



LABOUR AND MIGRATION POLICIES UNDER VICENTE FOX: SUBORDINATION TO U.S. ECONOMIC AND GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS*

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The treatment of migration issues clearly represents one of the most important changes to have taken place in Mexican foreign policy during President Vicente Fox's first year in office (Castañeda 2001: 89). Above and beyond the anecdotal and symbolic fact that the first official ceremony he held at the president's official residence, *Los Pinos*, involved representatives of the migrant community, the National Development Plan for 2001 to 2006 identifies migration as a 'priority issue for Mexico,' one that must be addressed under 'a new long-term approach' within the framework of 'comprehensive negotiations [with the United States] that address the structural roots of the phenomenon, its manifestations, and its consequences, and that sees dealing with migration as a shared responsibility'. (Castañeda 2001: 61).

In line with this position, in the Annual Report he presented on 3 December 2001, Foreign Minister Jorge G. Castañeda noted that for the first time in the history of the bilateral agenda, the question of migration was taken on board on the basis of joint responsibility and with a long-term outlook aimed at 'making good use of the synergies that exist between the two countries'. After the parenthesis caused by the attacks on the United States of America on 11 September 2001, he added, negotiations had recommenced in full, and the two governments had recognized the need for the migration question to incorporate security concerns and for a wide-ranging agreement to be struck at the earliest possible juncture.

In addition to the Mexican foreign minister's "optimistic" view of progress in the bilateral negotiations, the migration issue is also emerging as a priority question for the government in Washington, albeit for very different and contrasting reasons. The growing U.S. interest in the matter is due to a range of factors, including the following: (a) the presence of a population of Mexican origin that already numbers over 23 million and is consolidating itself as the

* In Gerardo Otero: Mexico in Transition: Neoliberal Globalism the State and Civil Society, Zed books, forthcoming.

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“hard core” of the largest minority in the country, the Hispanics; (b) the ebullient dynamism that has been characteristic of recent emigration from Mexico; and (c) the obvious problems and challenges posed, from a “national security” viewpoint, by the U.S.’s southern border, which is more than 3,000 km long and the busiest in the world, with more than one million crossings a day. As a result of the progress made in the negotiations, five broad areas for discussion have so far been placed on the bilateral agenda:

- Straightening out the legal status of the more than three million undocumented Mexican migrants who live in the United States.
- Establishing a temporary worker program, to allow the Mexican workforce authorized access to specific regions and sectors of the U.S. job market.
- Agreeing on a special migratory relationship between Mexico and the United States and, consequently, increasing the number of visas available to Mexicans, to bring them more into line with the real migration levels currently prevailing between the two countries.
- Strengthening border security through joint Mexico-U.S. actions, with particular emphasis on efforts to combat trafficking in human lives and to prevent migrant deaths along the common border.
- Promoting regional development programs in the areas of Mexico with the highest levels of migration, and combining those efforts with the future implementation of a temporary worker program between the two countries. (Tuirán, Fuentes and Ramos 2001:4.

While recognizing the unprecedented nature of this agenda, which has fuelled great expectations among government circles and in some sectors of the migrant community, it should be noted that none of the proposed issues has been dealt with in full and that conflicting reactions still prevail in the different forums where they have been discussed (presidential summits, foreign ministries, parliamentary meetings, the bi-national commission, etc.). It is clear from the onset that the agenda excludes the proposal that Fox made during his presidential campaign: the demand for the free movement of labour. Important questions thus remain unanswered: What is the nature of the Fox administration’s change of direction on the migration question? Is it a strategic shift in Mexican foreign policy or merely a short-term superficial change? Is there a hidden agenda behind the trappings of the government’s new position? And, if so, what are its thrust and its likely consequences?

Using those important questions as a starting point, the main objective of this paper is to offer a critical overview of the Fox administration’s migration policy, taking into account the broad and intricate spectrum of labour relations that has arisen between Mexico and the United States under the influence of neoliberal globalism. Our primary interest lies in penetrating the content and scope of that policy and in revealing what lies behind the official rhetoric and constitutes the true face of relations between the two countries.

