

ARTICLES

Communities Without Borders

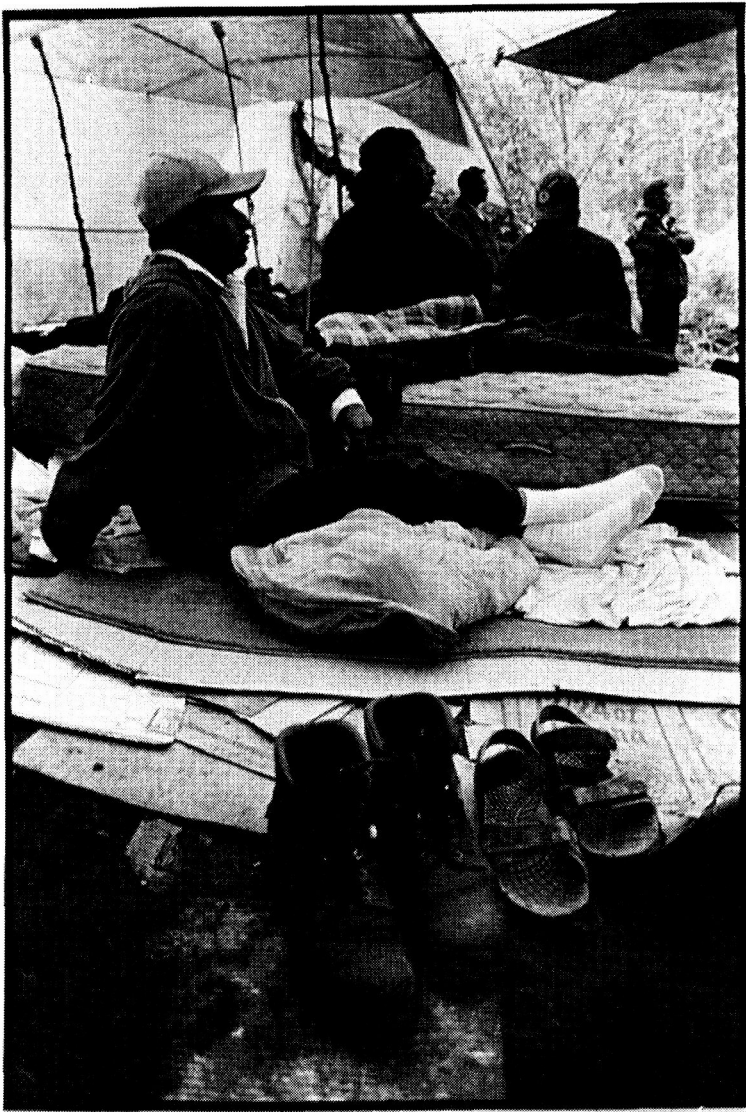
DAVID BACON

In 1982 Guatemalan army troops filled the roads through the highlands above Huehuetenango. As part of the country's civil war, soldiers, carrying Armalite rifles supplied by US President Ronald Reagan, swept into the small indigenous villages of Santa Eulalia and San Miguel Acatán. Accusing the towns of using church youth groups to recruit guerrillas, they began killing political activists. Finally, after the army shot down San Miguel teenagers in front of the church, many families fled. Helicopters chased and bombed them through the mountains, all the way to the Mexican border. For those who stayed behind, there was no work—just devastation.

That same year indigenous farm workers from Oaxaca, living in Sinaloa's migrant labor camps in northern Mexico, began to rise up against filthy living conditions and backbreaking labor. Radical young Mixtec organizers launched strikes and, together with left-wing students from the local university in Culiacán, faced down growers, police, armed guards and, ultimately, Mexican troops.

Oaxaca's Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui laborers were recent arrivals in Sinaloa, but they had already been migrating within Mexico for two decades. Starting in the late 1950s, when Mexican policies of rural development and credit began to fail, the inhabitants of small Oaxacan villages traveled first to nearby Veracruz. There they found work unavailable in their home state, cutting sugar cane and picking coffee for the rich planters of the coast.

