

The



LOWDOWN

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ♦ Vol. 10 No. 1 ♦ January 2008

"If workers organize or wage levels increase, Mexican NAFTA jobs are at risk of being moved from Mexico's \$5 per day to China's \$1 per day."

—Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch

Stop blaming workers—the bosses made this mess

Immigrants come here because globalization took their jobs back there

THE WAILING IN OUR COUNTRY ABOUT the "invasion of immigrants" has been long and loud. As one complainant put it, "Few of their children in the country learn English...The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages...Unless the stream of the importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious."

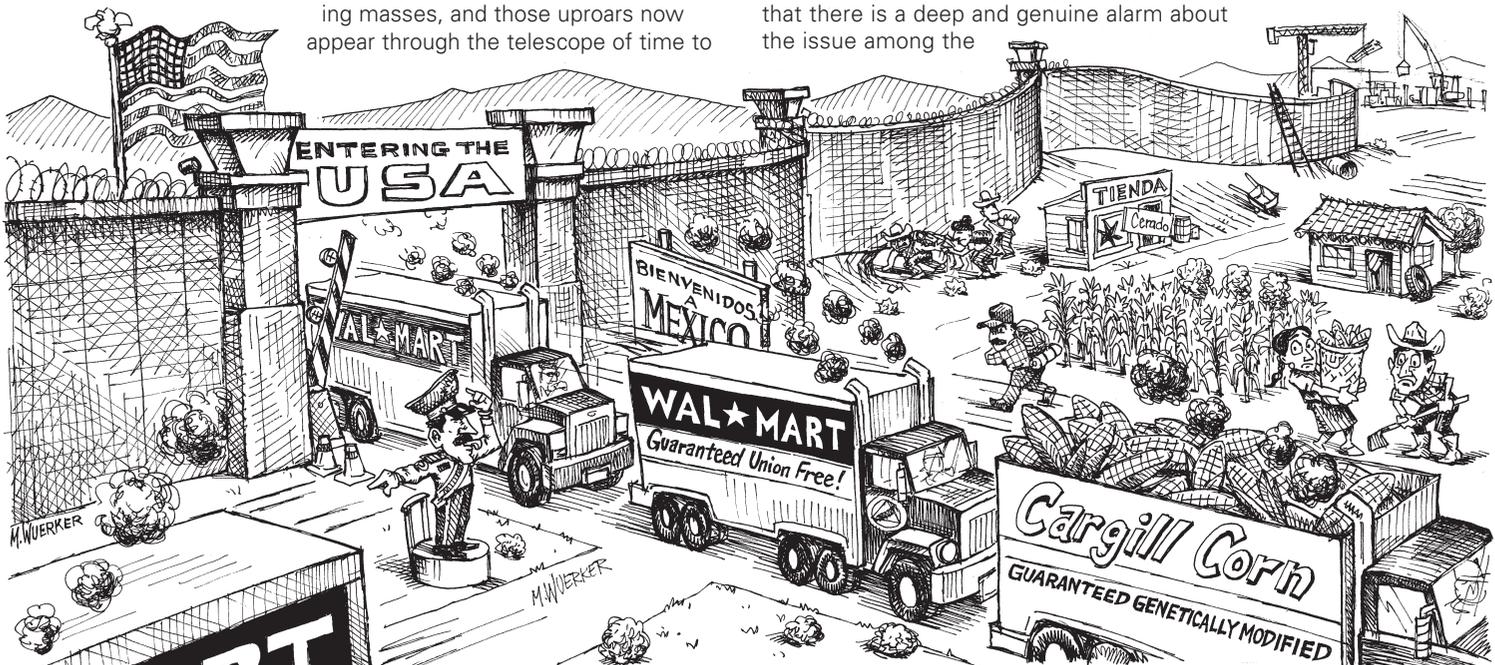
That's not some diatribe from one of today's Republican presidential candidates. It's the anxious cry of none other than Ben Franklin, deploring the wave of Germans pouring into the colony of Pennsylvania in the 1750s. Thus, anti-immigrant eruptions are older than the U.S. itself, and they've flared up periodically throughout our history, targeting the Irish, French, Italians, Chinese, and others. Even George W.'s current project to wall off our border is not a new bit of nuttiness—around the time of the nation's founding, John Jay, who later became the first chief justice of the Supreme Court, proposed "a wall of brass around the country for the exclusion of Catholics."

