

US-Mexico border fence almost doubles

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The Department of Homeland Security reached its goal last September of completing nearly 70 miles of new fencing along the US-Mexico frontier, nearly doubling the length of continuous fencing on the border. Construction for 700 miles of fencing along the border, the largest expansion in the history of the American Southwest, is well underway.

The latest fence built in the Barry M. Goldwater Reservation (located in southwestern Arizona), is now the longest on the border, more than twice as long as the 14-mile fence between San Diego and Tijuana.

The construction of the most recent barrier is part of the Bush Administration's push for immigration "reform," which in reality means further repression of undocumented workers at home and a further militarization of the border. Part of the Secure Fence Act (signed into law in October 2006), the plan calls for 700 new miles of fencing, with a goal of 300 miles completed by the end of 2008.

The size of what is officially called "The Secure Border Initiative Net" (SBInet) is unprecedented. The DHS plans to build an elaborate system of fencing and electronic surveillance (a "virtual fence") that will police the 2,000 mile southwestern US-Mexico border by 2013 and eventually the 5,000 mile northern border, a distance twice the span of the Great Wall of China.

Private contractors like Boeing Co. stand to make a killing in profits. The company already has contracts worth \$67 million and must prove its competence in a series of tests before being allowed to construct the whole Southwestern border. Numerous problems have plagued Boeing's 28-mile "virtual fence" in Arizona, causing the company to miss a June deadline for the first stage of the fencing. Congress is also worried about the price tag of SBInet, which has been estimated to cost as much as \$30 billion.

The labyrinthine fencing that is being scheduled for construction in the San Pedro River in Arizona is described by Rubén Martínez, a professor at Loyola Marymount University, in an October 17 op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* as follows: "If the Department of Homeland Security and the Army Corps of Engineers have their way, a 'vehicle barrier' made of railroad ties will cut across the river (although it will have to be removed each year by the Monsoon floods, which could easily whisk it away). There are plans for permanent vehicle barriers just beyond the riverbed—steel posts sunk into 3 feet of concrete. And for 'pedestrian fencing' made of double rows of concrete-filled 14- to 17-foot-high bollards. And for the 'Sandia'-style variant, which uses panels of tight steel mesh. There will be a new 'all-weather' road, lighting and electronic surveillance towers."

Most of the planned fencing is in more urban areas, where the majority of immigrants cross the border. Thus, cross-border traffic

will be certainly pushed towards drier and more dangerous trails, where it is nearly certain the death toll will rise. For all the technological hype that the "new and improved" border will be receiving, it will only succeed in one aspect—making the journey even more hellish for undocumented workers as they are pushed deeper into the inhospitable deserts and canyons of the southwest.

A recent and tragic example of the consequences of this policy was uncovered during October's deadly wildfires in southern California, when Border Patrol agents discovered four charred bodies believed to be Mexican nationals in a remote section of the woods. Sgt. Mike Radovich of the San Diego Sheriff's Department was reported to have said, "I imagine we will be finding bodies into next year."

The WSWs spoke with Pedro Rios of the American Friends Services Committee, which supports immigrants and is based in San Diego. "Since 1994, when Operation Gatekeeper [the Clinton Administration's border enforcement policy] was implemented in the San Diego area, the migration flows have been pushed to dangerous desert and mountainous areas which have led to an alarming number of people that have died," Rios said. "I think that this year in Arizona alone, we were looking at 222 people that have died trying to cross into the US."

Rios went on to say, "In San Diego this year, we were looking at around 20 people that have died this fiscal year. So what that means is that the increase of enforcing border policies has not lessened the degree of people who are trying to come across into the US, but is only making conditions harsher."

Another proposal for the border, no less absurd and inhumane than the wall construction, has been to widen the Rio Grande River, along the Mexican border with Texas. The supposed justification for this project is that a deeper and wider river would somehow be more humane, since it would not require an oppressive wall to deter immigrants or wildlife from crossing. A wider river would increase the time it takes to cross the border by about 4 or 5 minutes, allowing Border Patrol agents in swift boats to spot migrants trying to swim across.

