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IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

OPEN BORDERS EXISTS AS A POPULAR SENTIMENT AND AN UNSPOKEN IDEAL AMONG immigrant rights activists and segments of the labor movement. It is expressed in the widely used slogan *sin fronteras* (without borders), and the massive demonstrations of 2006 saw the appearance of a new motto, No person is illegal, a phrase that suggests that we should reject the inhumane laws that govern bor-

ders and migration policy. Many of us feel that borders and walls, midnight raids on homes, and roundups at workplaces are immoral and unjust.

The idea of Open Borders arose through cross-border organizations and international solidarity movements that, since the 1970s, have reached across national frontiers to join hands with unions, women's groups, and environmental organizations abroad. Labor unionists speak of our "sisters and brothers" in other countries to indicate that workers are part of the same family of international labor—a movement without borders. We see the slogan of Open Borders begin to take shape as a strategic conception, an alternate global route to worker power and a more just world.¹

Closed borders are out of date, passé. It is a policy based on the defense of a national economic model that has been outmoded for thirty years. Around 1980, manufacturing, once con-

centrated in Europe and North America, became global thanks to innovations like computers, containers, fiber-optic cables, and satellite communications. Corporations now manufacture globally and market around the world. The result was the beginning of a new restructuring of global investment, global industrialization, and global labor.

Since the 1980s, the gap between rich and poor nations has widened and workers from poorer countries increasingly migrate to find jobs and higher wages in wealthier ones. With global manufacturing, national solutions to economic and political problems, especially to labor problems, no longer suffice. To survive, American unions must organize immigrants at home and work with unions abroad to confront global capital. Our path to alliance with workers in other countries lies through Open Borders.

Corporations, employers' associations, and some legislators in both the Republican and Democratic parties do wish to change immigration policy. Many would be willing to regularize at least some of those who are now here without documents in exchange for creating a system for future flows that would assure cheap labor, particularly to agriculture, but also to services, construction, and industry. Employers want consistent access to cheap immigrant labor, for example, through guest-worker programs. They have historically used the presence of such immigrant workers with limited or no rights to lower the wages of other workers and to divide workers along ethnic lines to prevent unionization.

Some fear that Open Borders means inundation by low-wage workers who will drive down our wages and weaken unions. Most economists, however, believe that immigration actually creates more jobs and raises incomes even if it threatens those with the very lowest education and skills.² Even on that point there is much debate, however, and there is no agreement among economists and sociologists that immigrants lower wages or threaten the well-being of specific groups of workers.³ The real issue is not the increase in immigrants, but labor's ability and commitment to organize them.

While welcoming immigrants is clearly important, the U.S. labor movement needs to protect low-wage, native-born workers and the 12 percent of our labor force without a high school diploma. We need to support teachers' unions to fight for more money for public schools, smaller class size, and more programs to stop students from dropping out. Labor must also fight for government training programs for

low-skilled workers. Just as we have created workers' centers to reach immigrants and other marginalized workers, we need labor-sponsored centers for the organization of the un-

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employed and the poor to help them fight for social programs and jobs that pay a living wage.

NINE ARGUMENTS FOR OPEN BORDERS

I ARGUE HERE THAT THE AMERICAN WORKERS' movement should adopt a position of Open Borders not simply because it is the only morally defensible position, but also because it opens up an alternate strategy to workers' power. Today, American unions are failing to organize enough workers to change the balance of power with American capital. The failure results in large measure from an inability to confront capital on its own terms, which have long since become global. Corporations manufacture and market products around the globe, while the international rules of the game are set by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. National unions have proven unable to respond to the international challenge.

Despite NAFTA, U.S. labor unions have not even been able to build a meaningful alliance with labor unions in Canada and Mexico so that they can confront capital on the North American continent. The failure results in part

from the narrow nationalist and protectionist view still held by much of the labor movement, and central to that view is the notion of closed borders. We need to change labor's strategic outlook from one that is national to one that is international. We can begin to implement an international policy and strategy here in North America by creating a genuine alliance of all workers on the continent, an alliance *sin fronteras*, without borders. I offer here nine arguments for Open Borders.⁴

I. The Humanistic Argument: One Race, One World

Humanists, secular and religious, have long argued that we are one race, the human race, that must share its common home, the planet Earth. The world's natural resources and produce should go to shelter, heat, clothe, and feed all of us on this planet. We should enjoy the right to travel this planet as our common home.⁵

At present, under agreements like NAFTA and the rules of the World Trade Organization, human beings do not have equal access to the planet's wealth, nor can we move about the world as we wish. Multinational corporations move their money, factories, and products around the world, and corporate executives, professionals, and high-skilled workers migrate around the globe to carry out the corporations' wishes. The wealthy can travel virtually anywhere they want and even the merely comfortable of the Global North can tour the world. Yet, working people may not move in search of jobs, higher wages, or a better life, because borders are closed. Closing borders violates the ethical principle of our common right to life on this planet.