Luckily for the development and enrichment of our country, these past public frenzies ultimately failed to exclude the teeming masses, and those uproars now appear through the telescope of time to

have been some combination of ridiculous panic, political demagoguery, and xenophobic ugliness. Still, this does not mean that the public's anxiety and simmering anger about today's massive influx of Mexicans coming illegally across our 2,000-mile shared border is illegitimate. However, most of what the politicians and pundits are saying about it is illegitimate.

Wedge issue

There is way too much xenophobia, racism, and demagoguery at play around illegal immigration, but such crude sentiments are not what is bringing this problem to a national political boil. Polls show—as do conversations at any Chat & Chew Cafe in the country—that there is a deep and genuine alarm about the issue among the



THE LUXURY OF CHINESE LABOR

Officials in China have had some trouble making translations from Chinese to English. For example, a sign to alert visitors about a wet floor in a mall came out this way: "The slippery are very crafty."

You might want to keep that thought in mind if you're buying certain luxury goods. For example, high-dollar leather handbags and shoes, silk ties and scarves, designer suits and such are being marketed as the exquisite products of traditional artisans employed by small European firms. They carry the prestigious names of Prada, Louis Vuitton, and Gucci... and they carry matching prices.

But European reporter Dana Thomas reveals that the crafty can, indeed, be very slippery. Many of these brand names are no longer proud family enterprises, but rather conglomerate-owned multinational outfits, producing their goods not by using expert artisans, but on assembly lines staffed by low-wage workers in places like China.

So, where's that requisite "Made in China" label? Some slippery conglomerates hide it in an inside pocket of the product. Some have 90 percent of the product made in China, then add a few baubles or buttons in Italy and label the whole thing "Made-in-Italy." Others simply rip out the product's China label and add a European one.

Slipperiest of all, though, are some that are making leather goods in Prato, Italy, a historic center for crafts. But Italians aren't doing the crafting here—instead, in this center of Gucci and Prada, illegal Chinese laborers have been brought in to do the work. In fact, Prato now

—continued on page 3

nonxenophobic, nonracist American majority. In particular, workaday families are fearful about what an endless flow of low-wage workers portends for their economic future—and they're not getting good answers from Republicans, Democrats, corporate leaders, or the media.

For the GOP candidates in this year's presidential run, the contest is coming down to who can be the most nativist knucklehead. They accuse each other of not wanting to punish immigrant children enough, of not being absolutists on "English-only" proposals, of having coddled illegal entrants in the past with amnesty proposals and sanctuaries, and of not being hawkish enough on sealing off and militarizing the border.

The leader of the anti-immigrant Republican pack is Tom Tancredo, a Colorado Congress critter who based his ill-fated presidential campaign on immigrant bashing. This goober is so nasty he'd scare small children. His website screeched that immigrants are "pushing drugs, raping kids, destroying lives," and his campaign slogan is a sledgehammer demand: "Deport those who don't belong. Make sure they never come back." As for illegal immigrants, Tom thinks that the term "illegal" is too soft, preferring to demonize immigrants as "aliens." Tancredo doesn't merely rant, he foams at the mouth, maniacally warning about waves of Mexican terrorists who are "coming to kill me and you and your children." Accused of trying to turn America into a gated community, he exulted, "You bet!"

At least he's taken a position, even if it's un-American and loopy. Democratic leaders, on the other hand, have mostly tried to do a squishy shuffle, wanting to beef up law enforcement against illegal immigrants while also mouthing soothing words about the good work ethic of our friends south of the border and offering a bureaucratic rigmarole to allow some of the younger ones to gain permanent residency in our country. Worse, such corporate Democrats as Rep. Rahm Emanuel urge the

party's candidates either to adopt the Republican's punitive message or simply to try ducking the issue.

Which brings us to the wall, both figuratively and literally. The fact that we are resorting to the construction of an enormous fence between two friendly nations admits to an abject failure by policymakers, who are so bereft of ideas, honesty, courage, and morality that all they can do is to try walling off the problem.

We've had experience here in Texas with the futility of tall border fences. Molly Ivins reported a beer-induced incident that took place in 1983. Walling off Mexico had been proposed back then by the Reaganauts, and a test fence had been built way down in the Big Bend outpost of Terlingua. This little town also happened to be the site of a renowned chili cook-off that Molly helped judge, and it attracted a big crowd of impish, beer-drinking chiliheads.