At a cost of \$40 million, the river widening project would construct a series of low dams at different parts of the river, which would gradually back up the flow of water and eventually widen the entire waterway. The riverbank would be dug out by engineers so the width of the river could be tripled to up to 500 feet, and deepening the river from 2 to 10 feet at its shallowest, and up to 24 feet at its deepest. The transformation of the Rio Grande, which in some parts is shallow enough to wade across, could ultimately lead to a greater number of people drowning.

Some of the border plans have been stalled, not by concerns over

the human costs, but by environmental concerns. In San Diego, California, the construction of a “triple fence” was stalled by ecological and environmental groups that filed a lawsuit against finalizing the 3.5 miles that would lead to the construction of the fence all the way to the beach area. The reason for the lawsuit was that the fence would damage rare fauna and flora that reside in those areas.

In a separate incident, bulldozers for construction were already in the federally protected San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area in Arizona when a federal judge temporarily halted construction in response to a joint appeal by the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife. The fence in question was said to be rushed forward without the requisite environmental and public-comment reviews.

However, in October Chertoff waived environmental regulation in the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area to allow construction to continue.

Many people in border communities have spoken out against the new plans. At a recent public hearing in Brownsville, Texas (in compliance with the Oct. 15 deadline set by US Customs and Border Protection to have public input on the proposed fence) about 100 people attended to voice their overwhelming opposition to the fence. Rev. Jerry Frank, representing thousands of members of Valley Interfaith, told the meeting that political leaders in Washington “are not representing the needs of the Valley”, and that the billions allocated for the fence would be better spent on children insurance programs, college education, teacher salaries, roads and levees.

At the University of Texas in Brownsville, students marched against a barrier that would literally sever off access to part of its campus. The Mayor of Brownsville, Pat Ahumada went even further, refusing land access to border fence survey crews. He has threatened an injunction if construction goes forward; the federal government has a 60-foot right of way to access the border, but must cross private and local public property to do so.

On the Tohono O’odham Reservation, traditional lands are bisected by the border with around 1,400 tribal members living on the Mexican side, and the construction of permanent vehicle barriers has already disrupted traditional cross-border pilgrimages. Tribal Chairman Ned Norris Jr. has reportedly told the government to build the fence only “over my dead body.”

Efforts to appease these widespread sentiments are already underway by local Democratic politicians. Democratic Representatives Solomon P. Ortiz, Ciro Rodriguez, and Ruben Hinojosa of Texas, and Representatives Raul Grijalva and Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona issued a mild letter to Department of Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff asking for an extension of the border fence’s “comment phase” for at least 2 more weeks.

The deadline for public comment came and went last October, despite complaints from a grassroots group called “No Border Wall” that the web site for the US Customs and Border Protection said “under construction” for days at a time, and the fax line was down.

Under the Real ID Act passed by Congress in 2005, Secretary Chertoff now has the absolute authority to waive prior

environmental regulations like the National Environmental Policy Act, allowing him to construct border fences in any area he deems necessary in order to protect “national security”. He has exercised this authority three times already, including the waiver for the San Pedro Riparian project.

Any efforts to overturn Chertoff’s new legal powers as described in the Real ID Act have already been ruled out by local Democrats. At a meeting last Friday, US Representative Henry Cuellar told an audience, “There were about 64 House members that voted in favor of the fence. With a new majority there are lots of new members that came in from districts that used to be Republican... so they are conservative Democrats. To try to repeal it, realistically, is not going to happen.”

Cuellar then noted that the deadline set by the government to construct 375 of the 700 miles of fencing was the end of 2008. According to the congressman, “[That time] gives us an opportunity to work with [Border Patrol] Chief Carillo and with the city and county so we can be proactive in working with to provide border security... In many ways [no fence] is good news but we still have to provide security.”

Even Representative Gabrielle Giffords, D-Arizona, whose district includes the San Pedro project, is against repealing Chertoff’s power. “Border security has to be a top concern in a state like this,” said C.J. Karamargin, Giffords’ press aide, in an interview with the *East Valley Tribune*. He explained that Giffords believes the federal government “should have the tools they need to do the job.”

The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are beholden to the same corporate interests that drive the current proposals to militarize the border and assault the working class in Mexico and America. While the Republicans may seem more xenophobic at times than their Democratic counterparts on immigration, the Democrats too utilize immigration as a way of dividing workers into “legal” or “illegal.”



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