

“My story belongs to every single human being who has sacrificed and risked their life in search of a better life”

Mexican migrant details harrowing journey across the Sonoran desert following deportation

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WSWS reporters spoke with Miguel, a Mexican migrant who wished to share his story, which demonstrates the plight of immigrants who make the treacherous journey through the deserts along the US-Mexico border region as their last option in search of a better life.

In his story, the threats posed by an unforgiving terrain and climate are only a portion of a dangerous landscape filled with the Mexican police, cartel thugs and the US border patrol.

Miguel describes an intricate and complex underground network requiring the tacit cooperation of both governments along with groups of thugs, human smugglers and drug traffickers.

The demand for cheap and disposable labor in the fields, plants and slaughterhouses in the North is paid for by migrants with an immense loss of life. Those who make it across the border are faced with the constant threat of deportation and severe economic exploitation, with little chance of permanent legal protection in the US. The following interview is the harrowing tale of the hell that tens of thousands of migrants have to endure to return to their families or seek a better life. For many thousands, their pursuit ends when they perish in the desert.

Arrival, deportation and decision to cross

WSWS: When did you emigrate to the United States?

Miguel: The first time I emigrated to the US was when I was 11 years old, on October 21, 1998. I came to the US through a port of entry and someone was paid to bring me here. As matter of fact, I was here at the border with my mom in hopes of getting across, but my mom got caught. She was arrested and sent back. I lived with my brother for four years until I was fifteen, when I moved out on my own.

The second time was through the desert in 2010 when I was 24 years old.

Unfortunately, I found myself in one of those situations, as they say, “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” My cousin and I were trying to live a normal life, going out dining, just, you know, living like a normal person here in the United States, when we got into an altercation with an undercover officer. He began to ask us for our documents for no apparent reason.

They found out that I did not have identification. They found out that I

was here illegally and arrested me. They never read my rights. I was in detention for six days. I was not allowed to speak to my family for six days. Then they dropped me off at the border and sent me off on my way. Never saw an immigration lawyer. They never provided me with an opportunity to know my rights or even to know where I was. They practically just cut me loose at the border. They did this also to my cousin, who was with me at the time.

WSWS: How long were you in Mexico before you came back through the desert?

Miguel: I was in Mexico for about two weeks. I had to gather money through family members. I had to find somebody who would bring me over here.

I knew that I couldn’t get through a port of entry because it would be detrimental if I ever got caught crossing. It would bar me for life from coming to the United States. I was in the middle of my semester at a community college. I had finals, I had homework, I had a job, and I had a life here in the US. My life is here. I needed to come back to resume my life here.

I was desperate and the easiest and cheapest way, although riskiest, was this guy who offered to bring us here in three days. We were told it was going to be a walk. They never told us it was going to be an extreme hike through the mountains and desert. They told us it was going to be a three-day walk where we would walk for a couple of hours and then rest. They made it seem like it was going to be a field trip, like something fun.

They told us, “You’ve probably already done this when you go hiking. You’re not going to risk anything, and you’re going to make it across the border. Once we get there to Arizona, you’re going to get picked up and someone is going to drive you to Los Angeles. Your family members need to meet you there with the money so that you can be released.”

And I mean released, as in they will keep you if they don’t pay, literally, against your will. It was already a dangerous situation to begin with. I knew there was going to be a big risk from the start, but I had to do what I had to do. I wanted to come back and resume my life here. I didn’t see myself living in Mexico because of the violence, because of the lack of opportunities, and because I was pursuing my education. I just could not let all that go. I did not want to give up on my dream of becoming someone or doing something that mattered, so I took the risk and went ahead and met the people who were going to get us across the border.

Crossing the desert

We traveled from Tijuana all the way to Piedras Negras, which is close to the border with Arizona. From there they shuttled us as close as they could to a mountainous region on the Mexican side. As a matter of fact, we were escorted by Mexican police to this area. It was about one in the morning when we got to the mountainous region.

