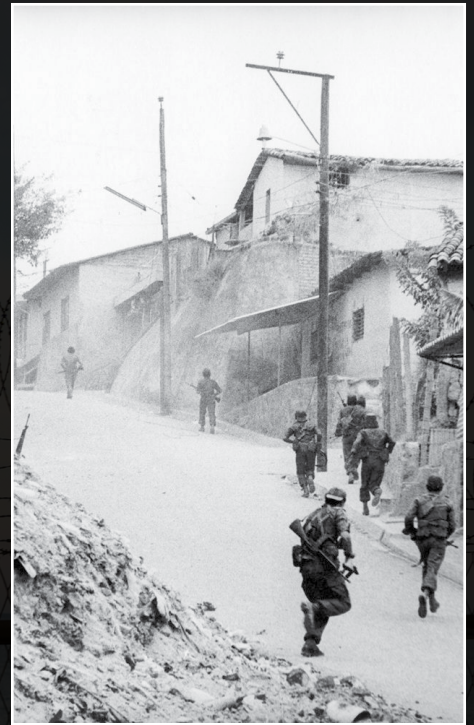


Exporting Instability, Importing Exploitation



The Impacts of U.S. Trade Policy on Migration in Latin America

Iza Camarillo

June 2025



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NPNA
NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP
FOR NEW AMERICANS

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About NPNA

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a multi-ethnic, multiracial coalition of 86 of the nation's largest immigrant and refugee rights organizations with reach across over 42 states. Together with our members, we advance immigrant and refugee equity and inclusion, build and expand immigration legal services and integration programming capacity, and drive campaigns that strengthen democracy through increased civic participation. See our website for more information at partnershipfornewamericans.org.

Suggested Citation

Iza Camarillo, "Exporting Instability, Importing Exploitation: The Impacts of U.S. Trade Policy on Migration in Latin America," Public Citizen and NPNA, June 2025.

Cover Images

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Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Iza Camarillo, Research Director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch. It was developed in close collaboration with the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), especially Ramya Reddy and Nicole Melaku.

The author wishes to express profound gratitude to Leslie Ortiz and James Paredes for their invaluable contributions to legal research and real-life perspectives that significantly informed this report. Special thanks to Melinda St. Louis, Melanie Foley, and all individuals who generously provided testimonies, including NPNA members and the Orellana family.

Author's Note

This report is dedicated to the countless migrants who, driven by necessity, are forced to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety, dignity, and a better life.

Growing up in Mexico near the U.S. border, I witnessed the impact of trade agreements on communities on both sides. My grandfather was part of the Mexican farmer movements against NAFTA and often warned, "The promises of free trade are empty for Mexico. The rich will get richer while more people struggle." His words shaped my career, driven by the belief that trade policies should serve people, not corporations.

As a global trade attorney, I gained firsthand insight into how trade policies exploit workers under the guise of economic development. I visited maquiladoras in Mexico and factories in the U.S., where I witnessed how the promise of free trade led to a "race to the bottom." In both countries, corporate profits soared at the expense of workers.

Politicians promised that trade agreements would promote economic growth. Instead, they fueled displacement, destabilized livelihoods, and deepened inequality. While capital and goods moved freely across borders, the workers who made this possible were left behind — their voices ignored. These same economic forces drove many to migrate in search of a better life, only for their struggles to be criminalized and reduced for political leverage.

This report is grounded in the belief that true justice requires reforming both trade and immigration policy to prioritize people over profit, empowering displaced individuals instead of penalizing them by creating policies that protect workers, respect migrants, and address the systemic inequalities that drive them to flee in the first place.

Executive Summary



John Moore/Getty Images

In campaign speeches, press conferences, and executive orders, President Donald Trump has relentlessly vilified Latin American immigrants as criminals, invaders, and burdens on the U.S. economy.¹ He has declared a “national emergency” at the southern border to justify authoritarian power grabs, deployed troops and razor wire against asylum-seekers, and fast-tracked deportations to countries like El Salvador without due process,² despite well-documented risks to life and safety.³ These tactics are not about border security, they are about scapegoating vulnerable people to obscure deeper systemic failures.

As Trump and other politicians use immigration as a political weapon, the real crisis goes unexamined: the economic system that displaces people through trade and investment policies, exploits their labor upon arrival, and criminalizes their existence.⁴

The consequences are felt beyond the border. Within communities, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency is detaining Spanish-speaking

American citizens, sweeping up Native Americans in immigration raids, even deporting U.S. citizens to Latin America.⁵ This targeting stems from hate-fueled bias, perpetuating racial profiling and the unjust treatment of those whose only “crime” is their heritage.

Immigrants or descendants of immigrants, regardless of their legal status or reasons for being in the country, face increasing criminalization driven by the expansion of discriminatory narratives. For example, university students have had their visas revoked as a direct result of global trade tensions, a troubling precedent that underscores the intersectionality of trade policies and racial profiling.⁶ These policies create an environment where individuals from targeted countries are marginalized and criminalized solely for their nationality.

However, migration is not a border crisis. It is a consequence of economic policies that displace people and extract profit at every step of their journey. This report traces a throughline from U.S. trade deals to the rural exodus, labor exploitation, and environmental collapse that drive migration across Latin America, only to criminalize and exploit the migrants once they arrive in the United States.

For decades, the United States has promoted a model of globalization that prioritizes corporate profits over human dignity and environmental protection.

Under the guise of development and market integration, U.S. trade policy has destabilized entire economies, pushed millions from their homes, and ensured a steady supply of exploitable labor across borders. The result is a transnational pipeline that treats land, labor, and migrants as disposable.

The dominant political narrative portrays migration as a spontaneous crisis rather than a foreseeable outcome of economic policies. This report dismantles that myth. It reveals how trade liberalization agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), were not designed to uplift workers or foster stability. They were crafted to secure deregulated markets and protect corporate interests while systematically stripping countries of sovereignty and encouraging a “race to the bottom” in labor protections and environmental safeguards.⁷

Workers across borders swiftly and deeply felt the effects of NAFTA and CAFTA. In the United States, they hollowed out manufacturing centers, shuttered factories, and accelerated job losses in unionized industries, leaving working-class communities in industrial strongholds like Detroit and Youngstown reeling.⁸ In Latin America, where economic conditions were already fragile, these agreements were even more devastating. They dismantled rural livelihoods, flooded markets with subsidized U.S. agricultural products, and deepened poverty and inequality.⁹ For many across Mexico and Central America, migration was no longer a choice — it became a matter of survival.

As a condition to join NAFTA, Mexico dismantled its constitutional land protections (ejidos), enabling foreign agribusiness to consolidate farmland and flood local markets with subsidized corn from the United States.¹⁰ Prices for Mexican farmers collapsed by 66%, and over 2 million small farmers lost their livelihoods. Migration rates from Mexico had been steady in the three years preceding NAFTA, but it only took six years after the deal's implementation for the number of migrants per year to double, from 370,000 in 1993 to 770,000 in 2000.¹¹

CAFTA reproduced these dynamics across Central America. The promised gains in domestic agricultural exports and job creation never materialized. Instead, U.S. grain imports displaced small farmers, and the apparel assembly jobs meant to absorb the displaced were able to easily relocate to even lower-wage countries. Unable to make a living, in the decade following CAFTA's implementation, the number of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala living in the United States increased by 49%, 122%, and 73%, respectively.¹²

While some apparel assembly plants remain in the region, the sector has faced significant challenges. With limited long-term investment or value-added development, Central America's garment industry has remained highly vulnerable to global supply chain shifts. As corporations sought cheaper labor and more flexible production, many factories relocated to Asia, triggering sharp declines in exports and employment, exposing the fragility of a model built on short-term cost advantages for corporations rather than uplifting workers.¹³

Meanwhile, trade-fueled extractive industries have depleted water resources, razed forests, and rendered farmland unusable across Mexico and Central America.¹⁴ In Guatemala, more than 1.89 million hectares of forest have been lost between 2001 and 2024, much of it for palm oil exports to the U.S. and European markets.¹⁵ In northern Mexico, water extraction for mining and export agriculture surged

by over 3,000% between 1995 and 2019, draining aquifers and displacing rural communities.¹⁶

These outcomes were foreseeable and fiercely opposed. Long before the consequences became undeniable, labor organizers, environmentalists, and migrant justice advocates sounded the alarm. In 1999, the Battle of Seattle protests brought tens of thousands into the streets to oppose the World Trade Organization (WTO), warning that trade agreements such as NAFTA were tools of corporate power that would deepen inequality, displace communities, and erode democratic sovereignty. They were right.¹⁷

These agreements locked in legal frameworks like the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) system that grants extensive rights to multinational corporations at the expense of affected communities. All the while, immigration laws, including the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), expanded enforcement and stripped migrants of legal protections.¹⁸ Together, these policies created a system where the same corporations that uprooted communities in Latin America now profit from the cheap, legally restricted labor of those they displaced.¹⁹

This report draws on legal analysis, economic data, and frontline testimonies to expose how:

- Trade agreements, which included rules that entrenched corporate colonialism, gutted rural economies, and encouraged a “race to the bottom” in wages and working conditions, displacing millions.
- Climate collapse, accelerated by trade-fueled deforestation and land grabs, is triggering a new wave of forced migration.



