the cheapest labor costs?

The experience of the past quarter century has made it abundantly clear that the strategy advanced by the AFL-CIO and the United Mine Workers of America of defending "American jobs" by offering concessions to the American-based corporations and pleading for protectionist policies from the government is as bankrupt as it is reactionary. The outcome of this nationalist perspective has been a historically unprecedented collapse of the unions, which now account for less than 8 percent of the private sector workforce. This protracted disintegration of the American labor movement is hardly the result of some sudden increase in immigration.

Beginning from the international character of production in an ever more globally integrated capitalist system, it is clear that workers in the US cannot take a serious step forward without forging the closest possible unity and coordination with workers in every other country where American-based transnationals operate.

Given the close integration of the US and Mexican economies, for example, is it not obvious that everything must be done to unite the struggles of American and Mexican workers, to establish the firmest possible bonds of active solidarity, mutual support and coordinated action? Will supporting laws that persecute impoverished undocumented Mexican workers driven to seek jobs in the US help or hinder such unity? To ask the question is to answer it.

You state that you detest capitalism, yet you are essentially echoing the arguments put forward by the government and the media that defends this system. This is no accident. Any political perspective that is based on nationalist rather than internationalist foundations inevitably expresses the class interests not of working people, but of the capitalist ruling elite.

The only viable program upon which workers in the US, Mexico and all over the world can successfully confront multinational capital is one that unites them across national boundaries in a common struggle based upon a socialist and internationalist perspective.

In this sense, wishing the Mexican workers well as they stay home to wage a struggle to "fix their corrupt system," while American workers conduct their own fight in the US, is not only inadequate, but self-defeating. It is based upon patently false premises.

The conditions faced by Mexican workers and those confronting workers in the US are the product of one globally integrated capitalist system, not merely the expression of the national peculiarities of each country. In neither country can the system be "fixed" by a bit of pressure and national reforms, but only through a combined political struggle to put an end to capitalism. Such international unity is inconceivable outside of an implacable defense of immigrant workers.

Finally, you raise the issue of "reciprocity." Our position is that workers should be allowed to live and work in the country of their choice with full democratic and social rights. This is not just a position we take in the US, but in Europe, Australia, South Asia, Latin America and everywhere else on the planet.

But such freedom of movement for labor can be established only by the working class taking control and reorganizing production to serve human and social needs, rather than private profit. Socialism will create the conditions for the harmonious development of the productive forces internationally, making it possible to put an end to the gross inequality and poverty that compels millions of people to emigrate from their native lands.

What is required, above all, to bring this about is the building of a socialist and internationalist political movement of the working class.

Yours sincerely,
Bill Van Auken



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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