Once we got to the mountainous region there was a sort of roadblock where the Mexican military was taking money for every single vehicle that came to drop off people at the border. The authorities knew what was going on. They were, practically, taking a bribe from everybody. Our driver asked everyone in the car to come up with money.

Everybody in the car pays, and if you don't pay, they literally kick you out of the vehicle. You are not allowed to go farther. They told us there was a fee for every single step along the way, all the way.

After the checkpoint, we hike up the mountain. We hide under some rocks and we wait a couple of hours. All we had on us at this point was a backpack filled with canned food, cookies, dried fruit and whatever else we could fit in there, enough to last us three days. After a couple of hours of waiting in the cold, the guy came and told us we had to go.

They handed us pieces of carpet that you had to tie on the bottom of your shoes and they explained to us that this was to prevent us from leaving our footprints. They gathered at least 60 people and we began walking at 3 a.m. It took us four hours to barely get to the point of crossing to the US.

Once we got to the point of no return the guy, called "coyote," gave us a little pep talk. He told us, "Guys, we are going to get through this together. We are not going to leave anybody behind. If you are tired let me know. If you think you're not going to make it, this is your last chance to go back."

They wanted us to feel good and to feel safe. I had never done this. I was a little nervous and scared. I did not know what to expect, but I knew it was a risk that I needed to take. We walked for about a hundred feet and the guy told us, "Alright, you are now in the United States." I was a little taken aback. There was no metal fence, absolutely nothing at all. I am used to seeing the big giant fence in San Diego. I grew up in San Diego, I know what it looks like. I was shocked.

We kept walking. That night we walked for 12 hours straight until the following day with no rest. That is when I realized that everything he told us about resting and that it was going to be easy—it was not going to be that easy. It was brutal. It was very difficult.

In the first five hours of our hike into the United States side, there were six people who could not walk anymore. They were simply out of shape or they felt hurt. We left them, six out of the group. They just could not walk anymore. They said, "We can't walk anymore. Will you wait for us?" The coyote practically said, "We are not going to be able to rest. I'm really sorry, we have to keep going. They're watching us. They know we are here, so we can't stop. We have to walk. We still have at least six more hours. If you can't walk anymore, this is your time to stay here. Somebody will come and pick you up."

Honestly, I don't know if that was the case. I highly doubt it, I'm afraid. Either these people were caught or walked back. I really don't know what happened to these people, but there was nobody coming. Absolutely not.

We were already in the middle of nowhere in the mountains. I was afraid about what would happen to these people, but we continued on. Every so often, there was a couple of people that could not walk anymore, that could not go farther. It is just heartbreaking, knowing that these people run the risk of dying. You hear so many stories of people that were never found. It was just so heartbreaking. I wanted to quit through the entire six days so many times.

WSWS: Did it take six days? How long did it take?

Miguel: Initially, it was going to take three days, but we encountered some problems. We walked the full three days and a vehicle did pick us up. By this point, the group was already at 40 people out of the initial 60 people. We had lost at least 20 people.

We piled up in the pick-up truck everywhere we could, on the back, on the side, even on the hood. We got in the truck and started driving. They told us, "This is it, we're going to take you to a location and from there we are going to split in different vehicles," but the truck broke down. We had to discard the truck and compensate for the distance by walking.

At that point, we didn't have any food or water left because we only packed enough for three days. That was one of the most brutal nights we experienced because it was really cold. It was so cold. People who had water couldn't even drink it because it was frozen. We would walk 30 minutes and rest five, walk 30 and rest five. We would lay down one on top of another because it was so cold.

It was literally a pile of bodies. It was uncomfortable and it was weird, but it was what we had to do to keep warm. We were afraid we were going to die because it was so cold. There was a point where you're bones locked and your knees didn't want to move. You literally had to drag somebody to help them get up. We were tired, hungry and thirsty, but we had to keep walking until the next day. At night it is really cold and dark, and during the day it is extremely hot. For the next three days, we dragged our feet across the desert. I guess the coyote, the guy guiding us, didn't know where he was going. I'm sure he didn't know the area.