Our principal hypothesis is that beyond the partial achievements that have been attained, the shift in Mexico’s migration policy under President Vicente Fox represents *the country’s greater subordination to the strategic geopolitical and economic interests of the United States*. This, in turn, is tied in with the strategic role that Mexican labour has been given in the context of the U.S. industrial restructuring, both within and beyond its borders.

For the purpose of this analysis, the paper is divided into four sections. The first examines the nature of trade between Mexico and the United States under the aegis of neoliberalism. Next, attention is paid to the particular dialectic that has arisen in that context between the country’s export growth and international migration. Third, the content and scope of the migration issues on the bilateral agenda are studied. The final section briefly describes the responses and alternative approaches that have emerged from the rank and file of the migrant community itself.

The true face of trade between Mexico and the United States

Two background factors are of relevance in addressing this first topic. The first of these is the creation of three blocs characterized by different configurations of capitalism following the dissolution of the post-war “order” and the emergence of a strategy for stepping up the U.S. hegemony in this continent. The second is the U.S. need to tackle its shortcomings in competitiveness and technological innovation vis-à-vis Germany and Japan, and thereby resolving—or at least mitigating—its severe external debt problem. It should be noted that the United States has gone from being the world’s leading creditor to become its biggest debtor. Since 1987, the United States has been a net debtor. Faced with this new dynamic in the global economy, U.S. multinational companies have adopted a strategy aimed, *inter alia*, at drastically reducing their labour costs.

Part of this has been the neoliberal reforms and painful structural adjustment programs imposed on Mexico, and on the rest of Latin America, by the ruling classes, acting in concert with the different international agencies that serve the United States and the powerful interests it represents: the multinational corporations and banks (Otero 1996c; Valenzuela 1996; Guillén 1997; Veltmeyer 2000). At this point we offer an analysis of one of the strategic goals at which those measures are aimed: *the transformation of the country’s export sector, making it the centre point of the reoriented Mexican economy and placing it at the service of U.S. imperialist power.*

Because of this and because of the optical illusion created by the country’s repositioning as Latin America’s leading export power and the eighth largest exporter in the world, it is vitally important that we reveal exactly what the country exports and who exactly is involved in and benefits from this export “boom.” The first noteworthy element that emerges from an examination of Mexico’s exports is the elevated dynamism and specific weight of *maquiladora* companies: assembly plants associated with internationalized productive processes that are not highly integrated with the national economy. Between 1982 and 2001, the *maquiladora* industry’s sales abroad increased 25-fold, ultimately accounting for almost half of all manufactured exports (48.5%). Moreover, that proportion rises to 54% if the export surplus alone – that is, the difference between the value of the exports and the import requirements – is taken into account (Cypher 2000: 16). In addition, spectacular growth also took place in *non-maquiladora* manufacturing, exports from which rose twenty-fold over the same period. And, even more significantly: in some of its more dynamic segments, such as the automobile industry, trends toward *maquila* patterns can be seen, based on segmentation and industrial delocalisation processes, with an exceedingly high import component. Imported components generally account for between 85% and 95% of vehicles exported to the United States (Kurt Unger 1990: 77). Gerardo Fujii (2000:1014) highlights this phenomenon in the following terms: ‘The dynamism of the export sector does not pull the rest of the economy along with it; instead, it escapes abroad, chiefly to the United States. Two very dynamic export sectors provide good examples of this: automobiles and electronics. Both are dominated by multinational companies, which carry out final assembly of their products in the country, using mostly imported components. And so the industrial sector is beginning to resemble the assembly industries along the border with the United States. Supporting this same line of analysis, James Cypher (2001:12), holds that: ‘Mexico’s export “miracle” can be largely explained by globalization strategies drawn up in Detroit – the U.S. auto industry accounted for approximately one out of every five dollars of Mexico’s non-oil exports during 1997’.

Another important piece of this peculiar structure is the overwhelming presence – estimated at between 65% and 75% – of intra-firm trade within U.S. corporations (Baker 1995: 402). In

addition to contravening the “free market dynamics” preached by neoliberal orthodoxy, this underscores the exceptional plundering of the Mexican economy that is taking place. The concept of shared production inherent in intra-firm trade does not, of course, mean shared profits. Export prices in commerce of this kind are set artificially by the companies without declaring “profits,” which not only allows a net transfer of earnings abroad, but also enables each job created to be subsidised and the bill for those subsidies to be passed on to the Mexican economy.

