

“The rich have all the resources and the money but still so many are struggling”

Leader of group of deported US veterans in Mexico speaks out

Norisa Diaz, Renae Cassimeda
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Thousands of veterans who have served in Washington’s wars are among those deported under the ongoing Obama-Trump deportation program. Deported veterans have fought as far back as the US wars in Vietnam and Korea, while greater numbers of deportees have been deployed in the Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The fact that these soldiers have served the armies of American imperialism does not protect them and their families from the bipartisan anti-immigrant attack.

The immigration advocacy group We Are One America reports that nearly 6.5% of the US Armed Forces are immigrants. A recent panel on deported veterans in San Diego reported that of the 170,000 immigrant veterans in California, nearly 30,000 are un-naturalized and can face deportation at any time.

Once deported, the only means by which they have to return to the United States is in a body bag. The rendering of honors in a military funeral is federally mandated by law to be provided for any deceased veteran of United States Armed Forces. The burial ceremony includes honor guard detail, the playing of taps, firing of three volleys from rifles, and the folding and presenting of the United States flag.

The *World Socialist Web Sites* spoke to Hector Barajas, deported veteran and founder of the Deported Veteran Support House in Tijuana, Mexico, also known as “The Bunker.” Barajas emigrated to the US as a youth, obtained his green card as a teenager, and enlisted in the military. He served from 1995 to 2001 and, following a minor crime, was deported in 2004 and again in 2010.

WSWS: What is life like for a deported veteran, and

how many deported veterans would you estimate exist?

Barajas: Life in general is difficult, especially your economic situation, you don’t make the same money you used to make. You’re separated from your family, your home, and you’re in a different place.

Here in Mexico, one trend on getting by is working at call centers, or the tourist areas where they can use their English. It’s even more difficult here in Mexico. Once you’re over 50, you’re not employable. They’d rather hire an 18-year-old. The older people survive by selling things.

As for how many veterans live here, we have no idea. Veterans have been deported since 1996. It could be hundreds or thousands. There is no way to tell

WSWS: Could you describe the relationship between war trauma and the often minor crimes that provoke deportation?

Barajas: Some have faced multiple deployments over years, and have difficulties integrating. You can’t just separate a person from the military one day to the next. It’s the same thing with veterans coming back nowadays.

One thing I’m seeing is that most of my vets being deported from immigrant communities return back to communities that don’t have the resources for them. Often, these are communities with gangs and drugs. They are put back into situations and environments that are not healthy and helpful.

WSWS: The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced earlier this year it will be closing 1,100 facilities across the country. Do you believe both citizens and non-citizens face the same fundamental

challenge, a government that is indifferent to their suffering?

Barajas: For all veterans in general, benefits are not easy to access. Once you're deported it makes it far more difficult.

Could the government do a lot better? Absolutely. People are risking their lives, and this is how they are treated. Twenty-two veterans take their lives every day because they can't handle living in this world.

We are such a rich country in resources. How do we have people struggling to get health care? The rich have all the resources and the money, but still so many are struggling.

WSWS: Have you heard the recent story of Brian Easley, the veteran who was killed by police when he held up a Wells Fargo bank with the single demand of reinstating his \$892/month disability following an injury while on deployment in Iraq to support himself and his daughter?

Barajas: No I haven't heard of him, but if you're going to take a person's bread and water away, how do they expect them to survive?

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Many immigrants are lied to by military recruiters who lead them to believe their service begins a naturalization process. Others are actually told that their naturalization is automatic upon joining. Most are completely unaware that their military service provides no basis for obtaining citizenship and that their service to the Armed Forces will not prevent their deportation once their green card expires.

Once their green card expires during active duty, immigrant soldiers are "honorably discharged." They remain in the United States at risk of deportation at any time, and they are not provided an attorney. Additionally and in many cases, however, deportation occurs in conjunction with minor offenses, the result of tougher immigration laws such as "Secure Communities," which authorizes the police to check the immigration status of people booked into local jails, even for a crime like driving under the influence.

These punitive laws were introduced during the Bush administration and were expanded under Obama, who deported 2.7 million immigrants, including thousands of veterans. For many veterans, harsh living conditions such as unemployment and psychological trauma produce mental and physical difficulties that in some

cases lead to crime.

Statistics on incarcerated veterans reveal the immense difficulties of adjusting to civilian life. A report published in July 2016 by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) showed that veterans are more likely than civilians to be serving time for violent offenses, to have used intravenous drugs, and to have gone through divorce. More than half of incarcerated veterans served during periods of war, with over a quarter having experienced combat.

At a recent panel on immigration, San Diego Democratic Congressman Juan Vargas boosted himself as a champion of House Bill 2761, known as Healthcare Opportunities for Patriots in Exile (HOPE) Act of 2017. The bill would allow deported veterans be allowed to enter the US to obtain health services, but would force them to return to their home country afterward. This pathetic "compromise" with the Trump administration sums up the reactionary character of the Democratic Party, including its Latino representatives who cynically posture as defenders of immigrants.

The irony behind Congressman Vargas's proposal is that the VA is shuttering its health facilities, causing untold hardship for veterans, both immigrant and non-immigrant alike. This past spring, VA Secretary David Shulkin announced the VA planned to close more than 1,110 of its facilities to pursue the privatization of veteran health care. Claims that 430 were vacant and another 735 "underutilized" were used to save the federal government \$25 million every year to maintain.



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