On the fifth day, of the 40 that had made it to the third day, only 20 remained.

Around 2 p.m., we ran into two people who had been lost for five days. They were in really bad shape. They said they had been trying to wave down border patrol agents, but they would just drive by and not arrest them or pick them up. They were so desperate, they wanted to get caught so that could get water or food, or at least be sent back alive.

They just left them there to die. I had a very different idea of the US government back then. I thought that they were doing some good things. I had some faith, but that day something inside me changed. It was just very difficult to wrestle with the idea that somebody could be as heartless as to leave somebody hungry, cold and afraid there in the middle of nowhere, practically, to die. It was a very difficult moment for me. I had just lost all faith in the government completely.

That same night, we were walking through the desert and we encountered some people who were dressed in military gear, with machine guns, rifles, guns and had their faces covered with ski masks. They were all speaking Spanish. Initially, I thought it was the US military. I thought it was either the Border Patrol or the US military, but to our surprise, it was Mexicans working for the drug cartel.

They kicked us and threw us on the ground. They put us on our knees, made us put our hands on our heads, and lined us up. They beat up and roughed up the coyote that was with us. They put him on his knees and pointed a gun at his face. I was listening in on their conversation and they were telling him, "Why are you here? Why are you walking down this path? You're not supposed to be here." And the guy said, "I already spoke to your boss. They allowed us to come through here. We just lost our truck that is why we are not in a vehicle."

They beat him up some more and told him, "We are going to kill everybody if you don't tell the truth." I guess they were just trying to interrogate him, trying to figure out if he was on the same side or working for someone else. I don't know, but we were all very scared. We thought we were going to die. We thought they were going to shoot us in the middle of the desert like dogs.

The guy handed the coyote a radio, a walkie-talkie, and he spoke to someone on the other side. I heard gibberish, probably code. I did not understand what they were talking about, but apparently the guy was

convinced that he was allowed to be there. He helped him up and told everybody to relax and to stand up. They were joking around a little bit and handed him two beers. Afterward, they just sent us on our way.

It was a very difficult moment. We thought we were going to die. These armed men, on this side of the border, make me think that it is impossible that the United States does not know about them. How could they not know? They know about us. How do they catch illegal immigrants getting across the border, but they don't catch these guys? It is impossible that the government does not know about these people or these operations. It is just impossible.

The last night we were in the desert, there was a guy traveling with his brother. His brother needed to use the restroom. However, the rule was don't go farther than three feet away from the person next to you because at night in the desert it is really dark, to the point you can't even see your hands. If you venture 20 feet away from the group you are lost. They are not going to be able to find you.

The reason is no one can make any noise. You can't yell, you can't whistle because that might alert whoever might be around and that can be dangerous. It could be the Border Patrol or some other armed group.

Out there, you're not just hiding from the Border Patrol, you are hiding from people with guns and all other possible dangers. Well, the guy's brother just ventured out a little bit too far and we heard him screaming bad words in Spanish. At that point, the silence broke and we started yelling, "Where are you? Where are you?" At that point, we didn't care anymore—the guy sounded in trouble. We thought maybe it was a snake or something. We heard what appeared to sound like some dogs growling, howling and chasing through the woods. We heard the guy screaming and asking for help until the screaming stopped. The smuggler told us that those were coyotes and that we were not going to find this guy anymore. It was very shocking. His brother broke down and fell on the floor crying uncontrollably, but we had to continue.

The coyote told him either you come or I'm going to leave you here. It was a very difficult moment for everybody. A couple of guys cried. I was on the verge of crying. It was just frightening and very, very sad. We literally heard the guy screaming for his life and the coyotes killing him. It was very hard, it was very difficult, but we kept walking.