Paradoxically, in spite of the Mexican economy’s dedication to exports – the total volume of which rose from US\$22 million to \$158 billion between 1982 and 2001 – this does not help mitigate the country’s severe external deficit problems; on the contrary, it translates into an ever-increasing volume of imports. It is particularly revealing that between 1988 and 1994, manufactured exports grew at an average annual rate (5%) that was less than half the rate of growth recorded for imports of those same products (12%) (Rueda 1998: 110). So pronounced are these tendencies that Enrique Dussel (1996: 80) has called this model of industrialization “import-oriented.” And although this import dynamic was momentarily interrupted by Mexico’s 1995 economic crisis, it soon picked up again, with deficits of slightly over US\$6 billion in 1997 and \$16 billion in 2001.

All of this casts a diminished light on the scope of the new export dynamic and puts into perspective. It becomes clear that this process, contrary to what might be expected from its evolution toward a model of secondary exporting (i.e., a specialization in manufactured exports), bears little relation to the domestic economy and has a minimal multiplying effect on it.

In addition to showcasing the fragility and volatility of the export dynamic, the comments made above require that we accurately assess the nature and scope of what the country actually exports. In this regard, it is clear that the name of “manufactured exports” is too grand a title for most of Mexico’s foreign trade, which takes place within the realm of intra-firm commerce and primarily involves the *maquiladora* sector. As Carlos Tello (1996: 50) has correctly pointed out, what Mexico essentially sells abroad is its *labour force*, without ever having it leave the country. Thus, the veil of supposed progress in secondary exports conceals the contraction of a part of the Mexican economy, which is reduced and compelled to serve as a reserve of manpower for foreign capital.

Perhaps it is not superfluous to point out that this export specialization bears some relation to Mexico’s direct exports of labour to the United States through labour migration, which indelibly marks the nature of commercial exchanges between the two nations. Both cases mean *net transfers abroad of potential earnings*.

This analysis of the nature of the Mexican economy’s reincorporation into the sphere of U.S. capitalism leads to at least two conclusions. Firstly, *labour* is the country’s chief export good, with a net contribution to the balance of trade in excess of US\$28 billion in 2001. This estimate includes both the added value of the *maquiladora* industry – intended as an approximate indicator of indirect labour exports – and the remittances sent home by directly exported workers. Mexico also exports *natural resources* (primarily oil) and *assets*. This latter area – the acquisition of the assets of privatized public companies at knock-down prices – is where most direct foreign investment has been channelled, helping concentrate and centralize the capital of large multinational companies. It is worth adding that these investments have been channelled into acquiring the country’s financial sector through the purchase of Mexico’s largest banks: Bancomer, bought by Banco Bilbao Vizcaya, and Banamex, bought by Citibank.

Secondly –and perhaps the best illustration of the extremely restricted nature of the process of capital accumulation in Mexico– is the transfer (or, perhaps more correctly, the plundering) of surpluses that takes place in the neoliberal context, under the aegis of U.S. imperialism. The total amount of surpluses transferred from the country, chiefly to the United States, between 1982 (when the shift toward neoliberalism began) and 1997 has been estimated at

US\$457 billion, expressed in constant 1990 prices (Saxe-Fernández and Núñez 2001: 150-151). This calculation includes two types of transfers: those intended as debt service, and those that can be considered trade losses (either through the trade balance or rent, or to pay for franchises, concessions, or patent rights). The true dimensions of this figure – which does not include transfers of potential earnings through direct and indirect exports of labour – become apparent if we consider that Latin America is the underdeveloped world's leading tributary region and that, within that region, Mexico is the leading country.

Dialectic between export growth and international migration

The other side of the Mexican economy's export orientation – and what gives it the appearance of an enclave (Delgado Wise and Mañán 2000) – is the impoverishment of most of the population. “Enclave” is not used here in its classic sense, but rather to refer to the plundering and expropriation of a portion (and not necessarily a small one) of the nation's territory and its workforce by foreign capital, through a construct that brandishes highly destructive “macroeconomic conditions” that restrict the domestic economy and pull down wages. In such an enclave, social inequalities become more acute and there emerges an ever-increasing mass of workers unable to find a place within the country's formal labour market, as a result of which one-third of the economically active population situates itself in the “informal sector” (see Dussel Peters in this volume). This is the breeding ground that fuels the current vigorous process of cross-border migration.