Then Sinaloa's new factory farms a thousand miles north, growing tomatoes and strawberries for US supermarkets, needed



A community of indigenous Chatino immigrants from Oaxaca live in a field in the Sonoma County wine country of California.

ALL PHOTOS BY DAVID BACON

workers too. Soon growers began recruiting the south's indigenous migrants, and before long, trains were packed with Oaxacan families every spring.

Over the next twenty years Guatemala's Q'ang' and Mam refugees, and Oaxaca's indigenous farm workers, moved north through Mexico. Eventually they began crossing the border into the United States. Today, both of these migrant streams have developed well-established communities thousands of miles from their hometowns. In Nebraska, Los Angeles and Florida, Huehuetenango highlanders affectionately call their neighborhoods Little San Miguel. Triquis living just below the border in Baja California named their settlements Nuevo San Juan Copala in honor of their Oaxacan hometown. In Fresno and Madera, California, the Mixtec community is so large that signs in grocery stores list

sale items not just in Spanish but in a tongue that predates the Spaniards' arrival by centuries.

Indigenous migrant streams have created communities all along the northern road. Their experience defies common US preconceptions about immigrants.

In Washington, DC, discussions of immigration are filled with false assumptions. US policy treats migrants as individual workers, ignoring the social pressures that force whole communities to move, and the networks of families and hometowns that sustain migrants on their journeys. Government policy often requires the deportation of parents caught without papers, who have to leave behind their children born in the United States. Sometimes, in this through-the-looking-glass world, the opposite happens, and undocumented youth

find themselves forced to move back to a place they don't even remember.

Policy-makers see migration simply as a journey from point A to point B. They assume that people make decisions about when to leave home, where to go and how to live based simply on economics—the need for a job. There is no denying the importance of the universal human need for work. But the worldwide dislocation of communities forced to migrate in search of it has never been a voluntary process. In Washington dislocation is a dirty, unmentionable secret of the global economy.

What US immigration policy does not take into account is how the drive for community motivates migration. Current proposals for “guest workers” are the latest form of this denial. Corporate interests have successfully made them the centerpiece of almost all current immigration reform proposals, whether put forth by Republicans or Democrats. By definition, guest workers are admitted on a temporary basis, contracted to employers. They have no right to settle in communities, send their children to school, practice their culture and religion or speak their language. They can't vote or exercise fundamental political or labor rights. They can come only if an employer or a gang-boss recruiter offers them a job. Without constant employment, they have to leave. The assumption is that they are here to work, and only to work.

Sergio Sosa, a Guatemalan organizer of Omaha Together One Community in Nebraska, an organizing project started by the Industrial Areas Foundation, emphasizes that “Mams and Qanjobales face poverty and isolation, even the possible disappearance of their identity. But they didn't choose this. People from Europe and the United States crossed our borders to come to Guatemala and took over our land and economy. Migration is a form of fighting back. Now it's our turn to cross borders.”

When they do, though, they confront a second dirty secret of globalization—inequality. Inequality is the most important product of US immigration policy, and a conscious one. The current spate of guest-worker proposals all assume that immigrants should not be treated as the equals of the people around them, or have the same rights. Among the crucial rights denied them is the right to community—both to live in communities of their own creation and to be part of the broader community around them.

Nonetheless, migrants can and do carry community with them, along with traditions of social rights and organization.

David Bacon writes frequently about labor and immigration. His book The Children of NAFTA was published last year by the University of California Press, and his photodocumentary on transnational communities, Beyond Borders, is coming out next year from Cornell University/ILR Press. Research for this article was supported by The Nation Institute.



Women in a weaving cooperative founded by the Frente in Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca.