Tony Andrews

- Migrant workers are essential to U.S. industries but are trapped in low-wage, high-risk jobs.
- Immigration enforcement serves corporate interests, silencing worker dissent through fear, surveillance, and threats of deportation.

Rather than confront the root causes of displacement, U.S. political leaders have long weaponized migration from Latin America for partisan gain, relying on migrant labor as a pillar of the economy, while criminalizing it whenever politically expedient.

Under the Bracero Program starting in 1942, the U.S. government actively recruited Mexican workers to sustain its agriculture and industry.²⁰ However, when economic conditions shifted, these workers were subsequently discarded. In 1954, the callously named “Operation Wetback” initiated mass deportations, criminalizing migrants who had only recently been encouraged to enter.²¹

The systematic weaponization of migration intensified in the 1980s, as the Reagan administration largely denied asylum protections to Central Americans fleeing violence backed by the United States. By labeling them as “economic migrants” despite well-documented human rights abuses, the U.S. was able to obscure its role in fueling the crises through military and economic intervention.²²

This strategy reached new lows under President Trump, who has characterized immigration from Latin America as an “invasion” posing an existential threat to the United States.²³ Through explicit xenophobia, Trump justifies family separation, mass detention, and expanded deportation — all while preserving and deepening the trade policies and corporate agendas that fuel migration in the first place.²⁴ As such, politicians scapegoat immigrants to deflect from the economic systems that profit from their vulnerability with impunity.²⁵

This report advocates for a comprehensive overhaul of U.S. trade and immigration policies. Public Citizen and the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) demand structural transformation:

Transform Immigration Policies to Respect Humanity and Address Root Causes

- Uphold Due Process
- Expand Protections and Legal Pathways for Vulnerable Populations
- Restore and Strengthen Asylum Protections

- Safeguard Temporary Protected Status (TPS)
- Decouple Immigration Enforcement From Labor Policy
- Support Immigrant Communities
- Oppose Punitive Immigration Laws
- Ensure Access to Pathways for Climate-Displaced Populations

Transform Global Trade Policies that Displace and Exploit Workers

- Implement Transparent and Inclusive Trade Policymaking Processes
- Conduct Impact Assessments
- Incentivize Living Wages, Decent Working Conditions, and Robust Environmental Standards
- Safeguard Small Farmers' Livelihoods
- Respect Sovereignty
- Remove Corporate Giveaways
- Eliminate ISDS
- Support Regionally Led Economic Development and Climate Justice

Migration is not a failure of policy. It is a reflection of the policy's true purpose under the current model that serves capital at the expense of people.

Until policymakers rewrite trade and immigration policies to prioritize justice, no wall — literal or political — will stop migration. It will only conceal the more profound crisis of an economic system that uproots people, exploits their labor, and punishes them for trying to survive.

I. Political and Economic Roots of Forced Migration

Scott Olson/Getty Images



Migration as a Policy Outcome, Not a Crisis

In campaign speeches, press conferences, and executive orders, President Donald Trump has consistently demonized Latin American immigrants, portraying them as criminals, invaders, and burdens on the U.S. economy.²⁶

By declaring a “national emergency” at the southern border, he justified the expansion of authoritarian powers, including the deployment of troops and the installation of razor wire to deter asylum-seekers.

Furthermore, he fast-tracked deportations, even to countries like El Salvador, where the risks to individuals' lives and safety are well-documented, bypassing due process in the name of border security.²⁷ These actions, however, have little to do with safeguarding the border and everything to do with scapegoating vulnerable populations to divert attention from deeper systemic issues. As Trump and other Republican politicians weaponize immigration for political gain, the underlying crisis — one rooted in an economic system that displaces people through trade and investment policies, exploits their labor upon arrival, and criminalizes their mere presence — remains largely ignored.²⁸

The repercussion of these policies extends far beyond the border, rippling through U.S. communities. Spanish-speaking American citizens are being detained, Native Americans are caught in immigration raids, and U.S. citizens have been unjustly deported.²⁹ This discriminatory targeting, rooted in xenophobic racial bias, leads to the unjust profiling and mistreatment of individuals whose only “crime” is their heritage.

Regardless of their legal status or reasons for being in the country, immigrants and their descendants face rising criminalization fueled by expanding discriminatory narratives. University students, for instance, have had their visas revoked due to the tensions spurred by global trade policies. This troubling trend highlights how immigration and trade policies intersect, with individuals from specific countries facing increasing marginalization and criminalization based solely on their nationality.³⁰

Trump has cynically framed migration from Latin America to the United States as a border “crisis” to justify militarization, detention, and deterrence. But migration is not a crisis: it is a predictable consequence of economic policies.³¹

Since the early 1990s, U.S. trade policy has prioritized corporate profit over economic stability, dismantling rural economies, suppressing wages, and accelerating environmental destruction across Latin America.³² Regional trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), locked in neoliberal policies that undermined local agriculture, manufacturing, and public services.³³

After NAFTA came into effect in 1993, U.S. agribusiness flooded Mexican markets with subsidized corn, and export-focused factories known as maquiladoras expanded rapidly along the U.S.-Mexico border, fueling widespread, low-wage, precarious jobs and environmental destruction.³⁴ Meanwhile, U.S. corporations offshored nearly

950,000 American jobs, hollowing out working-class communities and fueling political resentment.³⁵

U.S. politicians have long weaponized anti-immigrant sentiment for political gain, but no one has exploited it more aggressively or effectively than President Donald Trump.³⁶ He elevated this tactic into a centerpiece of his campaign and eventual presidential agenda, blaming impoverished workers in other countries as the culprits of job offshoring and stoking xenophobia against migrants to deflect blame from the corporate profiteers behind those unjust trade policies that forced people to move for survival. Instead of confronting the root causes of displacement, Trump scapegoats Latin American migrants and turns their suffering into political capital.³⁷

Meanwhile, the United States continues to rely on the very people it criminalizes. Migrant workers harvest food, build infrastructure, and keep essential industries afloat, yet remain trapped in low-wage, precarious sectors with minimal rights or protections.

Corporations profit at every stage of this crisis. First by exploiting land, labor, and natural resources in Latin America and then by relying on the cheap, precarious labor of displaced migrants in the United States, treating ecosystems and human lives as expendable.

Weaponizing Migration for Political Gain

The weaponization of migration is not a new phenomenon. Throughout U.S. history, immigration policies have fluctuated between selective welcome and harsh exclusion, depending on labor market demands and political expediency. The United States once actively recruited Mexican workers to sustain its agriculture and industry, only to turn to mass deportations and rising xenophobia when corporate interests shifted.³⁸ Migration was encouraged when it served economic needs and demonized when it was politically advantageous.

Over time, this cycle hardened into a dominant political narrative. Rather than confronting the systemic forces driving displacement, political leaders increasingly framed migration as a threat to national security. Migrants were cast not as workers pushed by economic necessity, but as invaders undermining the American way of life.³⁹

Trump did not invent this narrative, but he has amplified it to unprecedented extremes. By framing migration as a security “crisis” and asylum-seekers as

“criminals,” Trump has expanded border militarization, separated families, and further criminalized migration — while upholding and deepening the very trade policies that fueled instability and migration in the first place.⁴⁰ In his campaign rhetoric, Trump has used terms like “invasion” and “poisoning the blood of our country” to dehumanize migrants, stoke hatred, and justify sweeping crackdowns.⁴¹ His decision to designate the Venezuelan gang *Tren de Aragua* as a foreign terrorist organization feeds into this narrative, conflating isolated criminal threats with the broader migrant population to fuel xenophobic fear and consolidate authoritarian power under the guise of national security.⁴²

The narrative that migrants “steal jobs” or “drain resources” is a deliberate distortion.⁴³ In reality, the same industries that profit from undocumented and guestworker labor also spend millions lobbying for restrictive immigration policies that preserve worker vulnerability:

- **Agriculture:** In an industry where Mexicans alone make up two thirds of the work force, groups like the American Farm Bureau Federation lobby for expanded guestworker programs, such as H-2A, with minimal labor protections, while opposing pathways to citizenship for undocumented workers, keeping labor cheap and vulnerable, reinforcing the exploitative practices within agricultural supply chains.⁴⁴
- **Construction:** Roughly 30% of construction workers in the United States are immigrants, yet industry groups advocate for visa structures that tie workers to specific employers, suppressing wages and hindering unionization, while simultaneously resisting broader immigration reform.⁴⁵ This enables businesses to profit from precarious labor, creating a cycle of dependency that leaves workers with few protections.
- **Meatpacking and Dairy:** In the meatpacking industry, where immigrants make up 30-50% of the workforce in general, and 90% for dairy in some states, companies have benefited from workers’ fear of deportation, which suppresses union activity and stagnates wages. They only intervene when immigration raids disrupt their labor supply, not to address the underlying conditions that allow such exploitation to persist.⁴⁶

In this system, precarious immigration status is not a policy failure; it is a profitable business model. Politicians who weaponize migration without addressing the root causes are not only failing to protect vulnerable populations — they are actively upholding an economic structure built on exploitation.