To give an idea of the dimensions the phenomenon has acquired, the following figures are more than eloquent:

- The number of people born in Mexico and who live in the United States totals 8.2 million, of whom slightly more than one-third are undocumented migrants.
- The flow of temporary migrants (“sojourners”) accounts for between 800,000 and one million journeys per year.
- Each year, some 300,000 Mexicans establish their permanent residence (“settlers”) in the United States (Tuirán 2000).

Even though the phenomenon of Mexico-U.S. labour migration has a lengthy history dating back to the second half of the 19th century, unprecedented levels of intensity and dynamism characterize its current phase. For instance, the net annual international migratory flow over the past decade was ten times higher than the one recorded twenty years earlier (Tuirán, Fuentes and Ramos 2001: 6). This dynamic also implies major qualitative transformations, in terms of the geography of migration (diversification of points of origin and destinations, and greater numbers coming from urban areas), the occupational spectrum of cross-border workers (new fields for insertion into the U.S. job market), migratory patterns (age, sex, schooling, place in the family, duration of stay, legal status, etc.), and the amounts of remittances, the mechanisms used to send and receive them, the uses to which those funds are put, and the impact they have.

The following figures from the year 2000 underscore some of the new aspects of the phenomenon:

- Although the intensity of international migration varies on a geographical basis, 96.2% of the country's municipalities report some form of a link with migratory phenomena. Something similar occurs inside the United States, where residents of Mexican origin, while they are mostly concentrated in a handful of states, can be found in practically

all parts of the country, including Alaska and Hawaii, where slightly over 100,000 Mexicans live.

- 55% of all Mexico-born residents of the United States aged 15 years and older completed their secondary schooling or some higher level of education. This figure drops to 40.7% among the core group of temporary or circular migrants and rises to 71.8% if the full spectrum of the population of Mexican origin in the United States is taken into consideration. The corresponding national average is 51.8%; in general terms and contrary to common belief, this means that more qualified workers are migrating than remaining in the country.
- Another form of migration that does not fall in with the traditional stereotypes involves Mexican residents in the United States who have university degrees or postgraduate qualifications. The numbers in question stand at around slightly more than 250,000 people.
- The employment rate among the economically active Mexican population in the United States is fifteen percentage points higher than the corresponding level in Mexico.
- The number of Mexico-born migrant workers with formal jobs north of the border stands at around five million – a figure equal to one-quarter of the workers employed in the formal sector in Mexico.
- 36.2% of migrants are employed in the secondary sector (i.e., industry), while the corresponding figure in Mexico is only 27.8%. This situation contrasts with the stereotypical view of migrants as agricultural workers (in reality, only 13.3% of Mexican migrants work in the primary sector) and points to a fundamental change in the cross-border labour market.

Along with these characteristics, there has been a significant increase in the flow of remittances sent from the United States to Mexico, which increased 3.5-fold over the past decade to reach, in 2001, a historical maximum of US\$8.89 billion (see Table 9.1). Not only does this consolidate the country's position as the number one recipient of migrant remittances in Latin America and number two in the world (Waller Meyers 2000: 275, Lozano 2000: 160-161), it also makes labour exports Mexico's third most important source of foreign exchange earnings, making a greater contribution to the balance of payments than either tourism or agricultural exports.

Table 9.1. Importance of Remittances in Foreign Exchange Earnings (U.S. dollars, millions).

YEAR	Sector of Origin				
	Remittances	Tourism	Oil	Manufacture	Agriculture
1991	2660	4340	8166	32307	2373
1992	3070	4471	8307	36169	2112
1993	3333	4564	7418	42500	2504
1994	3475	4855	7445	51075	2678
1995	3673	4688	8423	67383	4016
1996	4224	5287	11654	81014	3592
1997	4865	5748	11323	95565	3828
1998	5627	6038	7134	106550	3796
1999	5910	5869	9920	122819	4144
2000	6572	5953	14884	145261	4263
2001	8895	6538	12801	141346	4007

Source: Bank of Mexico Annual Report, 2001 and INEGI, Economic Indicators, 2001.

