

As repression grows at border, so does solidarity

written by Greg Butterfield

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U.S. Border Patrol tear-gassed asylum seekers including children on Nov. 25.
Photo: Kim Kyung-Hoon

People around the world were outraged by video and photos showing small children and their families fleeing clouds of tear gas on the Tijuana side of the U.S.-Mexico border on Nov. 25. U.S. Border Patrol agents used this chemical weapon, banned for use in warfare under international law, against civilians on Mexican territory.

"We ran, but when you run the gas asphyxiates you more," said Ana Zúñiga, who fled with her 3-year-old daughter. (Associated Press, Nov. 25)

The brutal attack came during a demonstration by hundreds of refugees trapped on the Mexican side of the border while the Trump administration blocks their asylum requests. They were protesting not only Trump, but also the inhumane conditions they face in Tijuana.

"We are not criminals, we are international workers," read one banner carried by the marchers. Others carried homemade Honduran and U.S. flags.

At one point, some refugees rushed the barbed-wire barricade on the border fence. A woman was impaled trying to scale the fence. The Border Patrol used this justified act of defiance as an excuse to terrorize everyone.

It was just the latest escalation of Trump's racist war against the Central American exodus. Many thousands are fleeing the wars, violence and poverty caused by decades of U.S. imperialist intervention in the region — just as refugees are fleeing to Europe from U.S.-EU military and economic warfare in Syria, northern Africa and other parts of the world.

In late October, Trump ordered thousands of U.S. troops to the border. He said that soldiers could shoot at any protesters who threw rocks or other objects. Later, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly signed an order authorizing U.S. troops to use "lethal force" at the border. (Military Times, Nov. 21)

There are currently 5,600 troops at the border. Trump said that that number could

increase to as many as 15,000.

NBC News reported on Nov. 28: “The Pentagon is now actively planning for the [U.S. troops deployed to the southern border](#) to become a rotational force, meaning their mission would be extended and fresh troops would be rotated in, according to two U.S. officials and one former U.S. official familiar with the planning.”

Armed white supremacist militias, which have long worked hand-in-hand with the Border Patrol, are also mobilizing against the refugee caravan. (AP, Oct. 26)

Who are the real criminals?

While flouting both domestic and international law, Trump continues to claim the asylum seekers are “criminals,” as he attempts to whip up racist divisions among working-class and oppressed people.

Nor are the Democrats innocent. Their leaders have been largely silent as Trump steadily builds up repressive forces on the border. In fact, previous Democratic administrations laid the basis for Trump’s anti-migrant, anti-refugee campaign. President Obama earned the nickname “Deporter-in-Chief,” and tear gas was used against migrants while he was in office, too.

None of this, however, is deterring most of the asylum seekers, who have already endured numerous hardships on their long and arduous walk through Mexico from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries.

The Los Angeles Times reported Nov. 27: “The dusty complex where more than 5,700 migrants are staying was crowded with tents and makeshift homes made of cardboard boxes, towels and plastic trash bags. Hundreds lined up for food, while others hung their wet clothing to dry on trees. Some bathed in outdoor showers, armed Mexican federal police circling the camp in armored trucks.

"Henry José Juárez, 16, was hit in the head by a teargas canister during Sunday's border clash and suffered several second-degree burns when the canister exploded. On Monday, he limped around the sports complex on a single crutch, bandages wrapped around his head, left foot and right shoulder.

"Despite his wounds, Henry, a migrant from El Salvador who has been in Tijuana for a week, said he didn't plan to go back."

Another asylum seeker, Dennis Martínez from Honduras, told the Times reporter that he thought about staying in Tijuana to find work, but realized the city wasn't safe for foreigners. "I'm escaping a dangerous situation," he said. "Why would I then put myself in danger again?"

Unusually heavy rains during the last week of November provided an excuse for the local authorities to push refugees out of the Benito Juárez sports complex near the border to a shelter some 11 miles away. Tijuana officials cut off food, water and bathroom services, forcing many to leave the stadium. (San Diego Union Tribune, Nov. 30)

Growing solidarity

While the refugees are standing strong against powerful enemies, they need the aid and solidarity of workers and all progressive people in this country. Many networks are already mobilizing to bring aid of various kinds.

The New Sanctuary Coalition, based in New York, is organizing for a Sanctuary Caravan, including training students to provide various kinds of legal support. Along with Al Otro Lado, the NSC participated in a faith-based contingent that held a news conference at the border on Nov. 27 to condemn the Border Patrol's attack.

The School of the Americas Watch held a "Border Encounter" solidarity gathering from Nov. 16 to Nov. 18 at Ambos Nogales on the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona.

On Dec. 1, a coalition of groups including the Alliance for Global Justice held a “Troops Off the Border” protest at Arizona’s Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

Chicago’s Little Village Solidarity Network has set up donation sites in several parts of the city. “The situation is urgent. We know that families aren’t leaving their homes by choice. People only leave when they have to, in search of safety and a better life for themselves and their children.” (Block Club Chicago, Nov. 19)

In Los Angeles, where this reporter spent the last week of November, there are numerous solidarity campaigns and aid drives underway. On Nov. 30, Centro CSO held a rally and donation drive in the Boyle Heights community. The following day, a solidarity caravan initiated by the American Indian Movement of Southern California and Movimiento Cosecha L.A. took donated aid across the border to refugees in Tijuana. And on Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day, Unión del Barrio has called for a march in support of the refugee caravan.

Throughout southern and central California, many groups and individuals are soliciting donations and taking aid across the border.

This is just a small sampling of the solidarity efforts that are underway. But much more is needed to organize the workers and oppressed to shut down the U.S. government’s repressive measures and open the border to all who seek asylum.

Imagine if the labor movement became involved in a serious way. Union halls could become centers for a massive people-to-people aid effort. Workers could be mobilized for demonstrations across the country to demand that Washington meet its international obligation to welcome asylum seekers and use the money slated for repression at the border to instead provide housing, food and jobs.

What if unions provided buses for hundreds of thousands of workers, organized and unorganized, to travel to the border and welcome the caravanistas? Such an effort

would spark the imagination of people everywhere — churches and mosques, block associations and community centers, women's, LGBTQ+ and disabled rights groups, as well as the left — into an unstoppable tide of workers' solidarity.