II. The Responsibility Argument: Why Punish the Migrant?

Many in the immigrant rights and labor movement argue that closed borders unfairly penalize workers, denying them the right to find work to support their families when they were *forced* by economic or political developments to migrate. While governments and corporations have caused the dislocations that lead to migration, it is workers who suffer the consequences.

Modern migration began in the nineteenth century with the spread of industrial capitalism and the destruction of pre-capitalist agricultural and traditional societies from Ireland to China. Railroads siphoned dispossessed peasants off the land and hauled them to the harbors, where steamships could carry them cheaply to the United States, Brazil, or Argentina. This process took 150 years and continues today in Mexico, where NAFTA and globalization are finishing off the dispossession of the peasants, leading to millions of Mexican migrants coming to the United States.

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Capitalism and corporations are not entirely to blame for migration. U.S. foreign policy and military intervention also set workers in motion. The CIA's coup in Guatemala in 1954, for example, led to a series of dictatorial governments, civil war, and eventually the murder of over 200,000 Guatemalans. U.S. military intervention in Central America in the 1980s

destroyed political, economic, and social structures and set millions in motion toward the United States, not only from Guatemala but also from Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Why should workers in other countries have to pay the price for U.S. corporate and governmental policies?

Most people do not choose to migrate. Most would prefer to live in the countries they love with the families and friends to whom they are connected by deep ties of affection. Most move because they must. Given that U.S. corporations and U.S. foreign policy have generated these mass migrations, shouldn't workers from the affected countries have the right to come here seeking jobs? Why should workers in other countries have to pay the price for U.S. corporate and governmental policies?⁶

III. The Historical Argument: Borders Are Past Violence Congealed

Historically speaking, it is difficult to justify the legitimacy of the world's borders. Borders have been created by states through conquest. The U.S.-Mexico border was created by the War of 1847, an American war of aggression in which the United States took half of Mexico and forced 100,000 of its citizens to become U.S. citizens.⁷

The United States should not be singled out here. Borders almost everywhere have been created by the same process. The Berlin Congress of 1884 divided up Africa among the European powers and after World War II these divisions became the boundaries of the new Af-

rican states. The new states' borders seldom reflected the desires of the African peoples; they were simply foisted on them by the great powers. Similarly, Great Britain and France created

the borders of the Middle East when they gave up that region to the United States following the end of World War II. The new boundaries of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe resulted from power grabs by former Communist bureaucrats, while in Asia, China took Tibet and the Cold War divided

Korea. Everywhere, borders have been the result of power plays and aggression, of wars of conquest and occupation. Such borders, including our own, can hardly demand our respect since they represent only congealed violence.

Why should borders created in such a way govern migration? Shouldn't international relations, among them the rights of migrants, have a more rational, fair, and democratic basis?

IV. The Internationalist Argument: Borders Promote Nationalism and Warfare

Internationalists—humanists and socialists—have argued for at least 150 years that economic competition and nationalism lead to war. While the nation-state supposedly fights its wars to defend the nation, internationalists argue that in reality most are wars to enrich capitalists and expand the power of government.

Borders bind together all social classes in the common venture of the fatherland. Capitalists and workers of one nation are to be united against capitalists and workers in another. We have to defend our own markets while we fight our way into the markets of other countries.

The internationalists call upon the world's

people to unite as one, rejecting patriotism and its wars. Working-class internationalism argues that workers of any country have more in common with each other than they do with the bosses of their own nation. If other workers are our sisters and brothers in a common struggle against capital, then we cannot close our nation's door to them. We have to open the border and welcome them into our country, our workplaces, and our unions.

V. The Inequality Argument: Borders Reinforce Inequalities on a Global Scale

Since the 1980s, European Social Democrats have argued that the world's wealth is distributed in a way that is unequal, unfair, and ultimately unsustainable.⁸ Similarly, since 2001, the antiglobalization movement gathered in the World Social Forum has argued that the world's trade agreements exacerbate the situation: the wealthy nations of the Global North are getting wealthier, while poor nations of the Global South are becoming poorer. This unequal division of the world's wealth is maintained and enforced by borders.