The vital importance of these remittances in offsetting external imbalances becomes even clearer if each sector's net contribution to foreign exchange earnings is analyzed. In this case, remittances constitute the second largest source of net income after oil. Moreover, following the decline in international oil prices in 1998, incomes from remittances managed to secure the top position.

Table 9.2. Contribution of Remittances to the Net External Trade Balance (U.S. dollars, million)

YEAR	Sector of Origin					
	Agriculture	Oil and Gas	Mineral	Manufacture	Tourism	Remittances
1991	242	7030	395	-14660	1905	2660
1992	-746	6896	360	-22066	1788	3070
1993	-129	6054	319	-19068	1948	3333
1994	-693	6265	291	-23350	2305	3475
1995	1373	7507	-133	-117	3028	3673
1996	-1079	10469	74	-124	3327	4224
1997	-345	9227	758	-6023	3710	4865
1998	-976	5406	544	-9881	3760	5627
1999	-554	8954	-446	-10363	3768	5910
2000*	-161	9385	1388	-12969	2854	4564
2001*	-843	11006	-483	-13356	2981	6700

Source: Bank of Mexico Annual Report, 2001 and INEGI, Economic Indicators, 2001.

* Data for the third trimester

The fact that migrant remittances have attained this status – becoming the source of foreign exchange with the most consistent levels of growth over the 1990s – not only makes them more visible and attractive to international financial capital, it also places the apologists of the Mexican exporting “miracle” in a decidedly difficult position: faced with such overwhelming evidence, how can they continue to conceal the underdeveloped nature of Mexican economy or the profoundly asymmetrical character of the trading relations established with U.S. capitalism?

Moving on to the social arena, the strategic importance of migration is not only reaffirmed, it is redimensioned: as Rodolfo Corona (2001: 38) so rightly points out, the ‘migration phenomenon and its remittances are generalized aspects in the country’s life, in that they involve one out of every five Mexican households’. The phenomenon is even more accentuated in the rural areas of nine states in the centre and west of the country, where that figure rises to one household of every two.

The contradictory dynamic between migration and economic growth under the aegis of neoliberalism can be summarized in the following four points. Firstly, although migrant remittances are enormously important as a source of foreign exchange for the country and of subsistence for countless Mexican households, they also represent a net transfer abroad of potential earnings.

Secondly, unlike labour that is exported indirectly (through *maquiladoras*), workers who emigrate and settle in the United States consume a very significant part of the wages in that country, whereby the potential multiplying impact of their earnings is transferred to the U.S. economy. Note that the incomes of workers of Mexican origin in the United States totalled,

during 2000, some US\$250 billion, \$87 billion of which were earned by Mexican-born emigrants. These amounts contrast sharply with the remittances sent back to Mexico, which, impressive as they may seem, accounted for a total of US\$6.57 billion during that same year.

Thirdly, from a fiscal point of view, international migrants contribute more to the receiving economy than they receive in benefits and public services. Through transfers of resources, migrants contribute to the mass of social capital available to the U.S. state. According to data from the National Immigration Forum, during 1997 the migrant population in the UNITED STATES contributed US\$80 billion more to that country's coffers than they received in benefits from the U.S. government at the local, state, and national levels; with contributions at this level migrants introduce dynamism in the receiving economy.

Fourthly, although this aspect is difficult to quantify, by bringing pressure to bear on the job market, migrants tend to have an adverse affect on wage increases in the receiving economy, particularly in the areas and sectors in which they are employed. In connection with this, a recent study by Jean Papail (2001) points out that the gap between the average income of migrant workers and the U.S. federal minimum wage has been decreasing for the past 25 years. Measured in constant 2000 prices, the minimum wage fell by 38% over that period, from US\$11.70 to \$7.20 per hour. The paradox of this situation is that it is taking place alongside the changes in migrant profiles described above – in other words, that migrants now have higher education standards and greater presence in the manufacturing sector. This clearly indicates the vicious circle within Mexico's migration patterns, where the dice are clearly loaded in favour of the hegemonic interests of the United States.

*Mexico's migration policy:
from "no policy" to open subordination*

Using strict cost-benefit calculations – with the clear aim of avoiding a confrontation with the UNITED STATES, particularly as regards undocumented migrants – from 1974 and until very recently the Mexican government chose to follow a peculiar strategy that García y Griego (1988) calls 'the policy of no policy', entailing the absence of any explicit policy on migration matters.

