

What is behind the 57-hour San Diego/Tijuana border closure and renovation?

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The US General Services Administration is planning a 57-hour border closure and expansion at the US/Mexico San Ysidro Port of Entry in San Diego, California later this month. From 3 a.m. Saturday, September 23 until noon on Monday, September 25, all southbound car traffic into Tijuana will be halted.

The closure is expected to affect tens of thousands of immigrant families at the busiest border crossing in the world. Over the long weekend traffic is to be redirected to the Otay Mesa crossing, a port of entry some 10 miles away which has far less capacity.

The closure is part of a larger \$741 million border renovation which is scheduled for completion in 2019. The September renovations involve a realignment and expansion of Interstate 5 southbound freeway lanes, which will double from five to 10, directing traffic from San Diego's San Ysidro port into Mexico's El Chaparral Port of Entry. Additionally, eight northbound vehicle inspection lanes will be added to San Ysidro, resulting in a total of 33 northbound lanes. The multiyear expansion will also include an additional 22-lane pedestrian inspection facility.

The San Ysidro Port of Entry is the busiest land border crossing in the world, with San Diego-Tijuana border region trade representing a \$231 billion economy with over 5 million residents and nearly 2 million workers. Three hundred sixty-five days a year, 70,000 passenger vehicles, 20,000 pedestrians, and 4,000 commercial trucks cross back and forth.

Every day nearly 1 million people cross the US-Mexico border in both directions at 48 entry points along the nearly 2,000-mile-long border that extends along the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

The multiyear expansion is backed by the region's top binational business leaders and politicians, including San Diego's Republican mayor Kevin Faulconer and Tijuana mayor Juan Manuel Gastelum (PAN). Both mayors are involved in the advocacy group, Smart Border Coalition (SBC), which also includes top representatives from the real estate, manufacturing, health care, technology, solar energy, higher education, retail and telecommunications industries.

The expansion is being hailed by the Tijuana and San Diego media as a long overdue solution to the long border waits that workers and their families must tack on to the beginning and end of their day. Waits average two hours for each crossing, while nearly every commuter reports the occasional three- to four-hour wait time. The border dominates and divides all aspects of life from work and school to leisure activities, retail and groceries. Most K-12 grade schools along the border start closer to 9 a.m. to account for crossing time.

However, the border renovations are in no way directed at improving the quality of life of the working people and families who are burdened by it daily, but are directed at facilitating the smoother flow of capital and labor to be more efficiently exploited by multinational corporations.

Leaders of the SBC wrote in a *San Diego Union Tribune* opinion piece, "We are a constellation of powerful industries in a productive cross-border partnership. In Tijuana, we showcase the world's largest medical device cluster and Mexico's top aerospace, electronics and defense clusters, many of which have administration and operations facilities on the US side of the border. There are nearly 600 export manufacturing plants and 50 contract manufacturing options meeting world-class quality standards within a 15-mile radius south of the San Ysidro port of entry ..."

Revealing the true nature of the border expansion, they write, "From a purely commercial perspective, our borders are America's cash registers. All exports and imports must pass through them. No place else in the US, however, could make their customers wait in line every day for two hours and stay in business."

The coalition cites a San Diego Association of Governments' study, "Economic Impacts of Wait Times at the San Diego-Baja California Border," which outlines that border traffic is estimated to cost corporations \$6 billion annually in gross output.

What is meant by a "Smart" border is one that allows for higher traffic volumes while beefing up security measures and further militarizing Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The industries

and corporations lobbying for a “Smart” border are the very ones who benefit from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect July 1, 1989 to open up the markets of Canada and Mexico to US and foreign investors.

NAFTA is currently being renegotiated at the request of the Trump administration and in July of this year Congressional testimony was heard from corporations invested in the “modernization” of NAFTA for a “21st Century NAFTA.”

Having greatly benefited from the agreement, the corporate leaders requested that updates to NAFTA go much deeper in providing unbridled market access, that the US government must do more to curb practices that give state-owned firms access to more markets, and emphasized that borders be made cheaper and easier to cross for the export of goods and services, including e-commerce.

Amgad Shehata, senior vice president of Global Borders Policy at United Parcel Service (UPS), commented, “Will [the updated] NAFTA open up trade lanes between the three countries? Restrictions, particularly by Mexico, are impacting UPS’s ability to bring American goods to consumers beyond the border. These restrictions add barriers and unnecessary complications and cost to the import-export process for our customers. ... The administration should compel Mexico to lift entirely or, at minimum, raise the defined weight of an express shipment to the internationally recognized 70 kilos.”

Gustavo Pupo-Mayo with the TV Association of Programmers Latin America (TAP) testified:

“As an industry, we are firm believers that the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, should be maintained but strengthened because its current provisions have fallen short of fully and adequately protecting the interest of the US pay television programmers in Mexico represented by TAP. ...”

Albert Zapanta, major general of the United States-Mexico Chamber of Commerce, told Congress: “In 2016 the United States exported \$231 billion to Mexico, which is more than it did to the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy combined. And nearly twice as much as it did to China. In agriculture, NAFTA provides the third largest destination for American products and crops. It is also telling to note that the current \$500 billion trade gap was created by the relocation of American manufacturing and technology-based business out of the NAFTA partnership.”

The efficiency by which goods and labor can pass through the border is of immense interest to shareholders in the region, particularly within San Diego’s biotechnology, defense, pharmaceutical, software and communications sectors which account for nearly 30 percent of the areas workforce or 400,000 jobs. The largest drone manufacturer in North America, 3D Robotics, operates on both sides of the border to take advantage of the cheaper manufacturing costs in Tijuana.

US-based corporations are seeking even easier access to labor

in Mexico, which is on average 40 percent cheaper than in the US with a daily minimum wage of approximately \$5 USD. Half of Mexico’s 127 million residents do not earn enough to meet basic needs, while one in five suffers from hunger. Half of Mexico’s children live in poverty and a United Nations study found that 14 percent of children suffer from stunted growth as a result of malnutrition.

A recent study by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) found that on the other pole of society, the top 10 percent of Mexico’s highest earning families capture two-thirds of the nation’s income.

The need to expedite the flow of labor and capital at the US/Mexico border is yet another expression of the productive forces bursting through the seams of the nation state. Capitalist production has turned the entirety of the world into a single economic organism which continues to be divided up into nation states controlled by competing capitalist elites.

Calls for closed borders or the attempt by the Trump administration to stoke up nationalistic and anti-immigrant sentiment, are a desperate and noxious attempt to keep the working class divided.

Workers have the right to live and work wherever they choose with full citizenship rights, something they are denied under the capitalist system. While the material conditions exist and the conditions for the truly global integration of the economy have been laid, only the fight for a socialist society which unites the working class internationally can bring about such a change.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fights for an end to the nation-state system and the elimination of borders which, in the SBC’s own words, function as cash registers for the ruling elite, increasing the exploitation and division of the international working class. We urge workers on both sides of the US-Mexico border to take up the fight for socialism by joining the SEP.



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