The answer is not to close the border, but to open the border, thus giving all workers rights to residency and work, and some citizenship rights. Justice demands Open Borders.

VI. The Race Argument: Borders Keep People of Color Out of White Peoples' Countries

One hundred years ago, W. E. B. DuBois wrote that the "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."⁹ Since that problem was not resolved by the end of the twentieth century it continues to plague us in the twenty-first. Today, the color line is a bor-

der and the border is a wall. Most of the world's wealthy nations are made up mostly of white people (Japan is the exception), while most of the world's poor nations are made up mostly of people of color. Borders maintain that reality.

Nations and peoples have found it hard to simply keep the people of color out. They must also create reasons to fear and hate them. So throughout history we see that the argument for closed borders is bolstered by calls to keep out the yellow, brown, or black people who are racially inferior to whites. Or sometimes the other who must be kept out is Roman Catholic, Eastern Rite Christian, Jew, or Muslim.

When nations develop such racial attitudes, it becomes impossible to confine the fear and hatred of people of color or those of different faiths to those who are on the other side of the border wall. Racism also expands within the country. Advocacy of Open Borders represents a stand against racism and bigotry.

VII. The Feminization of Poverty Argument: Borders Contribute to the Increasing Poverty of Women

Borders also penalize women disproportionately. We have a global crisis that has been called the feminization of poverty: throughout the world, the poorest of the poor are women and their children. National borders are meant to keep women in their place. The woman who would move from the one-dollar-a-day income she has in Honduras will not be permitted to cross the border into the United States so that she can earn enough money to feed her children. Borders enforce the economic, social, and political subjection of women.

Yet, driven by the poverty of their coun-

tries, women will nevertheless seek to migrate, and half of all migrants are now women. The conditions under which they migrate create sexual abuse in the migration process and intense labor exploitation when they arrive, as well as a netherworld of traffickers in sex workers and mail-order brides.

Closed borders augment authoritarian tendencies within our country and undermine democracy.

There is a great irony here. The women of Africa, Asia, and Latin America give years of their lives and their miserable incomes to raise the children who grow up to become workers in the United States and Europe. Mexico, especially its women, pays the costs of social reproduction for the 10 percent of its workforce that works in the United States. Mexicans pay for the food, clothing, education, health care, and housing to raise the children to become working-age adults. The United States then reaps the benefits of their labor in their productive working years. Later, many of those workers return to Mexico in their older years, where they need more care. Much of the care at every stage is given by the often unpaid labor of women.¹⁰

VIII. The State versus Society Argument: To Defend the Border You Must Expand the Power of the State

To have closed borders you must have a stronger state. We will have to build walls at the bor-

der. We will need more border patrol agents, jeeps, helicopters, planes, and boats. We will have to deploy the National Guard and perhaps the army to back up the Border Patrol.

The border, however, is not only at the border. The border is everywhere. We have to ferret out the “illegal aliens” amongst us. We must have an immigrant identification system, so we will also need a national identity card for all citizens. We will need not only fingerprints, but also biometric devices to scan our faces, our hands, our eyes, and our DNA. We will need more surveillance and wiretaps.

Closed borders augment authoritarian tendencies within our country and undermine democracy. Historically, everything that strengthens the repressive apparatus of the state weakens the power of citizens and workers. The repressive measures taken against immigrants today will be taken against citizens and workers tomorrow. The forces mobilized to protect your border will also be used to break your strike.

IX. The Economic Power Argument: Open Borders Build International Solidarity

The principal reason that we should adopt Open Borders is that it will strengthen the power of the workers faced with the new global structure of capital.

What will it take for labor to respond to the new shape of capital, to be able to follow the actual chains of supply, production, and distribution? We are all aware that labor can only do this if it creates international alliances that allow us to take concerted economic action simultaneously across international borders. To build such international alliances against capi-

tal and the corporations, we have to prove ourselves to be loyal first to our fellow workers.

What does an Open Border policy have to do with an international solidarity policy? Think of it this way: Can we make an alliance with the unions and workers of Venezuela if we support a U.S. coup or invasion in that country? Similarly, can we join forces with Mexican or Guatemalan workers if at the same time we support stronger immigration enforcement, more Border Patrol, more Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, raids, and deportations? Will Latino workers believe in us if we permit guest-worker programs where the guests are slaves without civil or political rights? If we want an international labor alliance, then we must put ourselves on the side of immigrant workers here and foreign workers abroad rather than on the side of our employers and our government.