The negotiation and enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement served as a fundamental point of reference for the subsequent course of bilateral relations and, in particular, of international migration. The Mexican government's agreement to exclude the issue of migration from the negotiation agenda and adhere a-critically to the principle of free movement for investments and goods reaffirms not only its lack of commitment toward the migrant sector, but also its frank and, in this instance, open subordination to the hegemonic interests of the United States.

The same attitude can be seen in the Mexican government's lukewarm stance vis-à-vis Washington's ferocious assault on the human and labour rights of Mexican migrants. Among the many measures introduced by the United States to install a *regime of terror* along the border with Mexico are the countless operations deployed by its Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to curtail, at any cost, the growing flow of labour migrants. Bearing in mind that Mexico ranks as the United States' number two trading partner, this is far from a civilized "good neighbour" policy between partners. One clear indicator of the vehemence with which the anti-immigration policy is being pursued is the increasingly generous – some might say exorbitant – budget given to the INS, totalling US\$4.18 billion in 1999. In line with the xenophobia behind the failed Proposition 187 of California Governor Pete Wilson, on 30 September 1996 the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act came into

effect. This legislation (which is still in force) was important in that it institutionalized the *criminalization of labour migration*, through a series of arbitrary procedural provisions that violate the human and labour rights of cross-border workers (Mohar 2001: 51). One of the most reprehensible outcomes of this “hard-line” approach within U.S. immigration policy has been the proliferation of Mexican deaths along our northern border, totalling 1,236 between 1998 and 2000 (Villaseñor and Morena 2002: 13); recourse is thus being made to ‘death as an element in dissuading migration’, ratifying the predisposition toward state terrorism as an essential ingredient in U.S. foreign policy and domestic security.

Significantly, the Mexican government’s chief response to those challenges was the enactment of legislation whereby Mexican nationality could not be lost. This was, essentially, a measure intended to help Mexicans in the United States defend their rights, allowing them to acquire U.S. citizenship without losing Mexican nationality (Martínez 1999: 251). However, one area of constant conflict is the fact that the law still does not grant sufficient guarantees to those who use it and wish to enjoy full exercise of their Mexican citizenship, i.e., the right to vote and to run for public office. It should be noted that the law in question – which came into effect on 20 March 1998 – has been taken up and reinterpreted by the organized migrant community in the United States, who are demanding, with increasing vehemence, full political rights.

The onset of Vicente Fox’s presidency in December 2000 brought on a reassessment of the migration question, placing it for the first time ever in the history of Mexico-U.S. relations as a priority issue on the bilateral agenda (2001:89). How should the change in positions on the part of the two governments be interpreted? What reading should be made of the negotiation agenda they agreed on? What interests does it serve? And what are its real implications? Moreover, returning to the five main issues on the agenda – straightening out migrants’ status, a temporary worker program, increased visa numbers, strengthening borderland security, and promoting development programs in high migration areas – what assessment can we make of the progress made in the negotiations?

First of all, the change in the governments’ positions regarding migration is based on their recognition of a reality: the burgeoning growth of the migration phenomenon (contradicting the predictions and preachings of neoliberal doctrine) and the United States’ inability to contain it (or, better put, to regulate it) on a unilateral basis using strict police and military measures, such as those provided for in the 1996 Act (Mohar 2001: 54). Because of the recession affecting the U.S. economy and its knock-on effect on the Mexican economy, these problems are accentuated and redimensioned from the perspective of the hemispheric security of the world’s leading capitalist power.

Secondly, even though these five issues on the bilateral agenda address matters of interest to the migrant community, they avoid one issue of key importance to Mexico’s strategic interests: the liberalization of migratory flows. The agenda is therefore *structurally limited* in that it fails to address a key aspect of the root causes of international migration and that, on the contrary, and as the Mexican government itself has stated, it is aimed at ‘evolving toward a regime of ordered flows’ or regulated migration. It is not difficult to see that the negotiating dice are loaded in favour of the United States’ strategic interests and that, in the worst case scenario, they will continue to benefit from a reserve of cheap Mexican labour. Consequently, President Fox’s comment, made in his first State of the Nation address and reiterated in Foreign Minister Castañeda’s annual report, that ‘for the first time in history, the United States has agreed to negotiate the migration issue on a comprehensive basis with another country’, is inaccurate.