There stood the barrier, 17 feet tall and topped with barbed wire. It didn't take many beers before the first-ever "Terlingua Memorial Over, Under, or Through the Mexican Fence Climbing Contest" was cooked up. Winning time: 30 seconds.

Yet here come the border sealers again. Bush & Company (including Democrats who have allowed the funding) are putting up an initial \$1.2 billion to start building this version of the wall, which is projected to cost up to \$60 billion over the next 25 years to build and maintain. It's a monster wall—two or three 40-foot-high rows of reinforced fencing that take a swath of land 150 feet wide and stretch for 700 miles.

The Mexican government and people are insulted and appalled by the wall; ranchers, mayors, and families living on either side of the border hate it; environmentalists are aghast at its destructive impact on the ecology of the area. Still, it's being built. Indeed, a 2005 federal act contained a little-noticed section authorizing Bush's Homeland Security czar to *suspend any laws* that stand in the way of building the wall. Current czar Michael Chertoff

has already used this unprecedented authority to waive 19 statutes, including the Endangered Species, Clean Water, and National Historic Preservation Acts.

All this for something that will not work. As Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona put it, "Show me a 50-foot wall and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder." People have literally been dying to cross into the U.S., and it's not possible to build a wall tall enough to stop them. They will keep coming.

Why?

The question that policymakers have not faced honestly is this one: Why do these immigrants come? The answer is not that they are pulled by our jobs and government benefits, but that they are *pushed* by the abject poverty that their families face in Mexico. That might seem like a mere semantic difference, but it's huge if you're trying to develop a policy to stop the human flood across our border.

Although you never hear it mentioned in debates on the issue, you might start with this reality: Most Mexican people really would prefer to live in their own country. Can we all say, duh? Pedro Martin, who has seen most of the young men and women in his small village depart for *El Norte*, put it this way: "Up north, even though they pay more, you're not necessarily living as well. You feel out of place. Here you can walk around the whole town and it's comfortable. Life is easier."

Their family, language, culture, identity, and happiness is Mexican—yet sheer economic survival requires so many of them to abandon the place they love.

Again, why? Because in the last 15 years, Mexico's longstanding system of sustaining its huge population of poor citizens (including small self-sufficient farms, jobs in state-owned industries, and subsidies for such essentials as tortillas) has been scuttled at the insistence of U.S. banks, corporations, government officials, and "free market" ideologues. In the name of "modernizing" the Mexican economy, such giants as Citigroup, Wal-Mart, Tyson Foods, and GE—in cahoots with the plutocrats and oligarchs of Mexico—have laid waste to that country's grassroots economy, destroying the already-meager livelihoods of millions.

The 1994 imposition of NAFTA was particularly devastating. Just as Bill Clinton and the corporate elites did here, Mexico's ruling elites touted NAFTA there as a

DoSomething!

Here are a few sources of reliable information about both the problems of illegal immigration and the solutions:

■ **Judy Ance], Institute for Labor Studies**
<http://www.umkc.edu/labor-ed/about.html>
 (816) 235-1470

■ **Public Citizen's trade program**
<http://www.citizen.org/trade/>
 (202) 454-5106

■ **No Border Wall**
<http://www.notexasborder-wall.com/>
 noborderwall@yahoo.com

magic elixir that would generate growth, create jobs, raise wages, and eliminate the surge of Mexican migrants into the U.S. They were horribly wrong:

- **Economic growth in Mexico** has been anemic since '94, and the benefits of any growth have gone overwhelmingly to the wealthiest families.
- **Since NAFTA**, Mexico has created less than a third of the millions of decent jobs it needs.
- **Average factory wages** in Mexico have dropped by more than 5% under NAFTA.
- **Unemployment has jumped**, and unskilled workers are paid only \$5 a day.
- **U.S. agribusiness corporations** have more than doubled their shipment of subsidized crops into Mexico, busting the price that indigenous farmers got for their production and displacing some 2 million peasant farmers from their land.
- **Huge agribusiness operations**, many owned by U.S. investors, now control Mexican agricultural production and pay farmworkers under \$2 an hour.
- **Since NAFTA passed**, there has been a flood of business bankruptcies and takeovers in Mexico as predatory U.S. chains have moved in. U.S. corporations now control 40% of the country's formal jobs, with Wal-Mart reigning as the #1 employer.
- **19 million more Mexicans** live in poverty today than when NAFTA was passed.