A Historical Overview of U.S. Intervention and Economic Instability in Latin America

The root causes of Latin American migration to the United States include a long history of political intervention, military coups, and foreign corporate control to serve U.S. economic interests at the expense of sovereignty and stability.

The groundwork was laid early. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 justified U.S. intervention under the pretext of preventing European colonialism, but in practice, these policies entrenched U.S. economic control over Latin America.⁴⁷ Giant U.S. corporations like the United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company wielded immense power in “banana republics,” restructuring national economies around the export of commodities like bananas, coffee, and sugar — profits that flowed north while exploiting communities across the region.⁴⁸


When Latin American governments attempted to assert greater control over their resources or implement reforms, they often faced swift backlash from the United States, whose military and economic power was deployed to protect corporate interests.

Throughout the 20th century, U.S. foreign policy in the region followed a consistent pattern of securing access to resources, suppressing political movements deemed “socialist,” and preserving conditions favorable to foreign capital.


The result was a wave of authoritarian regimes, structural economic violence, and mass displacement that continues to shape migration flows today.




Guatemala (1954): The CIA backed a coup against the democratically elected President Jacobo Árbenz after he implemented an agrarian reform to redistribute land to impoverished farmers, threatening the vast holdings of the United Fruit Company. Supported by U.S. officials with financial ties to the company, the reform was branded as “communist,” ousting Arbenz, and triggering a brutal 36-year civil war, fueled by the military dictatorship that replaced him.⁴⁹




Chile (1973): The U.S. backed the military coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende, Latin America's first democratically elected socialist leader. The Pinochet dictatorship that followed imposed neoliberal economic "shock therapy," privatized national industries, and dismantled labor protections — under the guidance of U.S.-trained economists known as the "Chicago Boys."⁵⁰



Brazil (1964), Uruguay (1973), and Argentina (1976): In each country, the U.S. supported or tacitly enabled military dictatorships that cracked down on unions, criminalized leftist movements, and imposed free-market reforms designed to attract foreign investment. Thousands were tortured, disappeared, or killed in the name of "stability" and "market freedom."⁵¹



El Salvador (1980s): As a leftist insurgency gained support during the civil war, the U.S. funneled over \$1 billion in military aid to the Salvadoran government and paramilitary death squads, despite widespread human rights abuses.⁵² The U.S. government supported it by framing the conflict as a Cold War battleground, warning that if Central America "went Communist," the United States would be in danger.⁵³ The toll was devastating. More than 75,000 civilians were killed, over 1 million Salvadorans were displaced,⁵⁴ and 85% of the violence was attributed to U.S.-backed state military and paramilitary forces.⁵⁵ This militarized response to grassroots reform movements also reshaped immigration patterns as the Central American percentage of immigrants from Latin America to the United States grew from 6% in 1960 to 16% by 1990.⁵⁶



Nicaragua (1980s): When the Sandinistas overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and implemented land reform, literacy campaigns, and healthcare expansion, the U.S. armed and trained the Contras, a counterrevolutionary force that engaged in widespread atrocities. This campaign of terror devastated the economy and forced tens of



Bill Gentile/CORBIS/Getty Images

thousands to flee.⁵⁷ The International Court of Justice later found the U.S. to have violated international law.⁵⁸



Honduras (1980s): Though not a direct war zone, Honduras became the primary base of U.S. operations in Central America. Honduras was militarized by U.S. intervention, becoming a key staging ground for regional proxy wars. Military aid and training to authoritarian regimes helped suppress union activity and enable Contra operations. Through direct military assistance and CIA operations, the U.S. trained and supported Battalion 3-16, a secret death squad responsible for the disappearance, torture, and murder of hundreds of civilians.⁵⁹ U.S. support for authoritarian regimes in Honduras suppressed labor organizing, destabilized the countryside, and created a legacy of corruption and violence that persists today.

Bettmann/Getty Images



Oliver North played a key role in the “Iran-Contra” scheme, through which the U.S. illegally armed, trained, and funded anti-communist militias in Nicaragua.

Cecilia

Cecilia came to the United States in 1994, two years after El Salvador's civil war officially ended. As a young, single mother with no formal education, she struggled to find stable work to support her three children. Selling fabrics from village to village was not enough to sustain a living. Throughout the war, violence permeated daily life — the national army and guerrilla forces regularly halted transportation, and corpses often lined the streets. After witnessing buses being burned with passengers still inside, Cecilia realized her children's survival depended on leaving.

“After the war, we were left without work, and there was nothing to eat. I had to come to this country to seek better conditions for my children... The country, after the war, had nothing for us.”

Cecilia's journey north was grueling. Abandoned by smugglers in Mexico, she had to start over multiple times, hiding inside gasoline trucks to cross deserts. Leaving her children behind was the hardest decision she ever made. Within days of arriving in Los Angeles, she found work in a jeans factory and began sending remittances home. Over time, she built a new life, obtained legal status, and reunited with her children. Her story is one among millions shaped by displacement, resilience, and the pursuit of dignity.

John Moore/Getty Images



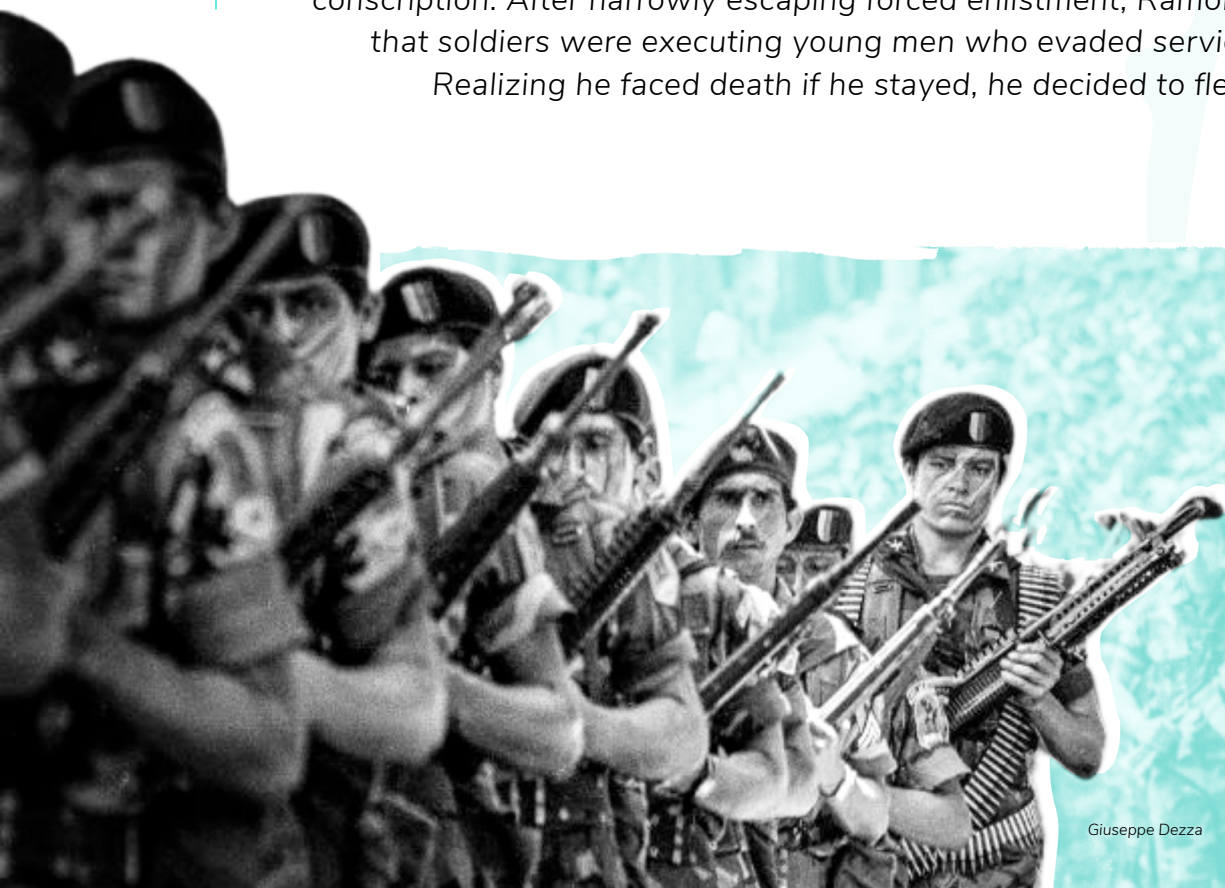
Beyond military interventions, the United States' disregard for Latin American sovereignty was also starkly evident in public health abuses. Between 1946 and 1948, U.S. medical researchers deliberately infected over 1,300 Guatemalans — including prisoners, mental health patients, and soldiers — with syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases without their consent.⁶⁰ These covert experiments, kept secret for decades, epitomized a colonial mentality that viewed Latin American bodies, land, and labor as expendable in the pursuit of U.S. interests.⁶¹

In addition to direct intervention, during the 1980s and 1990s, the United States used its veto power within international financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, to push a neoliberal economic agenda throughout Latin America.⁶²

In exchange for critical debt relief and loans, governments were required to implement Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which included slashing public spending, privatizing state-owned enterprises, eliminating agricultural subsidies, and deregulating labor markets.⁶³ These austerity-driven reforms gutted public services, exacerbated inequality, and left national economies vulnerable to foreign corporate control.