A CONTINENTAL WORKERS' ALLIANCE

THE TIME AND PLACE TO BEGIN THE OPEN BORDERS process is here and now, by creating a continental workers' alliance. Some might argue that labor has no need to build a continental workers alliance because we have the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Trade Secretariats responsible for coordinating international labor action. While the secretariats serve some useful purposes, most have not shown a commitment to building the kind of international movement necessary to challenge capital. We suggest here an alternative approach based on building real grassroots worker connections. Key to the success of all such joint campaigns would be the building of worker-to-worker meetings that would come to involve tens of thousands of

workers, gathering in many meetings in various countries and sitting down to discuss their lives, work, and goals face to face.

We might construct such an alliance around common needs and concerns. First, and most important, would be to focus organizing and bargaining efforts on certain corporations with a presence in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. General Electric, for example, has major investments in all three countries. Several unions in the United States and Canada have had some level of cooperation in dealing with GE and could reach out to the Mexican unions.¹¹ Unions should support organizing efforts at GE plants in all three countries and look for opportunities for simultaneous, concerted action across borders. Several industries and companies such as longshoring, mining, and telecommunications already have some level of international cooperation within North America and beyond.

Second, public employees in the same sector could be brought together around common concerns. For example, teachers could be brought together to defend public education at all levels. In fact, the Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education in Canada, the United States, and Mexico has already laid the groundwork for such an alliance.¹² One can imagine bringing together health workers from both the public and private sectors and government employees from the local, state (or province), and national governments of all three countries.

Third, workers in all three countries could come together in joint campaigns around issues of common concern. Several years ago, the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora attempted an international campaign for a living wage in all three North American countries.

While that campaign fizzled for lack of resources, it was a good idea and should be taken up again. One could imagine similar campaigns to win or defend national health care, to shorten the work week, and to protect retirement benefits. A continental workers' alliance could also promote international meetings of migrants and immigrants as well as of the unemployed and the poor.

A continental alliance could also be built around common tactics that arise from the very issues that have divided workers. One can imagine a series of actions built around causing delays or blocking international borders. Telecommunications workers are obviously in a strategic location to shut down global communications. Dockworkers have demonstrated the power to bring the entire worldwide movement of goods to a standstill. If we are to be able to exert such potential economic power for workers, we need to build a powerful grassroots movement to drive forward the ex-

isting unions and any future continental workers' alliance.

Support for Open Borders would begin to show our Canadian, Mexican, and Central American sisters and brothers that we are on their side. We have to be careful, however, not to replicate at a higher level the government-capital-labor alliance that now exists at a national level. We do not want to create a kind of Fortress North America locked in an economic war with Europe and Asia. We want rather to create a continental labor alliance that allows labor to shape the politics of this continent while promoting a global labor alliance.¹³ We have to strive at every level to replace competition with cooperation. North American workers must reach beyond the Americas to workers not only in Latin America, but also in Europe, Asia, and Africa. By opening our borders while building international solidarity we have a world to win. ■

Notes

1. Today very few unions and federations in any country take an Open Borders position, but some do. The French Union syndicale Solidaires (Solidarity Labor Union) made up largely of public employees and the second or third largest federation in France, calls for Open Borders. In its pamphlet "Immigration: A Cynical Politic at the Service of the Boss" Solidaires calls for the right to "free movement and immigration" not just for European Union members, but for all immigrants. They also call for the abolition of all laws affecting immigrants' civil and labor rights as well as for the right of immigrants who are not yet citizens to vote in local elections and have access to government jobs and social welfare programs. Union syndicale Solidaires, *Immigration: Une politique cynique au service du patronat* (Paris: Union syndicale Solidaires, Jan. 2006), 16. My trans.

2. Richard Lowenstein, "The Immigration Equation," *New York Times Magazine*, June 9, 2006, summarizing the debate between George Borjas and David Card. He writes, "The consensus of most [economists] is that, on balance, immigration is good for the country. Immigrants

provide scarce labor, which lowers prices in much the same way global trade does. And overall, the newcomers modestly raise Americans' per capita income. But the impact is unevenly distributed; people with means pay less for taxi rides and household help while the less-affluent command lower wages and probably pay more for rent." The National Research Council (NRC) found in 1997 study that "immigration produces net economic gains for domestic residents."