So, here's the deal: Thanks to Mexico's newly corporatized economy, wage earners there get poverty pay of \$5 a day (about \$1,600 a

year), while a few hundred miles north, they might draw that much in an hour. What would you do?

The wrong debate

In our national imbroglia over Mexican immigration (yes, some illegal migrants come from elsewhere, but more than three-fourths are from Mexico), our "leaders" have set us up to look down at impoverished working people forced to leave their homeland and risk death in order to help their families escape poverty.

Instead of coming down on them, why not *start looking up*—up at the executive suites on both sides of the border. Up is where the power is. The moneyed elites in those suites are the profiteering few who have rigged all of our trade and labor policies to knock down workers, farmers, and small businesses—not merely in Mexico, but in our country as well.

In the U.S., the middle class feels imperiled because...well, because it is imperiled. Politicians, economists, and the richly paid pundits keep telling us that the American economy is robust and that people's financial pessimism and anxieties are irrational. At the kitchen table level, however, folks know the difference between chicken salad and chicken manure.

Yes, these are boom times for the luxury class, but the middle class is imploding. In a recent letter to the editor, a working stiff in California put it this way:

"We've replaced steaks with corn flakes; we can't afford to get sick; our kids can't afford health insurance; we hope that our 10-year-old van keeps running because we can't afford a new one; our kids can't buy a home because housing prices are exorbitant; our purchasing power continually regresses; and worst of all, the poverty and near-poverty classes are growing."

It's this economic fragility that anti-immigrant forces play on. But even if there were no illegal workers in our country—none—the fragility would remain, for poor Mexican laborers are *not* the ones who:

- Downsized and offshored our middle-class jobs;
- Perverted our bankruptcy laws to let corporations abrogate their union contracts;
- Stopped enforcement of America's wage and hour laws;
- Perverted the National Labor Relations Board into an anti-worker tool for corporations;
- Illegally reclassified millions of employees as "independent



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Coming next month: an excerpt from Hightower's latest book, plus the schedule for his extensive book tour—probably coming to a theater, hall, or pub near you! Written with his longtime co-conspirator, Susan DeMarco, the book is titled ***Swim Against the Current: Even a Dead Fish Can Go with the Flow.*** For more information, go to the website: www.jimhightower.com.

—continued from page 2

has the second highest Chinese population in Europe, and many of the fashion factories producing luxury brand-name items pay these workers as little as \$3 an hour.

TAKING CARE OF THE SMITHSONIAN

Our national attic is caving in.

"America's attic" is the unofficial name of the venerable Smithsonian Institution. This is the 150-year-old complex of museums on the National Mall that houses an amazing array of artifacts and other irreplaceable treasures that mark significant developments in our country's rich history. This year, 24 million people trekked through its public exhibits.

You might assume that a place that's so important to our national identity and so popular with the people would be well taken care of. You'd be wrong. The president and the Congress, Democrats as well as Republicans, have failed us as caretakers. They have squandered hundreds of billions of our tax dollars on wars, weaponry, corporate subsidies, and boondoggles, while turning a blind eye to the need for basic maintenance of America's attic.

As any homeowner knows, if you don't spend on repairs, you get collapsing roofs, endangered collections, and closed buildings. The Smithsonian is now two and a half billion dollars behind on necessary upkeep.

Yet, Democrat Dianne Feinstein told Smithsonian officials at a recent Senate hearing that they're on their own. "I see no way that that two-and-a-half-billion-dollar shortfall is ever going to be picked up by the public sector," she said.

Excuse me? The Smithsonian is public

—continued on page 4

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—continued from page 3

sector, it belongs to the people, and it's a public responsibility. Instead of forcing it to charge entrance fees, hustle corporate sponsorships, or hold bake sales, nix a few corporate tax breaks, Senator, then do your duty to care for America's attic.

LOBBYISTS RUSH TO GET W'S LAST FAVORS

The lobbyists who put tens of millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of George W and the GOP—and enjoyed big-time payback for seven years—see that time is running out. Republicans lost control of Congress, and Bush is soon to go, so corporate lobbyists are now on a frantic shopping spree.

What they want is for the Bushites to rig regulatory rules to benefit their industries. Coal barons, for example, are pleading for permission to dump tons of rubble and waste into the valleys and streams of Appalachia. This "spoil," as they call it, is the by-product of an environmentally devastating mining shortcut called mountaintop removal. To get at the coal, they blow up the top third of these beautiful mountains. Rather than hauling off their rubble, they want a n okay simply to shove it down the mountainside, burying the streams, animals, and everything else below.