Ramón

Ramón fled El Salvador in 1986, during the height of the civil war. As a 20-year-old baker and semi-professional soccer player, he became a target once the government overturned a law exempting athletes from conscription. After narrowly escaping forced enlistment, Ramón learned that soldiers were executing young men who evaded service. Realizing he faced death if he stayed, he decided to flee.



“All of us young people were in danger. I was about 21, 20, something like that... There was no hope for life. I remember that we were just waiting for death.”

Ramón journeyed north by bus and on foot, relying on the kindness of strangers for directions after entering Mexico with a temporary visa. In Texas, he was detained by U.S. Border Patrol, but a stranger intervened, correcting officers' mistaken assumptions about his nationality, which led to his release and the opportunity to pursue asylum.

Despite the U.S. government denying his asylum claim, Ramón rebuilt his life with the support of his sisters, ultimately securing legal status through the Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act. Forced to leave behind his mother, his hometown, and his dreams of a soccer career, Ramón — like so many others — faced the choice between displacement and death.

These are not isolated stories. Migration is often the final link in a long chain of displacement, set in motion by policies of extraction, exploitation, and exclusion. It is not individual failures or a security “crisis” as the Trump administration claims.⁶⁴

Together, these political, economic, and human rights abuses entrenched a model of dependency where U.S. corporations reaped enormous profits while Latin American countries were left impoverished, unstable, and indebted.

II. Trade-Related Drivers of Migration



Corporate Control Through Trade Rules

As structural adjustment programs paved the way, free trade agreements became the next phase of economic restructuring. NAFTA entered into force in 1994 and CAFTA in 2006, locking the neoliberal policies championed by the IMF and World Bank into binding treaties that could not be changed unless all parties unanimously agreed.

One of the central contradictions of this model was freedom of movement for corporations, yet tight policing of people's movement. Agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA were designed to eliminate barriers for capital, enabling factories, finance, and goods to move freely across borders in search of lower wages and weaker regulations.

However, for workers — especially those displaced by the economic upheavals these agreements fostered — those same borders became militarized, patrolled, and politicized. This dynamic within the global trade system treats labor as disposable

and migration as a threat, all while quietly exploiting both. The resulting asymmetry serves the interconnected agendas of both corporate and political interests.

For decades, labor advocates, economists, and frontline communities warned that corporate-driven trade deals like NAFTA and CAFTA would not foster shared prosperity but would suppress wages, destabilize local economies, and drive mass displacement.⁶⁵ Their warnings proved prescient, as rather than building resilient industries, these agreements entrenched economic dependence and inequality, forcing millions to migrate in search of survival.

Policymakers negotiated NAFTA and CAFTA behind closed doors in extreme secrecy. While the public did not have any access to the texts being negotiated, hundreds of official “trade advisors,” nearly all of whom represented significant U.S. corporate interests, had direct access and were consulted throughout.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, the rules in these trade deals benefited those corporate interests at the expense of workers and the public interest.

A central tenet of the free trade agreement model is the binding requirement for countries to modify their domestic laws to comply with the terms set in the agreement. Thus, under NAFTA and CAFTA, governments were required to eliminate key protections for domestic industries, dismantle communal land systems, and open markets to heavily subsidized U.S. goods, contributing to immense changes in the Mexican and Central American economies.⁶⁷

Countries were also forced to adopt U.S.-style intellectual property terms, extending lengthy patent protections for pharmaceuticals and restricting the ability of governments to regulate drug prices, prioritizing pharmaceutical monopolies over public health.⁶⁸

Additionally, foreign corporations were gifted sweeping new powers to challenge domestic laws. NAFTA and CAFTA granted foreign corporations the extraordinary right to sue governments in private tribunals. These protections allowed corporations to challenge public policies they claimed violated their treaty-protected rights and enabled them to seek unlimited taxpayer compensation.⁶⁹ Corporations have challenged environmental protections, minimum wage increases, and public health regulations for millions and billions of dollars.⁷⁰

Economic Displacement

The displacement in Mexico and Central America that followed the implementation of NAFTA and CAFTA was profound. These agreements prioritized deregulation, tariff elimination, and foreign direct investment (FDI), radically restructuring Mexico's and Central America's economies around low-wage, export-driven sectors.⁷¹ Rather than spurring development, they eroded rural livelihoods, suppressed wages, and weakened economic sovereignty — ultimately driving mass migration.⁷²

Manufacturing Collapse and Wage Suppression

In Mexico, the promised benefits of NAFTA, such as higher wages, job creation, and industrial upgrading, never materialized for most workers.⁷³ Instead, domestic manufacturing shrank as U.S. firms substituted foreign components and relocated production to export-processing zones.⁷⁴ While multinational corporations reaped substantial profits, Mexican workers saw little improvement in their economic conditions. Real wages for most Mexicans dropped in the decade after NAFTA took effect, and employment in the sector declined sharply.⁷⁵

- Manufacturing wages, once averaging \$5 per hour in the early 1990s, stagnated and fell further after China's WTO accession in 2001. Many firms abandoned Mexican plants for Chinese factories offering labor at less than \$1 per hour.⁷⁶
- Today, Mexican auto workers earn between \$3.50 and \$4.30 per hour — one-tenth of what their U.S. counterparts earn at \$33 per hour — for nearly identical work in nearly identical factories for the same manufacturers. Yet, the cars made in Mexico are not priced lower than cars made in the U.S., despite significantly lower production costs, leading to higher profits.⁷⁷

Under CAFTA, Central America experienced a similar trajectory. Garment and textile factories proliferated, especially in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.⁷⁸ Yet the promise of broad-based job creation never materialized. Instead, countries saw a collapse in rural employment, weakened food sovereignty, and increased economic dependence on low-wage, export-oriented labor.⁷⁹

- In Guatemala, CAFTA had severe impacts on Indigenous and smallholder farming communities. The influx of subsidized U.S. agricultural imports undercut local producers, leading to widespread displacement from rural economies.⁸⁰

Despite Guatemala's contributions to global supply chains, the country continues to face high levels of inequality and poverty. The 75% of Indigenous Guatemalans who remain in poverty reflect the failure of trade policies to address longstanding racial and socioeconomic disparities.⁸¹

- Honduras, too, failed to gain stable, well-paying jobs from CAFTA. The garment industry that expanded under the agreement was shaped by volatile, short-term contracts controlled by major U.S. brands, prioritizing low costs over job security. As global fashion supply chains pursued ever-cheaper labor, many brands eventually shifted orders to Asia, leaving Central American economies vulnerable to sudden shocks with no safety net. Today, the average garment worker in Honduras earns just \$2.30 per hour, reflecting CAFTA's precarious impacts rather than long-term development.⁸²

Maquiladoras and Worker Exploitation

The maquiladora model — first launched in the 1960s and dramatically expanded under NAFTA, then mirrored in CAFTA — became central to U.S. corporate strategy.⁸³ These export-oriented factories are strategically located near the U.S. border to minimize transportation costs and maximize profit through low wages and weak enforcement of labor and environmental protections.⁸⁴ Across Mexico and Central America, maquiladora jobs are characterized by:

- **Low Wages and Minimal Protections:** Despite rising corporate profits, maquiladora wages have remained stagnant or declined.⁸⁵ In Nicaragua, the average maquiladora wage is just \$232 per month, while the estimated cost of living for a family of four is approximately \$2,139, excluding rent.⁸⁶
- **Union Suppression:** Companies maintain their profit margins by keeping labor costs low, not through innovation or investment, but by taking advantage of low wages and lack of basic worker protections.⁸⁷ Workers attempting to organize face retaliation, delayed contracts, and blacklisting.⁸⁸ Labor ministries often lack the resources or political will to enforce protections.⁸⁹ Weak enforcement of labor rights in both Mexico and Central America enables persistent violations with impunity.⁹⁰
- **Dangerous Working Conditions:** Workers in electronics, textile, and chemical manufacturing are frequently exposed to toxic substances without adequate protective gear, as documented in facilities linked to U.S. companies in Ciudad Juárez. Reports detail respiratory issues, chemical burns, and miscarriages tied

to long-term exposure. Workdays often stretch beyond legal limits, with few breaks and high injury rates.⁹¹ Despite these conditions, enforcement is virtually nonexistent — labor inspections are rare, fines are minimal, and violations routinely ignored.⁹²

These trends are the result of a trade system that prioritized low-cost, compliant labor as a competitive advantage, which encouraged governments to refrain from protecting workers' rights.