With respect to the “progress” made with each of the items on the bi-national agenda, the following comments and observations are of relevance. First of all, to date there has practically

been nothing of importance to report regarding the migratory status of the three million Mexicans stigmatized as “illegals.” The only information available notes that any possibility of an “amnesty” (a term proper to the criminalization of labour migration) has virtually been dismissed by the U.S. government and replaced by a more modest program of “acquired adjustment” (Miller and Seymour 2001: 1). Thus, in February 2002, the INS announced that the so-called “amnesty” could benefit some 300,000 Mexicans.

Secondly, the question of temporary workers is clearly one that has fuelled keen interest among U.S. authorities and lawmakers alike. Everything points toward the launch of a program that will allow a given number of Mexicans to legally work in the United States for a guaranteed minimum wage and access to some health benefits, provided that they return to Mexico after one year and that the number of workers allowed to register is annually adjusted in response to the conditions prevailing in the U.S. economy, particularly unemployment rates (Roldán 2001: 85). This program, which has been styled as involving *guest workers* – perhaps in an attempt to disassociate it from the discredited Bracero Program – clearly demonstrates one of the basic pillars of Washington’s position in the negotiating process. With its “generous” offer of extracting millions of Mexican labour migrants from under the “shadow of illegality” and “granting” them minimum labour rights, the program proposes – in the words of its chief advocate, Senator Gramm – ‘strengthening the U.S. economy and stimulating [through the remittances sent back to Mexico and the skills acquired by the “guest” workers in the program] Mexico’s long-delayed economic development’. In accordance with this idea, a pilot experiment was carried out in the state of Zacatecas, involving the U.S. companies LEH Packing Company, ACME Brick, Kanex, San Angelo, and Marcus Drake (García Zamora and Moctezuma, 2001). And although everything indicates that the program has President Fox’s blessing, the United Conference of Mexicans Abroad – an umbrella group representing some twenty political organizations – has stated its flat-out ‘rejection of the guest or temporary worker program’ and its disagreement with the fact that the migrant community’s representatives were excluded from the negotiations (El Universal 5/01/02).

Thirdly, no information is available on possible progress in the numbers of visas allotted to Mexicans. The INS’s per-country information gives updated figures for 1999 only, as does the webpage of the U.S. embassy in Mexico. The only figure we have is that in the H-2a visa program (temporary farm workers), Mexico’s share in comparison to other nationalities fell between 1995 and 2000.

Fourthly, of the five issues on the bilateral agenda, the matter of *borderland security* is by far the one that has received the most attention from both governments and regarding which the greatest common ground has been identified. In this case, as with the guest worker program, the vision and interests of Mexico’s northern neighbour have been imposed. A clear example of this can be seen in the Plan of Action for Cooperation on Border Safety, signed on 22 June 2001, which includes: ‘stopping people up to three kilometres to the south of the border; having the Border Patrol and the Grupos Beta carry out operations to “dissuade” migration; and exchanges of information between the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic (PGR) and the Naturalization and Immigration Service (INS) to combat smuggling gangs’ (Sandoval 2001: 252). This is a set of coordinated operations, through which Mexico’s police forces are placed at the service of U.S. security and assigned tasks in combating undocumented migration, under the aegis of a supposed commitment toward protecting the human rights of the citizenry. The 377 Mexican migrants who died during 2001, the 29% increase in the INS’s budget (announced by President Bush on 29 January 2002), and the decision to increase by almost 800% the number of National Guard members deployed along the border (divulged by the White House on 6 February 2002) are unequivocal signals that human rights do not feature among Washington’s priorities.

At the same time, the Mexican authorities' lukewarm reaction to the violence and terrorism unleashed by the U.S. government reveals that human rights are not a priority for the Fox administration either. And, worse still: in exchange for certain concessions vis-à-vis Mexican labour migration – which, to date, have been nothing more than empty promises – the Mexican government has agreed to serve as the U.S. sentry on its own southern border under two complementary programs: the *Puebla Panama Plan* (see Laura Carlsen's chapter in this volume) and the *Plan Sur*.

