

Central American asylum seekers forced to wait for months at US-Mexico border

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WSWS reporters spoke last weekend to members of the Central American caravan who have been waiting in a queue for months, at the West pedestrian entrance of the San Ysidro border crossing in Tijuana, for US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) to begin processing their asylum claims.

Just last month the US military and CBP agents fired tear gas, rubber bullets and flash bang grenades at desperate workers and their families at the San Ysidro Port of entry. It is estimated that between six and seven thousand immigrants from Mexico and Central America are currently in Tijuana.

Most of the caravan members spoke of feared repercussions from gangs they had fled and asked that their faces not be photographed.

Guillermo, 30, left Honduras with his wife, 12-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter, following a death threat from a local gang that had been extorting him and recently murdered two of his cousins.

The gangs had been extorting increasing amounts of money from his convenience store, so much so that very little was left for his family. “I could not give them what they wanted.” One day in June, Guillermo received notice that if he did not pay the amount demanded, he would be killed. He went home and told his wife and children they were leaving that day.

Guillermo explained that two of his first cousins, who lived just two blocks away from him, were killed by “las maras,” members of the MS-13 gang, within a month of one another. They both worked for a taxi service and the gang that was extorting them demanded more payment.

Guillermo showed WSWs reporters the photos of the mutilated bodies of his cousins, which he hoped would assist with his family’s asylum claim. One man had a long cross cut through his abdomen, from which his intestines had been removed, and another had been hogtied and left in an alley to rot, where authorities found

him.

He told reporters that he was fortunate to have been given a warning, one that his cousins had not received. “They were very close family, we are lucky that we got out,” Guillermo said.

The family has been in Mexico for nearly six months and only arrived in Tijuana in the last month. While running low on food and supplies, Guillermo had to find work in Chiapas for a while before the family could make their way to Tijuana.

Guillermo and his family have joined a list of thousands, and have been waiting for their number to be called on the West Port of Entry from Tijuana into Southern California. He expressed frustration over receiving conflicting and contradictory information from legal counselors. “There are some that give us hope and some that make it seem impossible.”

“I want people in the US to know there are many good and hard-working people here, that one person’s actions do not represent the whole.”

Manuel, a 52-year-old Honduran man, told reporters that he and his 10-year-old son had been in Tijuana for a little over a month and had seen immigration officials service just a few hundred people in that time. “When we arrived on November 12, they were at number 1025, and a month later they are only at 1308,” he said. Manuel, who did not wish to be photographed, said he sold hot dogs at a cart in Honduras and was also being extorted and threatened by “las maras,” which prompted their journey.

A small tent outside the San Ysidro port of entry has been taking names and distributing queue numbers to new arrivals, who must continually check on the numbers being serviced daily. However, with the recent change in venue to “El Barretal,” an abandoned nightclub turned into a makeshift shelter, a 35-minute drive away from the port of entry, constant check-ins are difficult.

Interactions between US Customs and Border Patrol and

new arrivals are facilitated by Grupo Beta, which consists of volunteers who are themselves asylum seekers waiting for their own numbers to be called by immigration officials. Once their number is called a separate volunteer will step up to replace them.

Immigration volunteers working with Al Otro Lado and other agencies, who provide legal advice to the caravan in Tijuana, stated that the entire number ledger system being used by CBP is in violation of international asylum and refugee law and that it is illegal for the US to decide it is only going to process a certain number, now 200-300 per month.

“Asylum seekers should be able to present themselves at a port of entry and have their asylum claim processed and be granted entry—it is irrelevant if in the end their case is accepted or denied. By law, they must be granted safe entry while they await proceedings,” one attorney explained to a group of volunteers.

“We help them navigate through hell... we tell them they will be stripped down, separated from their children, kept in Hielera (Icebox) for its freezing temperatures, fed two small frozen burritos a day; if your children were healthy, expect them to get sick in there.”

Just last week, seven-year-old Jackeline Caal died in the custody of CBP. Antelope Wells, the CBP facility where she had become extremely ill, had no medical personnel and was entirely unprepared to receive refugees in family groups. Her death was a direct consequence of the punishing and ruthless repression of immigrants by the Trump administration.

Separated from parents and thrown into immigration prisons where temperatures are freezing, the conditions faced by migrants and their children are deliberately calibrated for the purpose of maximizing their suffering.

Bowing to Trump, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has already made clear that Mexico will continue to prevent immigrants from reaching the US. Washington and Mexico City are currently negotiating a deal that would force Central Americans applying for asylum with the US to remain in Mexico during the process, also known as “Remain in Mexico.”

Advocates and legal counselors warn that a “Remain in Mexico” policy would allow Mexico to becoming what is known by asylum law as a “safe third country.” Such a designation would allow US immigration officials to argue in the future that asylum in the United States is no longer necessary if they have “safety” in Mexico.

During the first three months of the year alone in Mexico, 7,667 murders were reported, an average of 85 a

day, according the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security (SESNESP).

Nearly 28 million people live in extreme poverty in Mexico, the majority of whom are concentrated in rural areas. Half of Mexico’s 127 million residents do not earn enough to meet basic needs, and one in five suffers from hunger. Over 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.

The stark reality that is avoided in all the coverage of the Central American caravan is that there are thousands of Mexicans, particularly from rural areas, who are seeking asylum in the United States, fleeing the same conditions as their Central American counterparts, and they have also spent endless months in Tijuana.

The migrants and their supporters worldwide must reject entirely whatever “deal” is being worked out by Trump and AMLO, which will only exacerbate the violent repression of immigrants at Mexico’s southern border.

Only a movement by the international working class can defend the rights of the asylum seekers. Among the demands of such a movement must be the safe passage and legal entry for all caravan participants into the United States, the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the dismantling of the militarized border region, the immediate liberation of all immigrants detained in the United States, the provision of jobs, homes, health care and educational opportunities to the caravan participants and all immigrants, and a multi-trillion-dollar program to rebuild Central America, to be paid for by expropriating the wealth of America’s billionaires.



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