

Interview with US immigrants' rights activist: "This administration has been terrible for us on many fronts"

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Julio Marroquin is the Inland Empire coordinator for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles (CHIRLA). The group was formed in the 1980s when large numbers of immigrants began to arrive in Los Angeles after American imperialism devastated the regions of Southeast Asia and Central and Latin America through wars and CIA-backed dictatorships.

According to the group's web site, for much of the last three decades CHIRLA has served as a "multiethnic collaborative of advocacy groups, social service providers, policy makers, and legal services organizations dedicated to advancing the human and civil rights of immigrants and refugees in Los Angeles."

The group has been involved with helping the recent influx of Central American children, including young mothers with infants. The WSWs interviewed Julio Marroquin about the conditions migrants are facing when they enter the United States and the process they undergo for deportation back to their respective countries.

He explained that a local church in San Bernardino was offering sanctuary for a group of families that had arrived from Central America. However, the help was only temporary, as a group of anti-immigrant protesters had descended on the church with signs and made the families feel unwelcome. The families had to be relocated out of fear for their safety.

WSWS: Can you tell us about the immigrants you have been assisting in the Inland Empire?

JM: There were about 40 families that arrived in the region. All of them were placed in a church in El Rialto. Everyone is accompanied by a mother. On Sunday, we had an anti-immigrant protest at the church.

When the immigration services tell us they have a group of families, it is only temporary, not for weeks or months. When they first arrive, we take care of whatever needs they have: food, clothing, etc. We connect them with their families, we help them with transportation tickets, but usually the families have money. We know there is a group of families arriving our way, but they will probably be sent to Orange County or somewhere nearby; they won't send any more our way because of what happened.

The anti-immigrant group told us we were breaking the law sheltering "illegals," but we don't consider human beings to be "illegal," only undocumented. So the church intervened to get rid of the families. The majority of our community is in support of us and sees it as a humanitarian crisis.

WSWS: How long are the families allowed to stay?

JM: The maximum time to help families is three days. As soon as

we help one group, another group moves in. We were concerned for their safety. They were holding signs and yelling, no personal threats, but if you were an immigrant, you would be afraid.

Once they are screened by immigration services they are free, but they have to report within 15 days. Most of the mothers wear GPS bracelets. If they don't show up to court, they get arrested. They have to show up to start the legal process or they get thrown away. Most families go to the East Coast. Very few stay. We provide legal services for them but the Justice 4 Immigrants Coalition has few resources to help. We have a friend who can represent them in court, but he's not a lawyer.

WSWS: How many families remain in the region?

JM: So far we have about 24 families in the region, and they are with families. The border patrol does not allow fathers through. If the youngsters are over 18 they are deported right away, and they are the ones the gangs are trying to recruit to Honduras. They are not treated as unaccompanied minors. It's a very tough situation.

Most of the mothers are 19, 20 or less. I have seen some very young. It is terrible. There are mothers that are too young to be mothers. The poverty in our countries is very bad. Kids don't have knowledge and they get pregnant. I am from El Salvador. When we were fighting the civil war, we were fighting to raise our standard of living. Now with the war on drugs, they deported many Salvadoran gangs back home and they grew. Mostly they prey on poor people, they force people to pay "rent." I know a bus driver who didn't have any money at the end of the day. Every time the bus goes into their territory they pay rent. If you don't pay them, they either kill someone in the family or you. It wasn't like that after the civil war; these gangs were a direct consequence of the policies of the United States. It became a major problem in El Salvador; there is no military power that can take them on. The economy is very much sustained by immigrants.

WSWS: What has been your opinion of the Obama Administration's deportations and overall immigration policy?

JM: This administration has been terrible for us on many fronts. When he was running for president, he was promising immigration reform in the first 100 days. We were very optimistic. He made that promise when they had control of both houses of Congress. But he changed his mind by appeasing the Republicans by passing laws that were developed by Bush. And then he was able to deport hundreds of thousands of people. If you had anything that resembled a criminal record, you were deported. Fifty thousand green card holders, and that's probably a low number, were deported for minor crimes. In some states a DUI is a felony, and you can get deported, and I've seen

lots of cases like that. I think he's been a huge problem for the immigrant community. We know immigration reform is not going to happen. At this point, my expectations are very low. He can stop the deportations, but people need amnesty to stay in the county. I am so demoralized with this administration.

WSWS: Why do people leave Central America to come to the United States?