While living in a settlement of bamboo and plastic tents, for instance, in the reeds beside California's Russian River, Fausto Lopez, a Triqui migrant farm worker, became president of the Sonoma County chapter of the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB). He brought fellow Triquis from their impromptu encampment to marches and demonstrations in California's state capitol, demanding driver's licenses and amnesty for

undocumented immigrants. Living in conditions most Americans equate with extreme poverty, they see themselves not as victims but social actors with a right to acceptance both in Mexico and the United States.

“Indigenous Oaxaqueños understand the need for community and organization,” says Rufino Domínguez, who coordinates the FIOB. “When people migrate from a community in Oaxaca, in the new places where they settle they form

a committee comprised of people from their hometown. This is a tradition they don't lose, wherever they go.”

Indigenous migrants from Mexico and Central America overwhelmingly belong to transnational communities like those of Oaxaca's Mixtecs and Triquis, or Guatemala's Mams and Qanjobales. Mixtec scholar Gaspar Rivera-Salgado and Jonathan Fox, an authority on Oaxacan migration at the University of California in Santa Cruz, refer to “Oaxacalifornia” as a “space in which migrants bring together their lives in California with their communities of origin more than 2,500 miles away.” They might have equally referred to Pueblayork, the title bestowed on New York by a similar flow of indigenous migration from the Mexican state of Puebla. Migrants from Guatemala's Santa Eulalia don't yet call their Midwest community Nebraskamala, but there are enough of them living in Omaha and surrounding meatpacking towns to justify such a nickname. These migrants retain ties to their communities of origin and establish new communities as they migrate in search of work. They move back and forth through these networks, at least to the extent that the difficult passage across borders allows. Their ties to one another are so strong, and the movement of people so great, that in many ways people belong to a single community that exists in different locations, on both sides of the border formally dividing their countries.

For Oaxacans, the formation of communities outside their home state began back when they became the workforce for industrial agriculture in the northern Mexican states of Sinaloa and Baja California. In 1984, as a young man, Domínguez was one of those who left Oaxaca. In Sinaloa, responding to conditions for migrants that were the scandal of Mexico, he formed the Organization of Exploited and Oppressed People. The strikes he helped organize put their abuse before the public eye.

“Often we went into the fields barefoot,” remembers Jorge

Giron, from the Mixtec town of Santa Maria Tindu, who now lives in Fresno. His wife, Margarita, recalls that in the labor camp "the rooms were made of cardboard, and you could see other families through the holes. When you had to relieve yourself, you went in public because there were no bathrooms. You would go behind a tree or tall grass and squat. People bathed in the river, and further down others would wash their clothes and drink. A lot of people came down with diarrhea and vomiting." The strikes, they say, forced improvements.

While bad conditions kept the cost of tomatoes low in Los Angeles, they were also a factor motivating people to keep moving north. Domínguez followed the migrant trail to San Quintin on the Baja California peninsula, where he and his friends organized more strikes. Finally he crossed the border, winding up in California's San Joaquin Valley. There he again found Mixtec farm workers from his home state. "I felt like I was in my hometown," he recalls. And just as they had in northern Mexico, Oaxacan migrants formed the Frente, using the network of relationships created by common language, culture and origin.

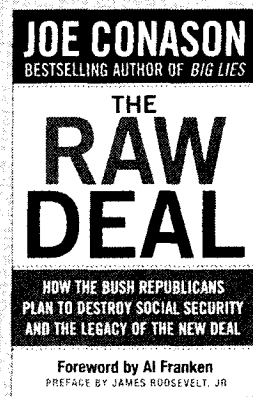
Labor organizing was part of the mix here too. In 1993 FIOB began a collaboration with the United Farm Workers. "We recognized the UFW was a strong union representing agricultural workers," Domínguez explains. "They recognized us as an organization fighting for the rights of indigenous migrants." But it was an uneasy relationship. Mixtec activists felt that UFW members often exhibited the same discriminatory attitudes common among Mexicans back home toward indigenous people. Fighting racism in Mexico, however, had prepared them for this. According to Rivera-Salgado, "the experience of racism enforces a search for cultural identity to resist and creates the possibility of new forms of organization and action."