This latter program, launched on 1 July 2001, was designed to reduce the porous nature of Mexico's borders with Guatemala and Belize, through a heightened police and military presence within the framework of the commitment the Fox administration acquired with Washington to reduce the flow of undocumented immigrants reaching the common border (Sandoval 2001:252). This is, above all, an operation to seal off Mexico's southern border through police and military controls, which reproduces within the country the security system designed by the United States and assigns the Mexican government the "dirty work" of curtailing migration from Central and South America, in a unprecedented demonstration of servility and subordination. President Fox's recent offer to tighten up controls on flows of migrants explicitly reaffirms that position (*La Jornada* 14/02/02).

The fifth area is regional development in the areas of highest migration, where progress has been practically non-existent. So far there have been no signs of any such initiatives involving the governments of the two countries. All that exist are mechanisms run by state governments, such as the 3x1 program in Zacatecas, "My Community" in Guanajuato, and, most recently, with backing from the Fox administration, "Adopt a Community" (Reforma 20/01/02). The aim of the first two programs is to channel collective funding from migrants into social projects (Torres 1998). The peculiar feature of the third program – to be put in place in five Mexican states – is that it has been designed as a strategy for fighting poverty. This approach, however, is based on a mistaken view of the relationship between marginalization and international migration. The severe structural restrictions imposed by the neoliberal context notwithstanding (Veltemeyer and O'Malley, 2001), none of these programs seriously addresses the possibility of using the potential offered by remittances – and other resources available to the migrant community – to further local and regional development (Delgado Wise and Rodríguez, 2001).

From what has been said it is clear that the results of the bilateral negotiations on migration issues have exclusively favoured the U.S. strategic interests in the arenas of geopolitics (hemispheric security) and geoeconomics (availing itself of the advantages Mexico offers in terms of cheap labour and natural resources). The agenda emerges as a zero-sum game wherein what is gained by one side is lost by the other. In this asymmetrical negotiation process that has nothing to do with the principle of shared responsibility, the dignity that for so long characterized the foreign policy pursued by the Mexican government has ultimately been disfigured and replaced by *open subordination*.

The migrant community and the challenges of neoliberal globalism

In concluding, it should be pointed out that today's migrant community appears much less isolated, disperse, and disorganized than in the past. As a contradictory by-product of the historic evolution and maturing process of migratory social networks, individual migrants have embarked on an increasingly perceptible and significant evolution toward becoming what Miguel Moctezuma (2001) has called bi-national and trans-territorial collective agents.

This process is taking shape through the emergence of a wide array of clubs (currently totalling more than 500), associations of clubs, state-based federations in several U.S. states, and multiple alliances and coalitions between organizations from different states with a national and bi-national outlook. The migrant community is progressing toward higher levels of organization, characterized, *inter alia*, by: (a) having a relatively permanent formal organization; (b) using it to strengthen ties of cultural identity, belonging, and solidarity with their places of origin; (c) opening up the potential for dialogue with different public and private agencies, in both Mexico and the United States; and (d) enjoying a not inconsiderable financial potential—through collective funds that transcend the limitations and constraints inherent in individual or family remittances—for undertaking public works projects and, ultimately, local and regional development efforts.

One of the demands that has stirred up the most interest among migrant communities is for them to be able to fully exercise their rights as Mexican citizens while abroad. This demand—which is an immediate consequence of the 1998 constitutional amendment whereby Mexican nationality could not be lost—brings together three claims that go severely against the grain of the ideology and practices of neoliberal globalism: (a) strengthening national identity, the opposite tendency to the disintegration and fragmentation inherent in globalism; (b) collective support for local and regional development, in opposition to the destruction of the domestic market and the country's productive base caused by neoliberal restructuring; and (c) bottom-up democracy, attacking the separation between the political class and civil society that neoliberal "democracy" has exacerbated (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001: ch. 6).

On the other hand, the demands of the migrant community in the United States are directed toward straightening out their legal status, securing full rights as citizens, and creating a multicultural society, in contrast to political exclusion, social marginalization, and the constant formation of ethnic minorities and ghettos ([Castles and Miller, 1998](#)). And we could also add their demand for open borders, which is directed at one of the key elements in the strategy for imperialist domination that guides relations between Mexico and the United States (Wihtol de Wenden 1999).

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