JM: The main reason people leave Central America is because there are no jobs. The only jobs are maquiladoras, assembly-type jobs, hundreds of people, but they are low-paying jobs. The possibility to make a good living is very low unless you have a technical education. I have teachers in my family, lawyers making \$300 to \$400 a month. You buy gas, it's the same cost in the US. Fifteen years ago they changed the money of El Salvador. People used to exchange American dollars for Salvadoran money. Fifty US dollars equals 100 colones. Now, \$50 US is \$50 Salvadoran.

WSWS: What has been your experience with Border Patrol?

JM: We hear all kinds of stories. Some good, some bad. There is a formal complaint of immigration service, not just bad treatment but sexual abuse. There are several organizations making the complaint.

The WSWS also spoke to several workers in Los Angeles and Murrieta, California, the site of the recent anti-immigrant protests against Central American children. Contrary to what the corporate media espouses, most workers are sympathetic to the plight of the undocumented migrants and do not share the xenophobic sentiments that the political establishment encourages at every opportunity.

Renee Carter is from Los Angeles. She was formerly a security guard at a commercial building. As a result of an injury that broke both her legs, she lives on a measly state subsidy.

WSWS: What do you think about the immigrant children crisis?

RC: Children come first, no matter what color, country, shape or form. They're cold, they're hungry, they're fearful, running from a scary place to come here and have a better life. We should give them that. Some are sick, they don't have a place to lay their head.

WSWS: What do you think about Obama's plan to invest \$3.7 billion to reinforce the borders?

RC: He should take that money and feed these kids, clothe them, build homes for them, give them medicine, make them comfortable and take care of them. We are the USA, why can't they be here? Why can't they go to bed like he does every night? There shouldn't have been any cuts to food stamps either. Programs should be wide open for people in need. Nothing should be taken away from these programs, like Social Security, mental health care, etc. Look at the consequences for those who are left on the street with mental issues. It's disgusting and makes my stomach turn.

WSWS: And war?

RC: I think we should mind our own business. Stay out of people's business. It has nothing to do with us. Just bring our boys home, stop throwing away money they rob from us that we work for. In any case, I hope somebody would wake up one day and take care of these immigrant kids. Politicians are bickering at each other, but no one does anything for them.

WSWS: What do you think of the role of US imperialism in these countries?

RC: Who is the US to set foot in these countries or give advice? Politicians can't do right even in this country! That is more reason why these kids should be here being taken care of. We owe them that. We are human beings, people with hearts and feelings. We can't just walk away from that.

WSWS: The media has often portrayed Americans as xenophobes. What do you think about that?

RC: They want the blacks against the whites, the Chinese against the Latinos, etc. We're people with hearts and kindness. If I had it my way, all the things they've done onto us would be done on their skin. This is bull. I'm black, we are for these Latino kids and any other people who are mistreated like this.

Jennifer, from Murrieta, told our reporters, "My family is Italian and my grandfather came through Ellis Island. What is happening is maddening. I feel for these women and children who are going from one horrible situation to another. They should be treated kindly. They are just coming over for a better life."

After Jennifer expressed concern that there was "no money for Americans," our reporters described the difference between the working class, which has been made to suffer extreme conditions of austerity, and the ruling class, which has grown richer, while spending trillions on imperialist wars abroad.

Jennifer responded, "I want to see the president impeached. Why are we spending so much money on war? Sending our boys over there to fight, and many of them don't come back." After some discussion with our reporters, Jennifer agreed that the purpose of such wars was material and geopolitical interests.

A teacher, also from Murrieta, who did not wish to be named, said she was concerned about the welfare of the migrants, but worries that an influx of Spanish-speaking students will negatively impact district resources that are already stretched so thin. "We barely have enough to get by with our students, how are we supposed to handle more students with special language needs?" Our reporters noted that there were trillions of dollars to fund endless imperialist wars abroad, or to bail out the bankers, the very social layer that created the current economic crisis. She took material from our reporters and expressed interest in reading the wsws.

Our reporters also spoke with a school worker who wished to remain anonymous. She is from El Salvador. She briefly spoke with the WSWS about her journey to the United States.

"I left El Salvador a long time ago. It is a very, very dangerous country. The American government has been deporting many, many Salvadorans back to El Salvador, and then these people form gangs that are involved with drugs, murder, everything you can think of.

"These children that are coming here are facing such terrible conditions. I was watching the news last night. They showed three young kids. One was only six years old. Why do their parents make them go through this? Things must be so bad at home that they're willing to risk their children making this long and dangerous journey here. Staying in their home country means getting killed.

"It's hard enough for adults like me to make the journey through Guatemala, Mexico and into the US. How much more difficult is it for these kids?"



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