We made it to the point of pick-up early in the morning at about 5 a.m. on the sixth day. We waited at a location until a white van came to pick us up. We were shuttled to the nearest small city; from there we waited for another car to pick us up. The man who came was dressed like the cowboys on the show *Narcos* with gold chains and a gun.

This is exactly the kind of kind of guy that showed up in the vehicle. He threatened us and told us that if we didn't have his money by the time they delivered us in Los Angeles, they were not going to let us go. He was being really rough and violent with his words, saying things like "Hijos de su puta madre," like "Motherfuckers, if you don't pay, bad things are going to happen to you." It was very frightening.

I was hoping and praying that my family was going to be there when I arrived. It was going to be another horrible moment if they weren't there. I worried about the rest of the group, about what was going to happen to them if they didn't have the money. Some of them looked very poor and not very educated. They were from very poor rural areas of Mexico. How could their family come up with that kind of money to pay? It was a lot of money in dollars. I was wondering, "How are they going to pay this guy? Are they winging it?" I don't know. I couldn't put my finger on it.

What happened after this, I think, is the craziest part of my story. In a way, it made me think that there are some good people even in this poisonous environment. After they load us on this van, all 20 piled one on top of the other, we started driving. They told us to lay low so that we couldn't be seen through the windows. Ten minutes after we started driving, we hear sirens. After six days of walking through the desert, we hear sirens.

My first thought is "Damn it. I just didn't walk six days in the desert to be sent back now." I was so disappointed. I looked back at the window and, sure enough, it was the Border Patrol pulling us over.

The guy driving pulls over and jumps out of the van and runs into the brush—just takes off. The Border Patrol agent comes and takes the keys off the ignition and opens the back. They asked me if I spoke English, but I pretended I didn't speak very well. They asked me if there were drugs or guns in the van. I told them no. He gave me half of a sandwich. I guess, it was half of their lunch. Then they gave me a bottle of water and they asked for my identification. I gave them my Mexican identification. They came back and asked me if I had ever been deported. I told them the truth that I had been deported two weeks ago.

They asked me where we were all going and I told him that we were all going to Napa Valley to pluck grapes to make wine. The agent then looks at me, grabs the keys, and tosses them into the van towards me. He tells me, "Get in the van and get the fuck out of here." They walk back to their squad car and they leave. They leave me there in the middle of the road with the keys and this van full of immigrants. I was in disbelief.

I thought that maybe they wanted me to get in and drive so that they could pull me over a little farther and frame me. I didn't know what to believe, but I got in the van and I started driving. I drove for about an hour scared to death. I thought I was going to get framed for crossing people over. I saw a sign that said Las Vegas and I told everybody to gather whatever little money they had, a couple of dollars, and that we were going to Las Vegas. That is the only sign I saw and I wasn't going back, I was going to drive to the nearest city I knew. I had been there before and from there I was going to call family members to come and pick me up. We pulled over at the first gas station and bought water and a large bag of chips. Everybody took a handful and a sip of water. We had not eaten in three days. We drove to Las Vegas.

On our way there we had to drive through the Hoover Dam and, apparently, there was an immigration and police checkpoint. I thought I was going to get arrested for having these people with me in the van who were clearly illegal. We were all clearly illegally in the country. I didn't have the documents to the car. I didn't have a license. I thought of getting off and running, but my cousin was also in the van. I didn't have the heart to leave everybody there stranded.

I spoke English and could have probably managed. Maybe I could have made it, but what was everybody else going to do? I thought to myself, "If I'm going to get arrested, this is the end of it. I'm going to be sent back, but at least I made it out alive. These guys are alive. I'm going to see this through."

I continued until it was my turn. The agent with his flashlight ordered me to pull over to the side. They asked me to lower my window and there was another guy looking in the back looking into the van with his flashlight. He was looking at everybody laying down. The officer asked me where I was going. I told him, "I'm going to Napa Valley to pick grapes for wine." He shook his head in disapproval and said, "All of you are going to the same place?" I told him, "Yep, we're all going to the same place."