Similarly, chicken potates such as Perdue want an exemption from laws that ban massive releases of ammonia from their factory farms; electric power plants want to increase their toxic emissions without the "burden" of installing pollution controls; and big business lobbyists want to bypass family-leave laws, which allow unpaid time off to care for newborns or deal with family illness.

4

contractors," leaving them with no benefits or labor rights;

- Subverted the right of workers to organize;
- Turned a blind eye to the re-emergence in America of sweatshops and child labor in everything from the clothing industry to Wal-Mart;
- Made good health care a luxury item;
- Let rich campaign donors take over both political parties;
- Passed by hook and crook a continuing series of global-trade scams to enrich the few and knock down the many.

Powerless immigrants didn't do these things to us. The richest, most-powerful, best-connected corporate interests did them. Judy Ancel, director of the Institute for Labor Studies at the University of Missouri, offers this example of Iowa Beef Processors (IBP), the largest meatpacker in the U.S., now owned by the multibillion-dollar conglomerate Tyson Foods:

Until the late 1970s, meatpacking was a high-wage industry, with highly skilled workers in charge. Factories were in union cities, union contracts provided good wages and benefits, and unions set professional standards for everything from worker training to safety conditions. Then IBP's executives transformed this beneficial model into today's profiteering system. The factories moved to nonunion cities and rural areas, and lower-skilled workers were hired to do repetitive cuts on speeded-up assembly lines. With Reagan as

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The political and the personal

FREE POLITICAL ADVICE: If you're going to bash illegal immigrants as part of your presidential bid, you shouldn't hire any of them to do personal work for you.

CASE #1: Mitt Romney. A vociferous proponent of building a really big border fence to keep these devils out, the Mittster has now been caught not once, but twice, hiring a landscaping firm that uses illegal workers to tend the lawns, tennis court, etc. at his suburban mansion near Boston.

CASE #2: Tom Tancredo. This ferocious anti-immigrant crusader, who considers illegal workers the scourge of our country, hired a construction crew in 2001 to build a 1000 square foot entertainment room in his Colorado home. Apparently, Tom didn't notice that only two of the crew spoke English, nor did he express any curiosity about the legal status of those who toiled for him. Most turned out to be undocumented "aliens," as he likes to call them. As one of the men later said, Tancredo "doesn't want us here, but he'll take advantage of our sweat and our labor. It's just not right."

president, meat-industry lobbyists were able to emasculate labor laws and unions lost their influence over the workplace, which became much less rewarding and more dangerous. IBP began intensive recruiting of Mexican workers (legal or not) to do what had become very nasty work. In only 20 years, meatpacking wages dropped by roughly half, the union was ousted, and the rate of workplace injury became one of the highest of any industry (more than a fourth of meatpacking workers now suffer "accidents").

The fix

Immigration reform cannot be separated from labor and trade reform. We can't fix the former without dealing with the other two. We must stop the exploitative NAFTAfication of such aspiring economies as Mexico and instead develop genuine grassroots investment policies that give people there an ability to remain in their homeland. Then we must enforce our own labor laws—from wage

and hour rules to the NLRB—so as to empower American workers to enforce their own rights.

Eliminating the need to migrate from Mexico and rebuilding the middle-class ladder here is an "immigration policy" that will work. But it requires us to go right at the corporate kleptocracy that now owns Washington and controls the debate.

We must challenge Democrats, especially, to broaden the debate and to recognize that they must choose sides—to be for workers or for more trade imperialism. Right now, the Democratic leadership is siding with imperialism and exacerbating the economic causes of Latino migration. For example, just last month, Speaker Nancy Pelosi engineered a vote to extend NAFTA to Peru—a corporate favor that could be called the Tom-Rahm Bipartisan Axis of Immigration Stupidity, for it drew enthusiastic support from both Tom Tancredo and Rahm Emanuel.

America's immigration problem is not down on the border, it's in Washington and on Wall Street.

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10:1 January 2008

IMMIGRANTS COME HERE BECAUSE GLOBALIZATION TOOK THEIR JOBS BACK THERE

- 2 The luxury of Chinese labor 285
- 3 Taking care of the Smithsonian
- 4 Lobbyists rush to get W's last favors