

Agri-Food Industry's Deadly Cycle Feeds Immigration

by Eric Holt-Gimenez

Just weeks before the elections, Congress is unable to agree on legislation regarding the nation's 12 million undocumented immigrants. Legislators are at loggerheads over such disparate proposals as conditional legalization, guest-worker programs and massive deportations. In a sad testimony to the lack of bipartisan leadership, the only thing Congress has authorized this year is the construction of a \$2.2 billion, 700-mile fence on the Mexican border.

Remarkably, not one single U.S. lawmaker has addressed *why* an estimated 1.1 million people cross the border every year looking for work. This omission allows our politicians to divert public attention away from the way U.S. policies cause massive migrations.

In the 1960s and '70s, when the Rockefeller Foundation's Green Revolution increased grain production in Mexico and Central America, the world applauded, convinced this signalled the end of world hunger. But the region's fragile tropical and hillside soils where the majority of farmers cultivate their grains lost organic matter under the Green Revolution's intensive fertilizer regimes. Pest outbreaks became chronic. Smallholder farmers took out loans to buy more and more chemicals.

When the World Bank and the IMF imposed structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, government loans, marketing programs, and agricultural extension services disappeared overnight. Then the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and its Central American cousin, CAFTA, flooded local grain markets with cheap corn, subsidized by U.S. taxpayers and sold below cost of production.

The region's peasant farmers struggled, squeezing out every last ounce of family labor to compete in the so-called free market. Debts piled up. When droughts or hurricanes hit—as they frequently do in the tropics—the Green Revolution hybrids withered and died. In Mexico from 1994-2004, 1.3 million smallholders went bust. Abandoned by their governments, run over by the Green Revolution, broke, hungry, and exhausted, they joined the ranks of the dispossessed.

Desperate to feed their families, dreaming of a better life, small farmers send their able-bodied family members to the United States to look for work. There their sons and daughters find jobs in poisonous fields harvesting vegetables, in deadly industrial slaughterhouses, and in gruelling food-processing plants.

The U.S. Farm Bureau estimates that immigrant labor adds up to \$9 billion of the nation's \$200 billion annual agricultural output. Because they are undocumented, migrant farm workers are forced to sell their labor cheaply and receive no health or insurance benefits. This results in tremendous labor savings for an industry that already benefits substantially from agricultural subsidies. The agri-food chain depends on immigrant labor, and it requires migrants' illegal status to realize its windfall profits.

Immigrant working families make up a large portion of the 12 million food-insecure people in the United States who often do not know where their next meal is coming from. They cannot afford to buy the fresh fruits, vegetables or meat they produce.

In order to obtain the necessary calories for survival, like most low-income people in this country, they substitute protein, fresh vegetables, and fiber for sugars, fats, and starch by eating the cheap processed food sold by the agri-food industry. These diets are the primary cause of the obesity, heart disease, and type II diabetes epidemics afflicting the nation's poor. Not only do immigrants give up their land and their labor to the agri-food industry, they sacrifice their health as well.

But the story does not end here. Immigrants send an estimated \$27 billion a year in remittances to their families. Remittances are the second largest source of income in Mexico and the largest contributor to GNP in Central America. Without these remittances, the economies of those countries and the markets for U.S.-based agri-food products would crash.

The tragic irony is that the lion's share of remittances is spent on processed food packed with high-calorie corn syrup, produced and distributed by the agri-food industry. The impact on the health and family economy of immigrant families is devastating.

The vicious cycle of dispossession, appropriation, and substitution is complete. With help from the Green Revolution, U.S. economic policies, and subsidies from the U.S. taxpayer, the agri-food industry profits from every step of the immigrant dream.

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