

# Report Back from the First Latin American Community Migrant Summit

## Perspectives From *El Otro del Otro Lado-Canada*

(Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, May 10-13, 2007)

By Evelyn Encalada Grez

June 26, 2007



[Juan Paez Andrade, Evelyn Encalada Grez, and Magaly San Martin in Morelia]

Over 1000 participants made history at the First Latin American Community Migrant Summit held in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico from May 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>. It was the first time migrants, migrant advocates, researchers and stakeholders from diverse civil society organizations throughout the Americas have convened in this magnitude to address migration issues from various angles and standpoints.

In one of the welcoming speeches, Oscar Chacon, from the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities, asked that those born in a particular country but living in another to stand. As predicted almost all participants stood demonstrating the leadership assumed by Latin American and Caribbean migrants and how the region has been marked by migration. Latin American migrants living in Europe were also in attendance to tell of their particular stories along with migrants from Africa in order to have a richer exchange of experiences and ideas. The summit was conceived by leading migrant activist led organizations which have been part of recent World Social Forums and some which have mobilized millions in the US against the immigrant backlash in the last two years.

The Summit was principally intended as a space for migrants to discuss their particular struggles. Panel after panel proved that migration experiences and challenges vary according to various contexts throughout the world. The vast heterogeneity in the Americas and the Caribbean lends itself to differing migration patterns and contexts. For instance, a Garifuna woman from Honduras and a Mixtec man from Mexico will have lived distinct migration realities by the manner in which they are racialized in “developed nations”. The way we live and experience migration is determined by the colour of our skin, gender, economic status and the institutional legal framework within the country of our destination.

The Summit also addressed the South to South migration that too has generated a sleuth of problems for particular nationals such as Colombians in Ecuador, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica and Bolivians in Argentina. Among the diversity and inequality lived through migration by peoples in the hemisphere there was strong consensus that we have all convened to fight for the same thing: to combat forced migration by continuing the fight for social justice in the region and for the recognition of migrants' rights in receiving countries. Migration should not be the only solution to alleviate poverty or as a sole source of community

development wherein governments resign responsibility to facilitate the creation of productive capacities and to provide social goods for the population.

In Mexico, the three for one program (3x1) has been celebrated as an alternative model of rural development that attempts to make the best of remittances. Three levels of government are to contribute for every dollar remitted by migrant workers for public works of diverse sorts. However, critics claim that this model of development is flawed on many accounts including the fact that governments contribute too little too late or none at all. Jaime Boyso, community organizer from a Nahuatl community in the State of Puebla, San Mateo Ozolco explained how local residents and migrants based in Philadelphia were dismayed to learn that this initiative was not designed to fund a much needed highschool. Instead migrants and non-migrant residents had to fund the school on their own and seek outside funds to help give their young people more options than to migrate to the US after their primary education.

In a panel a woman from the Yucatan expressed her outrage by stating that it was inconceivable for migrants to be burdened with local development and giving back to a community that eventually expelled them from their countries. The onus of local development according to many should not fall so forcefully on the back of migrants and their families. At another panel about migrants and health issues a psychologist argued that many migrants do not always tell the truth about life in the other side (*el otro lado*-the USA). Many go for months without work, proper food or shelter. Therefore, it cannot be expected that all migrants can remit a generous amount back to their families let alone be expected to contribute to the construction of infrastructure in their communities.

The Summit gave much attention to the US context. There are over 41 million Latin American and Caribbean nationals living and working in the country and about 12 million of them are living without status. This fate is certainly not limited to the Latin American and Caribbean communities with strong and often generational ties to the US. But the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the USA undeniably has a Latino face and a Spanish accent. Xenophobia and racism are hard felt throughout the country, in some states more than others ranging from prohibiting the use of Spanish, aggravating day labourers in search of work, to the organization of paramilitary groups such as Minutemen along the US-Mexico border to prevent the inflow of migrants.

At the federal level Democrats and Republicans are divided on how to handle the immigration issue. There are mounting pressures from reactionary right wing groups and constituents while Latino voters and im/migrant rights sympathizers pressure just as forcibly. The unregulated workforce that im/migrants represent is also encouraged and welcomed by unscrupulous employers seeking higher profit margins.