Independent Maquiladora workers unions went on strike across northern Mexico in 2019 demanding better wages and working conditions.

Migration as a Structural Outcome

With stable jobs disappearing and wages collapsing, migration became a rational last resort to deepening precarity.

- Between 1990 and 2000, the Mexican immigrant population in the U.S. more than doubled, growing from 4.3 million to 9.2 million, increasing by 114%.⁹³ This surge coincided with the economic challenges following NAFTA's implementation.⁹⁴

- Similarly, economic instability and climate-related disruptions in Central America following CAFTA have been linked to increased emigration, as individuals seek better opportunities abroad due to limited prospects at home.⁹⁵ In 2000, the Central American immigrant population in the United States was just over 2 million. By 2010, it had risen to over 3 million, and by 2021, the population reached 3.8 million, reflecting a continued upward trajectory in immigration.⁹⁶

Short-Term Investment, Long-Term Instability

While NAFTA and CAFTA triggered surges in foreign direct investment, much of it was short-term and extractive.⁹⁷

Rather than building resilient industries or raising wages, multinational corporations targeted quick returns through deregulated labor markets and resource-intensive sectors.⁹⁸ Once costs rose or competition emerged — as with China’s WTO accession in 2001— investors simply moved on, chasing wages as low as \$0.82 per hour and leaving hollowed-out economies behind.⁹⁹

This “race to the bottom” did not bring shared prosperity. It produced disposable labor, abandoned towns, and a regional economy increasingly dependent on remittances and migration as survival strategies.¹⁰⁰

The Agribusiness Takeover and Rural Job Loss

One of the most devastating consequences of NAFTA was the destruction of Mexico’s agricultural sector. By eliminating tariffs on key crops like corn, wheat, and soy, the agreement allowed heavily subsidized U.S. agribusiness giants to flood Mexican markets with artificially cheap agricultural products — often sold below the cost of production.¹⁰¹ These subsidies, funded by the U.S. government, provided American producers with a significant competitive advantage.

In contrast, NAFTA dramatically expanded the power of foreign investors in Mexico’s agricultural sector, accelerating the privatization of communal land (ejidos) and

eroding the country's system of agricultural subsidies. This shift stripped small-scale farmers of state protections and exposed them to competition with heavily subsidized U.S. agribusiness. Mexican small farmers' production costs often exceeded the sale price of U.S. imports, driving millions into bankruptcy and triggering widespread rural displacement.¹⁰²

In Mexico, corn imports from the U.S. increased over 400% within a decade of NAFTA's enactment.¹⁰³ In just that first decade of NAFTA, an estimated two million farmers lost their livelihoods, with rural poverty deepening in states like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero — regions that later saw some of the highest migration rates to the United States.¹⁰⁴ Corn prices collapsed by 66%, gutting entire communities and eroding centuries-old agricultural systems, leading to widespread rural displacement.¹⁰⁵

This increase in power from foreign investors is also evident in the privatization of Mexico's small farms and the elimination of agricultural subsidies under NAFTA, which increased the displacement of these farmers.¹⁰⁶

Less than 12 months after the implementation of NAFTA, in December 1994, Mexico faced one of its worst economic crises in history, marked by the collapse of the peso.

While NAFTA was promoted as a vehicle for modernization and growth, it left Mexico vulnerable to the very shocks it claimed to mitigate. Even worse, the agreement restricted the country's ability to regulate capital flows or implement certain fiscal measures, removing key tools that could have helped stabilize the economy during the peso crisis.¹⁰⁷ In the absence of meaningful social or economic protections, migration became a survival strategy.

Without alternative income sources, displaced farmers moved to overcrowded cities in search of low-wage factory work or across the U.S. border, where they became



undocumented laborers in similarly exploitative industries.¹⁰⁸ An estimated 300,000 Mexicans migrated to the U.S. between 1990 and 1996, and between 400,000 and 500,000 migrated by 2008.¹⁰⁹

Trade measures that once protected domestic agriculture, such as price supports, local procurement, and tariffs, were dismantled, while corporate export rights were locked in through binding obligations.¹¹⁰ Countries could no longer prioritize domestic food production without risking investor-state lawsuits or trade penalties.¹¹¹ Today, Mexico faces a trade dispute with the United States for attempting to protect seed diversity through restrictions on genetically modified (GM) corn, in a case that epitomizes how trade law continues to override food sovereignty.¹¹²

CAFTA reproduced NAFTA's model in Central America with devastating results. In Honduras, the loss of rural jobs following CAFTA's enactment was hard-felt by farmers and campesinos, including Afrodescendent workers, who described how they were pushed from land where they grew beans or corn, while corporate plantations expanded oil palm cultivation.¹¹³ Guatemala and El Salvador experienced similar losses, as U.S. grain and agro-industrial goods displaced local producers.¹¹⁴

While the agreement promised to offset agricultural job loss by expanding textile and apparel industries, between 2005 and 2013, apparel exports from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to the U.S. fell by 21% after CAFTA took effect, undermining one of the central promises of CAFTA, that increased market access would lead to new job creation.¹¹⁵

Marisol

“ My family came to the United States in the late 1990s following the enactment of NAFTA. We were from a rural agricultural community that simply couldn't compete with the prices of corn coming from the U.S.

Having lost their livelihood, my parents tried to come to the US legally, but their applications were denied. They then tried to find jobs in nearby towns, only to face discrimination against rural residents. My parents then took the only viable option for them, at the time, to give us a chance at overcoming poverty — to come to the US without documents. ”

Environmental Damage and Climate-Induced Displacement

The consequences of free trade agreements extend beyond economic displacement. They have also accelerated environmental destruction, worsening climate vulnerabilities across Latin America. NAFTA and CAFTA have facilitated the expansion of extractive industries into rural and Indigenous territories, where environmental protections were already weak or poorly enforced.¹¹⁶

Rather than strengthening these safeguards, the agreements prioritized investor access and deregulation, allowing corporations to take advantage of lax oversight. The result is ecological collapse, deepened poverty, and mass displacement — especially in regions where communities rely on land, forests, and water for their survival.¹¹⁷

Olga

Olga, an Indigenous Moskito woman from Nicaragua, was left with no choice but to flee her village to the United States after climate change-fueled hurricanes Eta and Iota devastated her village in 2020. Many of the Moskito faced starvation as their communities depended on fishing and growing rice to sustain themselves.

*Soon after, the Nicaraguan government, which had been persecuting the Moskito since 2015, used the destruction of the hurricane to relocate internally displaced non-natives in the Moskito's territories, promising jobs and constructing new homes that never arrived. This left Olga and her community without options to rebuild, in addition to continued pressure from the government.*¹¹⁸

Land Grabs and Resource Extraction

Trade agreements made it easier for foreign agribusiness and mining corporations to acquire land, often displacing Indigenous and rural communities. In Guatemala, land grabs fueled by palm oil and cattle production have driven massive deforestation, particularly in Alta Verapaz, Petén, and Izabal.¹¹⁹

From 2001 to 2024, Guatemala lost approximately 1.89 million hectares of total tree cover, with 82% of this loss occurring in areas primarily driven by deforestation for permanent agriculture.¹²⁰ U.S. consumption of foreign palm oil — found in everything from snack foods to cosmetics — helped drive this trend, as CAFTA eliminated tariffs on agricultural exports like palm oil and prohibited countries from imposing export taxes or quotas.¹²¹

These provisions ensured that companies could expand exports to the U.S. market without restriction, while the agreement lacked meaningful environmental standards or enforcement mechanisms to prevent land degradation or deforestation.

Palm oil plantations were responsible for 28% of all new cropland replacing forests, and many of these plantations displaced Indigenous and rural communities who had sustainably cultivated the land for generations.¹²² Despite Guatemala's repeated commitments to sustainability, deforestation rates continued unabated, as companies often sourced palm from mills that lacked proper oversight, evading real accountability.¹²³ Once local communities were pushed off their lands, they were left with few alternatives — a dynamic that triggered both economic precarity and forced migration.

Water Shortages and Soil Depletion

Trade policies also prioritized export agriculture and resource-intensive manufacturing by eliminating tariffs on cash crops and restricting governments' ability to support local food production. NAFTA and CAFTA incentivized countries to convert vast tracts of land to monocultures geared toward U.S. markets — avocados in Mexico, sugarcane in El Salvador, and palm oil in Guatemala.