He told me to keep going forwards. I thought, "They're going to ask everybody to get off," but there was another officer about 10 yards away and he pointed us towards the entrance to the road and they let us go. They let me go. At that point, I cried. I started driving and I couldn't hold my tears. I was crying. I didn't know what the hell happened. It was impossible that something like this could happen to me, and, well, we ended up in Las Vegas. We ditched the van and called our family to pick us up. That was it. Only about 20 of us had made it to the end.

WSWS: Did you find any supplies in the desert along the way?

Miguel: Actually, we found gallons of water. Jugs of water, but they were empty. They looked like they were all cut, like somebody cut them with a knife. So there was no water. We never found water or supplies. I

came across to what appeared like maybe somebody could have left supplies, but they were all trashed and wasted.

WSWS: What were the demographics of the group?

Miguel: It was only men. The people who did this, the organization I approached to get us across, they only worked with men. They said they don't work with women or children because they slow them down. They were not going to bring women and children. They said they were just not going to do it.

There were women at the shelter, I still remember the codename for the place, "Treinta-Treinta," thirty-thirty. Everything over there is coded. It is like a shelter and there were women and little kids, but they wouldn't take them. Every time a shuttle would leave for the border, they would beg "Please, take me. Take me." They would just push them away from the vehicle. They would not take women and children. It was only men, and the age range was between maybe 20 all the way to 60. There were a couple of really old people. There were a couple of people around 60 years old and they didn't make it. Everyone who made it was younger than 35.

supposed to do? If I go back to Mexico now, where am I supposed to go? What life am I supposed to build? Or what opportunities am I going to have for my wife, who is a US citizen? What am I going to give her? It is impossible.

WSWS: Thank you so much, Miguel, for sharing your story with us.

Miguel: No, thank you. My story isn't just mine. It belongs to every single human being who has sacrificed and risked their life in search of a better life.



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Future prospects for legal residence

WSWS: What are the prospects for legal residence in the US? What does that process look like for you now?

Miguel: I am married to a US citizen and I applied for a green card. Although they accepted my case, they want me to leave the country to have what they call an interview with an immigration judge in Juarez. But in our community, in my community, we know what that entails. It's a trick. I've heard it of people that believed, had faith, following the law, do everything they are asked to, paid all of the money they were asked to pay.

This is all very expensive. The government is making money in the thousands of dollars per person, making them believe, "Just go there, we accepted you, we know you're here. Just go over there and you will get this or that. Or maybe they'll just punish you a little bit, but, you know, you can always ask for this or do this, just follow the legal path."

But it is not true. They completely straight out deny them and bar them from ever coming into the United States. It's a practice known in our community. That is why I'm afraid to go. How can you do everything by the law? I am doing it. I have paid all of the money they have asked pay. I have paid my taxes since 2004. I have stayed on the right side of the law. I went to school. I went to university. I speak the language. I have always had a job. I have never committed a crime.

They just don't want people like me. I don't get it. It is upside down. The logic just does not make sense. They are not looking out for the best interests of the community. They are looking out for the best interests of rich people who want to make money off of these poor immigrants who can be manipulated, discarded if needed, because they don't even know the language to complain. They want somebody who they can discard at their leisure.

So the avenue for me to become a legal resident is luck or faith, because they're asking me to leave the country. They are practically telling me, "Leave and when you leave we know you are serious about this. We know you want to get right with the law."

But I can't trust the system. I can't trust the system that is rigged. I am afraid if I leave they will bar me forever. Now I have a wife, she is a US citizen. What is she going to do? They're going to force her to move into a different country she has never even been to.

This isn't her fault. She didn't do this. I didn't ask to come here. They brought me here as a kid, as a child. I am already here. What am I