The immigration reform currently before the American Senate, known as the Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy (STRIVE) Act, has been crafted with much controversy and compromise among the varying tides within Republicans and Democrats. However, it has clearly failed the millions of undocumented peoples who will continue to remain in limbo, fear and with the pain of separation from loved ones. The reform would institute guest-worker programs that would offer few protections for migrant workers, allow more affluent and educated migrants to obtain status and continue the investment of millions of dollars to build a wall to protect Fortress America from undesirable migrants from the South.

The proposed reform has also angered right wing groups that argue the deportation of all undocumented migrants regardless of the social and economic costs it would induce. Economic uncertainty in Latin America, pressure from the United States for further trade liberalization, devastating environmental changes in the hemisphere will certainly intensify migration. The militarization of the border will only mean

more lives being lost along the way from Central America to the US Mexico border. Im/migrant advocacy organizations are also calling for changes in American foreign policy in the region that encourage migration and political instability.

The small Canadian contingent at the Summit argued for the fact that beside *el otro lado* (the other side) as the United States is commonly known there was an *otro lado*-Canada. Canada is also part of the North American Fortress and when fighting for migrant rights we must do so together across borders. Canada is in the midst of expanding guest workers programs under different government and employer led schemes that contracts not only Caribbean and Mexican farm workers but also Thai, Mayans, Chinese and Salvadorians and many other nationals into diverse industries across the country. Canada is also used as a bridge to cross over to the United States in inventive and precarious ways. Many have stayed in the country without status along with their children. A conservative estimate pins the number of undocumented peoples in Canada at 200,000 who mostly reside in urban centres. Proper figures are certainly difficult to obtain but numbers are unquestionably increasing each year.

The Canada Border Services Agency has responded ruthlessly by stepping up its tactics. In the spring of 2006, brother and sister, Kimberly and Gerald Lizano Sossa made headlines in the Canadian press when officials from the Canada Border Agency “removed” them from school and held them in detention centres in efforts to pressure their parents to turn themselves in. The Costa Rican family who had made a new life for themselves in Canada exhausted all legal means to remain in the country and were eventually deported on Canada Day 2006. A wave of deportation of Portuguese families has also caused a public stir.

Regularization is far from becoming a federal policy issue. Instead the Canadian government is seeking to respond to the country’s low birth rate and aging working population by expanding guest worker programs that limit the mobility and rights of migrant workers. While undocumented peoples in Canada contribute immensely to local communities in various ways and to the economy as a whole through their work and purchasing power, there has been little political will to integrate them into the social fabric of the country with full citizenship rights.

In the meantime undocumented peoples in Canada have to live in constant fear of being deported. Many have to go completely underground and seclude themselves from public life. Community spaces such as soccer fields are known to be frequented by immigration officials. In a celebration of International Women’s Day in 2005 at Ryerson University in Toronto, immigration officials had no qualms about invading such a community space to detain activist Wendy Maxwell for violation of deportation orders. She was deported to Costa Rica weeks later despite the immense public support.

The fight against the immigrant backlash in Canada is at its infancy stage in comparison to the United States. Certainly the two contexts are completely different but this summit was an ideal ground to learn about strategies and tactics to strengthen the hemispheric movement for im/migrant rights. Members of Justicia for Migrant Workers including a migrant worker who works in Canada through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program were able to participate in this summit through generous community support.

We had the opportunity to network with key leaders from Mexico and the rest of the Americas to discuss transnational solutions and organizing strategies. We heard of inspiring case studies where people in local communities in Mexico united despite mistrust and differences to create successful cooperatives lessening the push and pull of precarious forms of migration. The Summit reminded us that we are not alone in our struggles and for the need to work together across borders.

For detailed summaries of summit panels and workshops visit:  
<http://www.cumbredemigrantes.org>

---

The authour would like to thank Rural Women Making Change-Guelph University and Juan Carranza, LLB., Carranza Barristers & Solicitors for sponsoring members of Justicia for Migrant Workers to participate in this historic Summit.