At the same time, rules limiting agricultural subsidies and banning export taxes undermined national food sovereignty, reinforcing dependence on export-driven agriculture. The result was a shift toward water-intensive monocultures in drought-prone regions, accelerating soil depletion, aquifer exhaustion, and rural displacement without meaningful environmental safeguards.¹²⁴

In northern Mexico, water extraction for mining and export agriculture surged by more than 3,000% between 1995 and 2015, drying up aquifers and leaving entire communities without access to safe drinking water.¹²⁵

One of the starkest examples is Monterrey, one of Mexico's largest and most industrialized cities.

In recent years, Monterrey has faced acute water shortages that left millions of residents without running water for days or weeks at a time, while foreign corporations like Heineken and Coca-Cola continued operating local bottling and manufacturing plants with priority water access.¹²⁶

This crisis underscores the extent to which trade-driven resource allocation favors multinational investors over local populations.

Soil degradation has also worsened as global supply chains demand intensive farming practices that exhaust the land.¹²⁷ Chemical contamination, topsoil loss, and over-cultivation have rendered large swaths of farmland unusable.¹²⁸ In many cases, this ecological collapse pushed entire communities off the land, as agriculture could no longer sustain livelihoods.¹²⁹

These cascading effects — water scarcity, soil exhaustion, and climate volatility — have made rural life increasingly precarious, forcing migration not just as an economic decision, but as an ecological necessity. Trade policy has enabled corporate land and water grabs that threaten the right to remain, turning vital resources into export commodities and deepening regional displacement.¹³⁰

Deforestation and Industrial Pollution

Free trade agreements and foreign investment protections have fueled rampant deforestation and toxic industrial expansion across Latin America. In Mexico, deforestation rates surged after NAFTA, as land was rapidly cleared for commercial farming, cattle ranching, and export agriculture.¹³¹ Entire ecosystems were sacrificed to meet the demands of global supply chains, and the corporations behind them faced virtually no accountability.¹³²

At the same time, U.S. companies relocated pollution-intensive industries to Mexico to evade domestic environmental standards.¹³³ A 2011 study found that over 20% of used U.S. vehicle batteries were exported to Mexico, where smelting operations released high levels of lead and other toxins into nearby communities.¹³⁴

These environmental hazards disproportionately impacted low-income and Indigenous populations, turning free trade zones into sacrifice zones.¹³⁵

NAFTA's so-called "environmental side agreement" proved largely symbolic.¹³⁶ Its weak enforcement mechanisms were no match for the sweeping investor protections enshrined in the core text of the agreement.¹³⁷ As a result, industries such as mining, oil extraction, and manufacturing operated with near impunity, contaminating air, water, and soil with minimal oversight.¹³⁸

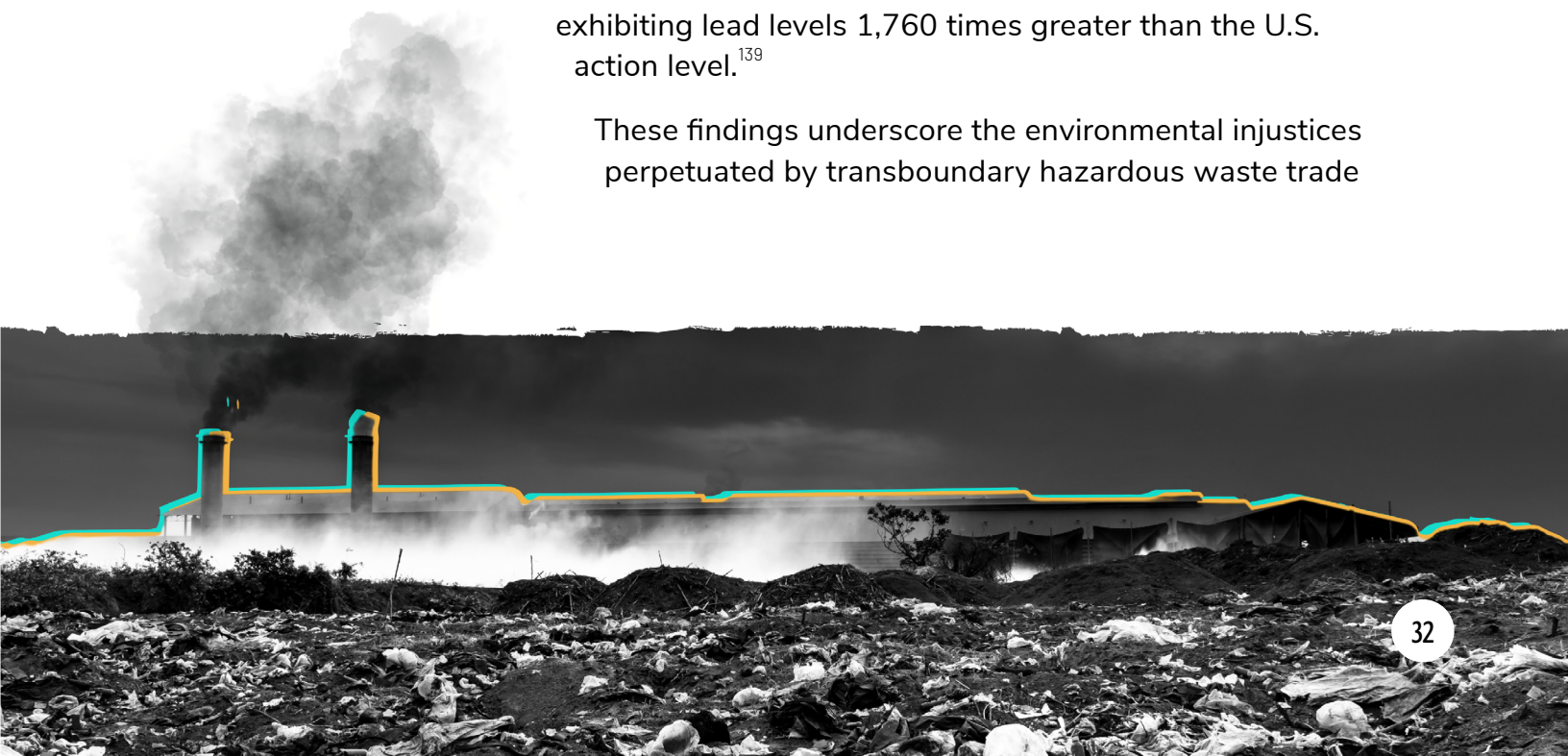
Hazardous Waste and Battery Recycling in Mexico

Despite NAFTA's environmental assurances, the agreement facilitated the relocation of hazardous industries to Mexico, exemplified by the lead-acid battery recycling sector. Following stricter U.S. environmental regulations in 2009, many battery recycling operations moved to Mexico, where environmental standards and enforcement are comparatively lax.

This shift led to significant health and environmental concerns. For instance, in Mexico, a plant operated by Zinc Nacional, which processes hazardous waste from the U.S., was found to emit high levels of lead, cadmium, and arsenic, contaminating nearby homes and schools.

Soil and dust samples collected around the facility revealed toxin levels significantly exceeding U.S. health risk thresholds, with one primary school exhibiting lead levels 1,760 times greater than the U.S. action level.¹³⁹

These findings underscore the environmental injustices perpetuated by transboundary hazardous waste trade



under NAFTA, where communities in Mexico bear the brunt of pollution resulting from industries avoiding stricter environmental regulations in the United States.¹⁴⁰

Trade policy did not merely ignore environmental protection — it actively undermined it by allowing corporations to pollute without consequence.¹⁴¹ What followed was not just ecological degradation, but a public health crisis as well. As traditional livelihoods collapsed under the weight of industrial pollution and resource extraction, migration became a survival strategy.

ISDS: Corporate Overreach

Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions embedded in NAFTA and CAFTA further entrench environmental harm by giving multinational corporations sweeping legal power to challenge public interest regulations, thus constraining governments from addressing them.¹⁴²

These mechanisms allow firms to sue governments in private tribunals for policies — such as environmental protections — that they claim violate the extreme foreign investor rights granted in the agreement and threaten their expected profits.¹⁴³

Fossil fuel, mining, and agribusiness companies have repeatedly used ISDS to attack environmental regulations across Latin America.¹⁴⁴ These cases often result in multi-million or billion-dollar awards, draining public resources and deterring future regulation.¹⁴⁵

ISDS effectively doubles corporate advantage as companies profit from extractive and polluting operations, then pursue legal claims when governments attempt to limit environmental damage. The threat of litigation has created a chilling effect, where governments — especially in the Global South — are pressured to prioritize investor interests over ecological and community wellbeing.¹⁴⁶

Metalclad v. Mexico (2000 – NAFTA)

A U.S. waste management firm was denied a permit to operate a hazardous waste landfill in San Luis Potosí after local officials cited environmental risks.¹⁴⁷ Metalclad sued Mexico for over \$43 million.¹⁴⁸ The tribunal awarded the company \$16 million from Mexican taxpayers, ruling that Mexico's denial of the permit constituted an "indirect expropriation."¹⁴⁹

Legacy Vulcan v. Mexico (2023 – NAFTA Legacy)

Mexico denied permits to U.S. mining giant Vulcan Materials for environmental reasons, including damage to protected coastal ecosystems in Quintana Roo, resulting in an “ecological catastrophe.”¹⁵⁰ Vulcan is seeking approximately \$1 billion under NAFTA’s legacy ISDS clause.¹⁵¹ The case remains pending.

