

Family members of disappeared Mexican students appeal for support in US

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Family members and friends of the 43 student teachers kidnapped in September from Guerrerro, Mexico, are touring throughout the United States to speak out on their disappearance.

On April 12 and 13, Maria de Jesus, mother of 19-year-old Jose Eduardo, and Cruz Bautista, uncle of 20-year-old Benjamin Ausencio Bautista, spoke at several locations throughout Detroit, Michigan.

On the morning of the 12th, parishioners gathered to hear their story at historic Saint Anne de Detroit Catholic Church, in Detroit's Southwest neighborhood, the center of the city's Mexican-American population. Signs covered the church lawn, bearing the names and ages of the disappeared.

This was the first event on the Detroit leg of *Caravana43*, as the tour is known. It was immediately followed by a two-mile march from Saint Anne's to Detroit's Clark Park, attended by nearly 100 community members.

On September 26, 2014, police in the town of Iguala, in Mexico's impoverished southern state of Guerrero, violently attacked a group of some 80 young student teachers, leaving at least six dead, 17 wounded and 43 "disappeared." Among the disappeared were Jose Eduardo and Benjamin Ausencio Bautista.

The students, from the Ayotzinapa Rural Normal School, had been protesting against state cuts to their college and raising funds for a demonstration in Mexico City marking the anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, which left hundreds of students and civilians dead in one of the worst atrocities of modern Mexican history.

The families are touring the United States to expose Mexican political corruption, to demand the return of their children—as the families do not accept the Mexican government's claim that the kidnapped were murdered—and to speak out against the Merida Initiative, under which the US has supplied some \$2 billion in arms aid to the country, while training security forces and sending US "advisors" across the border.

Caravana43 is a project which aims to facilitate the travel of friends and family members of the missing across America in order to raise awareness about Mexican human rights issues.

Three caravans departed from Texas on March 16, where they then branched out to reach Pacific, Central and Atlantic region

states; they will converge at a summit in New York City on April 26, the seven-month anniversary of the disappearance, having visited over 50 cities in more than 30 states. Twelve friends and family members rotate amongst the three caravans.

Maria de Jesus, quietly smiling when asked by the WSWs about her son, described Jose and his life-long desire to become a teacher, "[Jose] is a very hard worker. He was the one who took care of his younger siblings—his brother is 15 and his sister is 12. He would teach them how to study. He was my first son, and as a mother you always want the best for your child. He knows how to cook, to work very hard, to do brickwork and build a home. He knows about agriculture. He was well known in the village, and people who worked with him are very saddened by his disappearance. When they see the work that he did, they are reminded and become sad. It's very hard for them to go day by day, without new information."

Maria said that when her son became a student, he had no idea that the government of President Peña Nieto had a political agenda of eliminating the *normalista* schools, as the rural teachers colleges are known. The disappearance of the 43 took place during his first month at the school.

"He was very happy," she said. "That was his natural vocation: to be an educator. And it was something in him since he was young, to teach small children. My husband's family lives outside the city, in a rural area, so he would see the poverty there and he always wanted to help them. He saw education as a way to rise out of poverty. He had hope and vision to change people's situations."

The Mexican Normal schools are a legacy of the Mexican Revolution which began in 1910. They are viewed by the government as a hotbed for "leftist" activity. Cruz Bautista, a school teacher, and himself a graduate of a Normal school, said that the attack on these institutions was part of a move to privatize Mexican education.

"Those that want to systemize education say the private schools are best," he said. "They want to force English language learning. We are from the original communities of Mexico that speak 90 percent indigenous languages, and now the government wants students to learn a third language, English. We have been resisting this as well. We are against this education reform. We won't allow them to erase our

identity.”

Bautista said that when public schools are shut in rural areas and replaced by private schools, those sent to teach in the new schools lack the “context to understand the lives of rural families that they teach.” The teachers in the normal schools, on the other hand, “know the context, they encourage families and students to fight for their rights and take care of their communities.

Some of the schools lack educational materials and require the parents, often unemployed or low-paid workers, to pay a quota for building maintenance and supplies, he explained.

“In Guerrero, education is marginalized and abandoned,” said Bautista. “In our constitution there is an article that says education should be free and supplies and building maintenance should be paid for by the government ... but in real life these laws aren’t followed.”

When asked what life is like in Guerrero, Maria responded, “There is a lot of poverty, few schools, and many communities without water. They have to go to the river to get water. They can only farm during the rainy season, because they don’t have an irrigation system. They grow corn, beans, squash, and cilantro.”

The WSWs explained to Maria the current struggles with water availability in Detroit, where several thousand homes have had their services cut off in a continuing campaign to privatize the water system.

“I definitely see a link between the two countries [and what their workers face],” she replied. “I never thought the US would go through the same thing Mexico is going through.”

The daily threats to the lives and safety of the Mexican people was a consistent theme in both the press conferences and interviews over the two-day period. “Political representatives do not care about what has happened or what is happening even though the situation has created a global echo, because no one cares about our security or safety,” said Bautista. “The government is only focused on business and money, and keeps reelecting the same parties. We’ve always known that the history of the government is one of corruption, and the history of the parties as well.”

He continued: “The governments and political officials are working with the drug organizations. They keep saying that the criminal leaders attacked the students, but we have seen videos and pictures and heard testimony from students, that the police and the federal government attacked them. There is obvious evidence that the narcos are working with the federal police, so they are basically one and the same.”

Maria spoke passionately about police violence and the obstacles the government has created to prevent an investigation into the disappearance, “When they oppressed our young people they didn’t ask for our permission, but they tell us we can’t go places [to look for them] because we don’t have a search warrant,” she said. “These young people were taken away by our own government—shot at. Our children were shot

at. They suffered that persecution by police officers.”

Those who decided to join the tour were motivated by the need to secure a better life for Mexican youth, within which they can study freely without fear of violence. “As parents we have said we don’t care for our own lives anymore,” said Maria. “We cannot continue. We are very sad, crying in desperation and depressed; that’s why we couldn’t stay at home. We left home to spread the message. We are asked, ‘Are you tired?’ No. It’s an urgent matter; we seek to find these lives.”

Maria, added, “If it was the son of a government official, they would search heaven and earth, but not for us, because we are poor.”

“The US holds a lot of responsibility for what’s happening in Mexico,” she said, citing the flow of weapons across the border and into the hands of the drug cartels. Pointing out that Obama and Peña Nieto have met repeatedly, she added, “There is some kind of agreement between them. ... If Obama knows what’s taking place, why doesn’t he do anything?”

The role of mass poverty in the development of drug trafficking in Mexico was stressed by Bautista. Instead of fighting an endless drug war, he thinks the Mexican government should be funding education and jobs, “The poverty in Mexico is very intense. The minimum wage is 70 pesos: about 4 US dollars an hour, and prices for groceries are disproportionately high.”

When Bautista was asked by a press conference attendee what can be done, he answered: “There are many injustices that come to students, but we don’t know *why* students are always targeted. There’s always an effort to push down the lower classes and young people. We demand our government officials pass laws that respect the lives of youth. We demand freedom of expression. Many journalists have been harassed as well, and censored.”

He expressed his concern that Mexican media does not report truthfully and called for independent media to visit Mexico to learn what is happening there. “We’ve said before that when we go to rural areas and travel to the US, we always talk about our rights. Each one must fight for their rights. This is our message.”

This message delivered by the relatives of the Mexican students has found enormous resonance in the US under conditions in which American workers and youth are themselves confronting a wave of police killings, attacks on public education and a generalized assault on basic democratic rights.



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