3. Martin Oppenheimer, "Does Immigration Hurt U.S.-born Workers?" *New Politics*, (Winter 2008), 50-59, reviews all of the most recent literature. See also, David Bacon, "The Political Economy of Migration" at: <http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/mexico/poleconofmigration2.pdf>

4. I have been surprised to find few systematic arguments for Open Borders, though some for more liberal or humane policies. Some free trade economists, libertarians, anarchist, socialists, and communists have made open border arguments and some Catholic thinkers arrive at positions tantamount to Open Borders. Liberal theorists have sometimes argued for Open Bor-

ders based on a right to freedom of movement, though that may come into contradiction with other liberal notions of state sovereignty, property, and entitlements. Consistent conservative free-trade advocates also assert the right to freedom to migrate. An excellent comprehensive overview of philosophical discussions of immigration theory can be found in Veit Bader, "The Ethics of Immigration," *Constellations*, Vol. 12, No.3, (2005), 331-361. He argues for "fairly open borders." Shelly Wilcox, "Immigrant Admissions and Global Relations of Harm," *Journal of Social Philosophy* (Vol 38, No. 2, Summer 2006, 274-291, argues in that the global harm principle, not to do harm to others, not to create a human rights deficit, would create a "just and comprehensive liberal immigration policy." Another approach to the problem is taken by Jennifer Gordon, "Transnational Labor Citizenship," *Southern California Law Review*, 80 S. Cal. L. Rev. 503 (March, 2007), who argues that workers permitted to enter the U.S. even in guest worker programs might enjoy certain kind of "transnational labor citizenship," perhaps even without the participation of the U.S. government.

5. While the Catholic Church itself does not hold an Open Borders position, some Catholics have developed Christian humanist positions which are tantamount to Open Borders. Summing up the Social Forum on Migration held Jan 23-25, 2005 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Father Thierry Linard de Guertechim, S.J. said, "The construction of *universal citizenship* demands going beyond the demonization of others, especially of the migrant, who should not be considered a problem but rather a solution, because (s)he is the agent of transformation and the bearer of a universal human consciousness, a global citizen, symbolized in the concrete universal of the *house-earth* habitable by all persons." *Serviço Pastoral dos Migrantes, Travessias na DeSordem Global: Fórum Social das Migrações* (São Paulo, Brazil: Paulinas, 2005), 409. My trans.

6. Harry Van der Linden and Josh Clark, "Economic Migration and Justice," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19(1): 45-61, 2005, argues that the U.S. has a duty of justice to adopt an Open Border policy with regard to economic migrants because it is significantly responsible for the unjust social and economic conditions that bring such migrants to its borders. The article condemns President George W. Bush's "guest worker" proposal as morally objectionable because it responds to business interests rather than meeting the nation's responsibility to migrants created by its policies.

7. See the discussion of the Mexican-American War in William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press) 89-93. The Mexican-American War of 1847, the Spanish-American War of 1898, the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and current Iraq War all have their origins in the attempt of rival capitalist nations struggling to control, divide and re-divide the world's territory, populations, resources and markets. The victors draw the borders for political and economic interests, irrespective of the peoples' desires. Recently there has arisen a whole new body of literature discussing the American empire: Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Gregg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004); Ellen Meiskins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2003).

8. Brandt Commission, *North and South: A Program for Survival* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980); Brandt Commission, *Common Crisis: North-South: Cooperation for World Recovery* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

9. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Bedford, 1997), p. 42, opening line of Chapter 2, "Of the Dawn of Freedom."

10. Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (New York: New Press, 2001) makes arguments along these lines.

11. GE Workers United, Coordinated Bargaining Committee, at: <http://www.geworkersunited.org/about/page.jsp?itemID=28228464>

12. Dan Leahy, "The Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education in Canada, the United States and Mexico, 1993-2007: A Brief History," *Mexican Labor News and Analysis*, January, 2007 Vol. 12 No. 1, at: http://www.ueinternational.org/Mexico_info/mlna_articles.php?id=113#625

13. The International Labor Organization (ILO), a tripartite organization of government, business, and labor federations is not such an organization. (International Labor Organization at: <http://www.ilo.org/global/lang-en/index.htm>) While the International Trade Union Confederation pretends to be one, it frequently functions as a collection of rival national labor federations each of which is aligned with national capital. (International Trade Union Confederation at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/>) What is needed is an *anti-capitalist* international labor alliance.