Odyssey Marine Exploration v. Mexico (2019 – NAFTA)

The U.S. seabed mining firm sued Mexico for not approving an offshore phosphate mining project that environmental authorities said threatened coral reefs and marine ecosystems.¹⁵² Odyssey demanded \$3.5 billion for alleged expropriation.¹⁵³ The tribunal awarded the company \$37.1 million, ruling that the environmental concerns were pretextual.¹⁵⁴

Kappes, Cassiday and Associates (KCA) v. Guatemala (2018 – CAFTA)

After Indigenous-led protests and legal challenges, Guatemala suspended KCA’s El Tambor gold mine, citing a lack of community consultation.¹⁵⁵ KCA, a Nevada-based company, is seeking \$350 million, arguing the suspension violated investor rights.¹⁵⁶ The case is still pending.

Climate-Induced Displacement: The Migration Pipeline

Trade policy is accelerating climate collapse and forcing people to flee as a result. NAFTA and CAFTA have enabled vast quantities of goods to travel across borders, sometimes several times, before reaching their end consumer.

“Free trade” contributes to global greenhouse gas emissions both by increasing the transport of goods and increasing production in places where manufacturing is more carbon-intensive.¹⁵⁷ Unchecked deforestation, industrial agriculture, and extractive

megaprojects further accelerate the climate catastrophe as they eliminate climate-protecting greenhouse sinks.¹⁵⁸

The climate change that global trade fuels in turn increases the climate vulnerability of exploited communities in Latin America. Environmental shocks driven by this collapse — floods, droughts, crop failure, and extreme heat — are becoming more frequent and more severe.¹⁵⁹

In Guatemala, Hurricanes Eta and Iota displaced hundreds of thousands, with the worst damage concentrated in regions previously deforested for palm oil and cattle exports.¹⁶⁰ In Mexico, Hurricane Otis intensified from a tropical storm to a Category 5 hurricane in less than 12 hours, devastating Guerrero and exposing the state's lack of climate preparedness.¹⁶¹ In Mexico, entire towns ran out of drinking water during historic heatwaves, even as aquifers were drained to irrigate export crops destined for the United States.¹⁶²

Climate displacement is not a future threat; it is already happening. Rural and Indigenous communities, who have contributed the least to global emissions, are being uprooted by trade-enabled environmental destruction and pushed into migration.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, President Trump has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement,¹⁶⁴ rolled back over 100 environmental protections,¹⁶⁵ weakened safeguards against water and air pollution,¹⁶⁶ and cleared the path for fossil fuel and agribusiness expansion across the hemisphere.¹⁶⁷

Unless trade rules are fundamentally rewritten to prioritize ecological integrity, community rights, and climate resilience over investor protections, they will continue to fuel the climate crisis that displaces millions while corporations profit from their vulnerability.

III. Trump's Trade Agenda Makes Matters Worse

Associated Press/Moises Castillo



Trump's NAFTA Rewrite Fails to Deliver

Donald Trump has twice won the presidency by preying on working people's frustrations, including on trade policy. He marketed his 2020 renegotiation of NAFTA as a departure from the failed trade deals of the past.¹⁶⁸ In truth, he rebranded NAFTA as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) while preserving the architecture of corporate control and economic displacement that defined its predecessor.

Trump framed the USMCA as a win for American workers, but the substance of the agreement tells a different story. The core design remained intact, protecting corporate profits, suppressing wages, expanding monopoly rights, and restricting the policy space of governments to enact public interest laws. While modest

improvements — such as the creation of the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) and the elimination of specific rules to further expand pharmaceutical monopolies — were won through relentless organizing by congressional Democrats, labor unions, and civil society groups, they came despite, not because of, the Trump administration’s priorities.¹⁶⁹

Despite public rhetoric, the USMCA continued the same asymmetries that made NAFTA a driver of displacement and labor exploitation. Big Tech pushed their deregulatory agenda through a new digital trade chapter that limits governments’ ability to hold them accountable. While ISDS was removed between the U.S. and Canada and reduced in scope with Mexico, Big Oil retained full ISDS rights in Mexico, preserving fossil fuel firms’ rights to challenge environmental or other policies in corporate-friendly tribunals.¹⁷⁰ U.S. agribusiness also preserved its ability to flood Mexican markets, undermining rural livelihoods and accelerating migration.¹⁷¹

The “Race to the Bottom” Continues

The most celebrated reform, the RRM, enables workers’ organizations to petition the U.S. or Canadian government regarding specific abuses in Mexican factories that deny collective bargaining rights, with a response required by the respective governments within a specified timeframe. It allows for punishments (tariffs) to be levied against individual facilities found in violation rather than against an entire category of goods. This novel approach received broad bipartisan support and led to re-hiring or backpay for more than 36,000 Mexican workers.¹⁷²

While the mechanism marked an improvement, it has not created the structural change needed to support Mexican workers broadly. Even when RRM complaints are upheld, remedies are paltry, implementation is slow, and retaliation against organizing workers often continues. The “race to the bottom” is alive and well, as structural patterns of abuse — including wage suppression, union-busting, and retaliatory firings — persist across Mexico’s industrial zones, especially in maquiladoras. Government enforcement remains weak, as U.S. and Mexican authorities have largely failed to pursue substantial penalties or systemic reforms beyond individual factory cases.¹⁷³

Despite modest improvements in labor protections, the USMCA has not empowered workers to negotiate fair wages or significantly transform workplace conditions at scale.

General Motors (GM) – Silao, Mexico

The GM Silao plant became a test case for the USMCA's labor enforcement capacity. Workers producing some of GM's most profitable vehicles earned a fraction of their U.S. counterparts — often under contracts negotiated by company-friendly unions.

In 2021, after a fraudulent union vote was exposed and workers faced threats, the U.S. government filed an RRM complaint, which resulted in action by the Mexican government at the facility. A new vote was held, and an independent union eventually won. However, GM stalled contract negotiations for over a year, while intimidation and retaliation continued behind the scenes.

The Silao case revealed the fragility of the USMCA's reforms: even with international scrutiny, one of the world's largest corporations could delay change — and continue extracting profits from a deeply unequal labor regime.¹⁷⁴

Agricultural Dumping Continues

The USMCA failed to address one of NAFTA's most devastating legacies: the destruction of small-scale agriculture. U.S. agribusiness continues to export heavily subsidized corn, wheat, and soy to Mexico, eroding food sovereignty and deepening poverty in rural communities that NAFTA enabled.¹⁷⁵ Under the USMCA, rural poverty persists, food sovereignty has been further eroded, and migration trends remain generally unchanged, continuing the same economic instability that free trade deals were supposed to prevent.¹⁷⁶

Mexico's 2020 presidential decree to ban genetically modified corn and glyphosate was a landmark attempt to protect public health, biodiversity, and Indigenous farming systems.¹⁷⁷ The policy sought to ban GM corn for human consumption, particularly white corn used in tortillas — the nation's most widely consumed food — and eliminate the use of glyphosate, a toxic herbicide linked to cancer and environmental degradation. While the decree aligned with Mexico's constitutional right to food sovereignty, it was immediately met with fierce opposition from U.S. agribusiness and government officials.

In 2023, the U.S. government formally invoked the dispute settlement process under the USMCA to challenge Mexico's ban on GM corn, alleging that it lacked scientific

justification and violated trade obligations. Though the glyphosate phaseout has not yet been subject to formal litigation, it has faced intense lobbying from pesticide manufacturers and U.S. trade officials. These challenges reveal how trade agreements like the USMCA can be used to override national environmental and public health policies, privileging corporate interests over democratic regulation and Indigenous food systems.¹⁷⁸

The USMCA is not a departure from the corporate trade regime.

While U.S., Canadian, and Mexican social movements forced modest improvements in the final text, including the narrow path for addressing select labor violations and rolling back ISDS rights in some sectors, the central logic of NAFTA remains, at the expense of people and the environment.

As such, Trump did not fix NAFTA. He fortified it and then blamed the very victims of that system to justify new waves of xenophobia and economic nationalism. Until policymakers rewrite trade agreements to prioritize economic justice over investor power and to protect workers, not just profits, they will continue to reproduce the very conditions that drive displacement, deepen inequality, and undermine national and regional sovereignty.

Trump Guts Funding That Fights Race to the Bottom

For decades, Congress has authorized funding for the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) within the Department of Labor. Through technical support, research, and monitoring, ILAB works to strengthen global labor standards, enforce labor commitments among trading partners, and combat international child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking. ILAB helps counter the “race to the bottom” — because when workers abroad can earn a living wage with dignity, corporations have less incentive to offshore jobs and undercut U.S. workers’ bargaining.

