

FROM ARIZONA TO TAMAULIPAS

"Let us not be a region in which this can happen"

By Clay Boggs

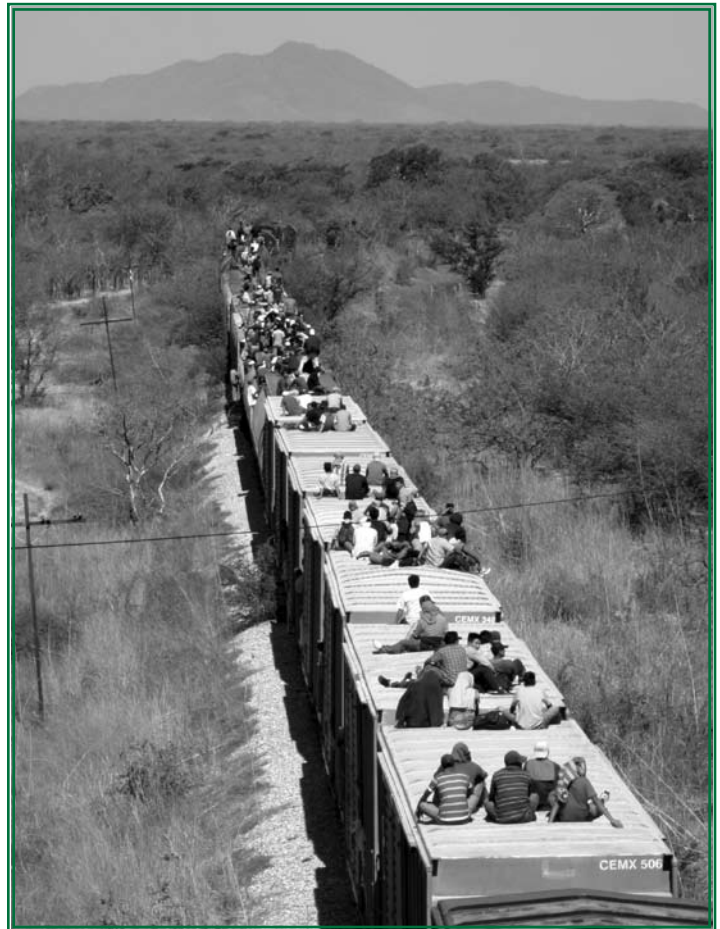
On August 24, 2010, the bodies of 72 Central and South American migrants were found at Rancho San Fernando in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The massacre, which has since been attributed to drug cartels, brought the dire situation of migrants crossing Mexico to the world's attention.

As many in Mexico know too well, however, San Fernando is only the most shocking example of a well-documented pattern. Conflicts with other gangs and with the Mexican government have diminished profits from the drug trade, so cartels have turned to the lucrative activity of kidnapping migrants (mostly from Central America) in the world's busiest migrant corridor.

Each day about 1,000 people cross the Mexico-Guatemala border en route to the United States. In 2009, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission published a report documenting more than 9,000 kidnappings of non-Mexican migrants in a six-month period (a crisis that shows no signs of slowing in 2010.)

The extreme vulnerability of migrants in Mexico, which includes kidnapping, rape, murder, and extortion, is an invisible humanitarian crisis among Friends and others in the pro-immigrant movement. The rising number of deaths on the US-Mexico border have received much needed attention, but without an accompanying awareness of what so many migrants must pass through in order to get there. Furthermore, even though atrocities like San Fernando occur south of the US-Mexico border, many of their roots can be traced to US policies.

The defense of immigrants' rights in the United States is one of the most powerful witnesses of contemporary Western Friends, and it is firmly grounded in the testimony of the divine dignity that each of us share. What happened in August in the border state of Tamaulipas is a stark reminder that we must recognize the plight of immigrants in the United States as one piece of



*Migrants in Mexico riding a freight train.
Photo by Ireneo Mujica.*

a larger puzzle that demands our awareness, attention and action. Like the recent anti-immigrant actions in Arizona and other states, what happened in Tamaulipas is of grave concern to Western Friends.

At Casa de los Amigos in Mexico City, we know firsthand about the impunity with which organized crime operates and the extreme vulnerability of migrants in Mexico. A wonderful Salvadoran family stayed at the Casa for a month. In that time, we learned their story: they had hired a human smuggler ("coyote") to help them join family members in the United States. He took them as far as Veracruz and turned them over to kidnappers, who sexually abused members of the family before eventually freeing them. In another case, after being kidnapped and

then freed in a government raid, a Honduran man stayed at the Casa while pressing charges against his kidnappers.

The increased surveillance of the Mexico-Guatemala border accompanied by the criminalization of migrants has forced these men, women, and children underground. They travel on freight trains in continual danger of losing life or limb, where they are easy prey for corrupt migration officials and organized crime. If lucky, they can pay for a ride in tractor-trailers operated by smugglers (who may then turn them over to drug gangs). Many in Mexico's civil society and press have taken strong stands criticizing the hypocrisy of the Mexican government for (rightly) demanding recognition of the rights of Mexicans in the US, while turning a blind eye to the massive human rights violations committed against migrants here in Mexico.

If it is hypocritical to criticize US immigration policy without also calling on Mexico to protect migrants within its borders, it is equally important to recognize the US role in shaping Mexican immigration policy. In the early 1990s, the United States demanded a crackdown on Central American migration through Mexico as a qualification for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Later, after 9/11, the US renewed its efforts to pressure Mexico to tighten its borders, reflecting the new "Homeland Security" focus that linked terrorism, drug trafficking and immigration. The "Merida Initiative," the US-Mexico strategy to improve security and combat drug trafficking, also "finances investment in technology to detect and detain migrants as efficiently as possible, thereby controlling migration in Mexico and

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Central America," according to the Casa's partner organization, Sin Fronteras. The motivation and logic for this is clear: fewer migrants will cross the US border if Mexican immigration officials detain and deport them first. Hence, even though Mexico has no significant anti-immigrant politicians or activists, and even though most migrants are simply passing through Mexico on their way to the US,

BORDER TALK

Picking up, setting down
we try our lives precariously
as red-winged blackbirds
who vocalize on stalks
of blowing milkweed
as though on solid ground

We are like stars
no walls or ground
but those we build
encompassing
the picking up
the setting down

*-Helen Bruner
Berkeley Friends Meeting*

Mexico now deports more migrants per year than its northern neighbor.

In September, Casa volunteers attended a special mass for the San Fernando victims at a church in the historic Mexico City neighborhood of Coyoacán. José Luis Loera of Amnesty International Mexico spoke about the testimony from the massacre's one confirmed survivor, who had walked, with gunshot wounds, through the darkness until he saw a light from a farmhouse and walked toward it. He knocked on the door and the family told him that they could not help him. He walked until he saw another light at another farmhouse, where he was turned away again. Finally, when he reached a highway roadblock, local police attended him. "Let us not be a country in which this can happen," said José Luis Loera. At the Casa de los Amigos, we hope that Friends everywhere might echo his words, "Let us not be a region in which this can happen."

Clay is the Peace Programs Coordinator at the Casa de los Amigos in Mexico City. To learn more about the Casa, visit <http://www.casadelosamigos.org/en/>.