Even among other organizations of Mexican immigrants FIOB is unique. It is a truly binational organization, with chapters all along the migrant trail. Members adopt one overall political program every three years, while chapters address the distinct problems of indigenous communities in each location.

In Oaxaca in the mid-1990s, the Frente began to help women organize weaving cooperatives and development projects to sustain families in small depopulated towns left behind by migrating men. Taking advantage of its chapters in the United States, the Frente began selling their clothes, textiles and other artisan work in the north, to support the communities in the south. This activity was an embarrassment to the Oaxacan state government, however, which is still run by Mexico's old ruling party, the PRI. Government hostility grew even sharper because FIOB leaders, like high school teacher Romualdo Juan Gutierrez, not only voiced outspoken criticism but allied themselves with Mexico's left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Last year Gutierrez was arrested and held in jail on bogus charges of misappropriating a computer, until a binational campaign of telegrams and demonstrations won his release.

"You can't tell a child to study to be a doctor if there is no work for doctors in Mexico," Gutierrez says. "It is a very daunting task for a Mexican teacher to convince students to get an education and stay in the country. If a student sees his older brother migrate to the United States, build a house and buy a car, he will follow. The money brought in by migrants is Mexico's number-one source of income, but the state government only

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recognizes the migrant community when it is convenient." Like many others on the Mexican left, Gutierrez accuses authorities of relying on remittances from workers to finance social services and public works, which are really the government's responsibility.

In Baja California, south of the border, FIOB activists fight for housing for indigenous migrants. They seek to enforce the old constitutional right of people to settle and build housing on vacant land, a right largely eliminated by the neoliberal economic reforms of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Militants like Triqui activist Julio Sandoval have led land invasions in the state's agricultural valleys. Large growers are so threatened that Sandoval was locked up for three years in an Ensenada prison. At FIOB's binational congress in Oaxaca in March, Sandoval declared that "as Mexicans, we have a right to housing, and we will force the government to respect us." Binational pressure was indispensable to winning his release as well.

FIOB started in California as an organization of Mixtecs and Zapotecs and then broadened to include all Oaxacan indigenous groups. At this year's assembly in Oaxaca, members voted to expand its reach again to include indigenous organizations from Puebla, Guerrero and Michoacan.

Mexican indigenous communities in the United States live at the social margin, and FIOB's activity confronts that fact. It is an organization of cultural activists, mounting an annual celebration of Oaxacan dance, the Guelaguetza, every year. Its organizers work for California Rural Legal Assistance, advising farm workers of their rights in indigenous languages. In fact, FIOB has won the right to Mixtec translation in California courts, a right still not recognized in Mexico. It knits different communities together through basketball tournaments (unlike most Mexicans, Oaxacans prefer this sport to soccer) and leadership training groups for women.

FIOB's organizing strategy grows out of indigenous culture, particularly an institution called the *tequio*. "This is the concept of collective work to support our community," Domínguez says. "Wherever we go, we go united. Even though 513 years have passed since the Spanish conquest, we still speak our language. We want to live our culture and to insure that it won't die."

Part of this culture is participatory democracy, with roots in indigenous village life. The organization's binational assemblies discuss bylaws and political positions. In one of the Frente's defining moments, the 2001 Tijuana assembly removed a longtime leader who was no longer accountable to FIOB's members. A woman, Centolia Maldonado, played the central role in this difficult process—a recognition of new sex roles that are a product of the migration experience, which is changing some of the migrating communities' old patriarchal traditions. FIOB's political platform, adopted at the same assembly, maintains a focus on the problems faced by transnational communities. It condemns US guest-worker proposals and calls for an extension of the rights of citizenship by implementing the decision made in 1996 by the Mexican government to allow its citizens in the United States to vote in Mexican elections.

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United States with experience in the radical
social movements of their homelands.*

Discrimination in Mexico is not the only obstacle to preserving indigenous culture. It's not easy for Mixtec and Triqui parents in Fresno to convince their children, born in the United States, to hold fast to language and traditions light-years removed from California schools and movie theaters. The state's ban on bilingual education, and discrimination by local school authorities, make cultural preservation even harder. But while some cultural adaptation is inevitable and sometimes even desirable, the experience of some fifty years of migration argues that economic and social survival depends on maintaining the identity, language and traditions that hold a community together.

Ruben Puentes, director of the transnational communities program at the Rockefeller Foundation, which has supported cultural development among Mexican indigenous migrants (and a photodocumentary project by this author), asks, "Is there today a growing culture of migration itself, a

kind of cultural capital that helps communities survive?" He argues that this developing transnational culture does not get adequate consideration in the debate on immigration policy.

Transnational communities play a growing role in the political life of their home countries, changing the very definition of citizenship and residence. This year, for instance, Jesus Martinez-Saldana, a professor at California State University in Fresno, was elected by Michoacan residents to their state legislature. His mandate is to represent the interests of the state's citizens living in the United States. Transnational migrants insist that they have important political and social rights, both in their communities of origin and in their communities abroad.

Today's migrants often come with experience in the radical social movements of their homelands. When Qanjobales and Mams came to Nebraska, their experience dovetailed with efforts already under way in the church parishes of South Omaha to organize meatpacking workers. "Using social networks to organize people is part of our culture," says Nebraska organizer Sergio Sosa. "The art is to transform these networks and connect them with African-Americans and Anglo-Saxons. Latinos can do many things, and this is our moment. But we can't do them alone."

Transnational communities, while often founded around a single indigenous ethnic identity, don't exist in isolation from one another. In Omaha's organizing ferment, the organizing styles of Guatemalans and Mexicans blend, as people reinterpret various traditions of collective action. The alliance among South Omaha's immigrants, the United Food and Commercial Workers and Omaha Together One Community successfully organized one of the city's main meatpacking plants.

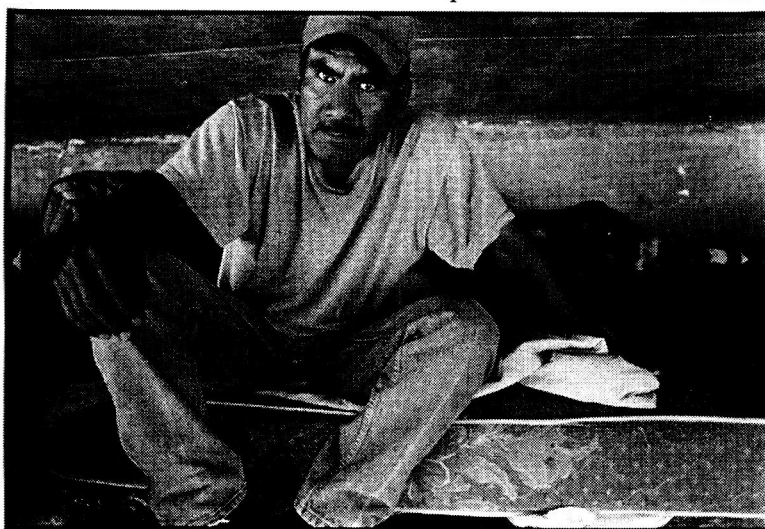
Sosa and another activist from Santa Eulalia, Francisco Lorenzo, then started Grupo Ixim with local Guatemalans. *Ixim* is the word for "corn" in all of Guatemala's twenty-three indigenous languages. "It also means the common good—the way that inside an ear of corn all the grains are together," Sosa says.

Like many immigrant groups, Grupo Ixim first jelled around practical goals. "For example, if a fellow countryman were to pass away, we would quickly mobilize to gather money and

send the body to Guatemala,” explains Jesus Martinez, a meatpacking worker. Ixim groups have also been organized in Chicago, Los Angeles and other US cities. In the Nebraska group, tension surfaced last year between those who see its function mainly as cultural preservation and others who want more politics. Two years ago Rodolfo Bobadilla, Bishop of Huehuetenango and a former disciple of assassinated Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, visited his parishioners living in Omaha. A heated debate broke out in a

back room at the welcoming fiesta. Martinez, Sosa and their allies proposed to give the bishop a letter to take home, expressing the sentiment of Guatemalans in the United States about the country's national election. Former general Efraín Ríos Montt, the president who ordered the bloodiest massacres of the 1980s, was once again a candidate. Ixim's activists wanted to remind their countrymen about this terrible past, which has much to do with the fact that so

many Guatemalans now live in exile. In the end, they voted to send the letter.



Juan Guzman, a Chatino from Oaxaca, lives under a bridge in Sonoma County, California.

Migration has complicated social costs and benefits in communities of origin. It threatens cultural practices and indigenous languages. It exacerbates social and economic divisions in small rural towns, as families with access to remittances sent home by relatives bid up land prices beyond the reach of families without that access. San Miguel now boasts a number of large modern houses owned by refugees of 1982 who live in the United States. With no economic development at home, migration has become a necessity. The ability to emigrate increasingly determines social and economic status in communities of origin.

The creation of transnational communities is a global phenomenon. They exist at different stages of development in the worldwide flow of migrants from developing to developed countries. According to Migrant Rights International, more than 130 million people live outside the countries in which they were born—a permanent feature of life on the planet.

Immigration policy in almost all developed industrial countries is institutionalizing this global flow of migration, as well as the roles of countries that employ it (like the United States) and those that produce the migrants (like Mexico and Guatemala). The main mechanism is guest-worker programs, which assign to the migrants' communities of origin the function of providing a labor pool for the production of future workers while offering no support in return. Instead, home communities depend on remittances from migrants. Mexican President Vicente Fox boasts that some of the world's most impoverished workers send home more than \$18 billion annually—a contribution to the economy approaching those of both oil and tourism.

FIOB's Los Angeles coordinator, Odilia Romero, predicts that “expanded guest-worker programs will lead to the wholesale violation of migrants' rights.” In previous periods when US immigration policy valued immigrants only for their labor power, it produced extremely abusive systems. The memory of the bracero program, which ran from 1942 to 1964, is so bitter that even today defenders of guest-worker schemes avoid association with the name. But before the braceros came, Filipinos were treated the same way—as a mobile, vulnerable

workforce, circulated from labor camp to labor camp for more than half a century. And before them the Japanese and Chinese, all the way back to slavery.

Today, guest workers are brought from tiny Guatemalan towns to the pine forests of the American East and South. Their experience is remarkably similar [see Bacon, “Be Our Guests,” September 27, 2004]. US immigration policy doesn't deter the flow of migrants across the border. Its basic function

is defining the status of people once they're here. Guest-worker programs undermine both workplace and community rights, affecting nonimmigrants as well. They inhibit the development of families and culture, denying everyone what newcomers can offer.

The alternative is a policy that recognizes and values transnational communities. A pro-people, anticorporate immigration policy sees the creation and support of communities as a desirable goal. It reinforces indigenous culture and language, protects the rights of everyone and seeks to integrate immigrants into the broader US society.

The United Nations' International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families proposes this kind of framework, establishing equality of treatment with citizens of the host country. Both sending and receiving countries are responsible for protecting migrants and retain the right to determine who is admitted to their territories and who has the right to work. Predictably, the countries that have ratified it are the sending countries. Those countries most interested in guest-worker schemes, like the United States, have not.

“Another amnesty is part of the alternative also,” says Sosa, “but ten years from now we're going to face the same situation again if we don't change the way we treat other countries. Treaties like CAFTA insure that this will happen.” Today working people of all countries are asked to accept continuing globalization, in which capital is free to go wherever it can earn the highest profits. Sosa argues that migrants must have the same freedom, with rights and status equal to those of anyone else. “I come from a faith tradition,” he concludes. “Faith crosses borders. It says, This world is our world, for all of us.” ■