In March 2025, despite Trump’s claims of wanting trade deals to benefit workers, his administration terminated all of ILAB’s cooperative agreements in one fell swoop.¹⁷⁹ Elon Musk’s so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) made clear that

the regime would not spend the funds that Congress specifically appropriated to combat unfair labor practices and to support workers' rights abroad.¹⁸⁰

To make matters worse, ILAB lost substantial capacity through the mass resignation of staff who, following the project cuts, took an administration buyout offer.¹⁸¹ There is also substantial concern that, through 2026 appropriations, ILAB could lose even more staff with the capacity and expertise to hold our trade partners accountable.

As more than 70 members of Congress recently noted, this further gutting would, among other things, put at risk the labor achievements of President Trump's own signature trade agreement: "Through the novel Rapid Response Labor Mechanism (RRM), ILAB has taken labor enforcement actions and worked to ensure compliance of our USMCA partners, especially Mexico, with the commitments of the agreement."¹⁸²

By putting this program at risk, Trump is abandoning the best (though far-from-perfect) element of his signature trade agreement, failing workers at home and abroad.

** In April 2025, Public Citizen, on behalf of ILAB grantees the Solidarity Center, Global March Against Child Labour, and the American Institutes for Research, filed a lawsuit challenging the administration's unlawful termination of ILAB projects. A decision remains pending.*

Trump Embraces Corporate Trade Deals

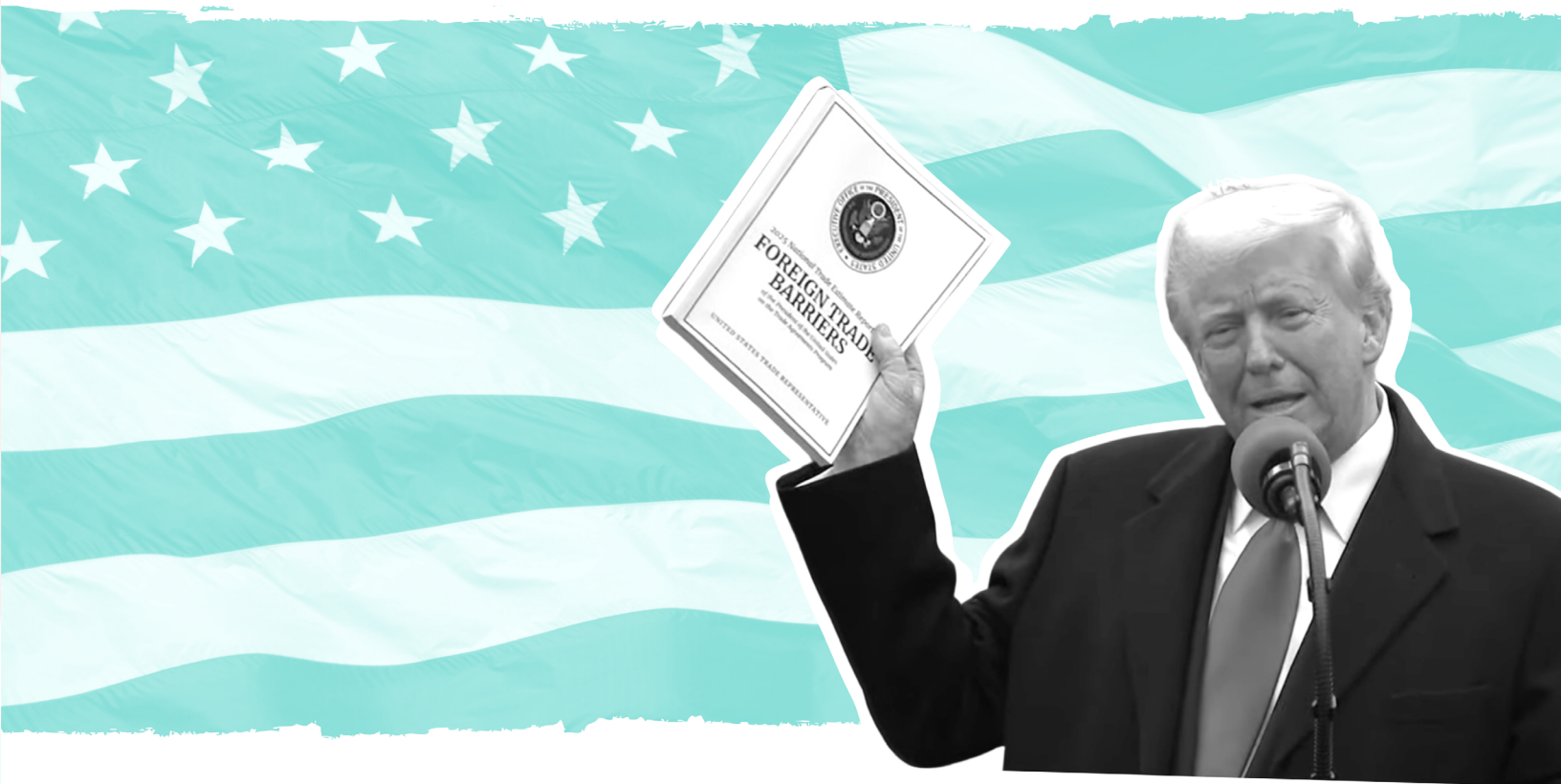
In his second term, Trump has wielded the threat of sweeping tariffs against Mexico, Canada, and virtually every other country, to supposedly "rebalance" trade. But behind his populist rhetoric lies a far more familiar truth: Trump is not rejecting the corporate trade model; he's weaponizing it.

Rather than confronting the structural failures of past trade agreements that drove the "race to the bottom" and offshored jobs, he's using tariff threats as leverage to force even more secretive, corporate-dominated trade agreements that further entrench those failures, rewarding corporate elites while sidelining workers, environmental safeguards, and public protections.¹⁸³

Trump's cynical "Liberation Day" tariff announcement exemplifies this strategy. Trump bypassed Congress's authority, announcing sweeping tariffs, citing the 2025 National Trade Estimate (NTE) Report as justification. This report, long shaped by corporate

lobbies, compiles a wishlist of other countries' laws that multinational corporations want to dismantle: climate regulations, digital privacy laws, food safety standards, and labor protections — all rebranded as obstacles to “free trade.”¹⁸⁴

Under Trump, these corporate grievances are not only prioritized but increasingly enforced through retaliatory threats and one-on-one deal-making, outside democratic oversight.



Worse, the tariffs serve as a quid pro quo enforcement tool, allowing Trump to lower duties for countries or companies that reverse public interest policies or display political loyalty. During his first term, the chaotic tariff exemption process rewarded Republican donors at twice the rate of Democratic ones — a pattern likely to worsen in his second term.¹⁸⁵

Far from confronting the failures of past trade deals, Trump is using the same rigged rules to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and expand executive authority over global trade.

The result is a trade policy that is less accountable and more extreme. Rather than fixing the harm caused by NAFTA and CAFTA, Trump is pushing for new deals that further limit democratic regulation under the guise of protecting American jobs.¹⁸⁶ What is actually being protected are the privileges of Big Tech, Big Pharma, and extractive corporations that benefit from global deregulation and weak enforcement.

Trump's trade policy in his second term marks its most authoritarian evolution yet, one that uses border threats and a tariff war to reward corporate power while scapegoating displaced workers and migrants.¹⁸⁷

IV. The Exploitation of Migrant Workers in the U.S.

Mona Caron



Members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a Florida-based farmworker organization that fights labor exploitation in the state's agriculture sector.

A Labor Pipeline Built on Displacement

Migration debates tend to fixate on border crossings, but the real story unfolds after migrants arrive in the United States. Here, they are systematically funneled into a labor market designed to exploit their vulnerable status.

U.S. immigration policy does more than regulate entry. It serves as a mechanism of labor discipline by funneling displaced workers into jobs where they are systematically denied the power to organize, negotiate, or leave. This system not only

fails to protect migrants, but it actively upholds a business model that thrives on their disposability.

The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), signed by President Bill Clinton, cemented this structure.¹⁸⁸ Before its passage, the undocumented population stood at approximately five million.¹⁸⁹ By 2006, it had doubled to around 12 million.¹⁹⁰ The IIRIRA slashed legal immigration pathways while vastly expanding deportation authority, constructing a policy architecture that ensures migrants remain exploitable long after crossing the border.¹⁹¹

At the same time, U.S. foreign policy has effectively extended this labor containment strategy beyond its borders. Under U.S. pressure, Mexico has expanded enforcement along its southern border, restricted Central American migrant access to formal employment, and accelerated deportations, likely pushing many to attempt the dangerous journey north.¹⁹² These efforts do not stop migration — they redirect it into more precarious, informal, and easily exploited channels.¹⁹³

For instance, the agribusiness industry benefits from the trade model not only due to access to new markets abroad, but also from the creation of a displaced labor force at home, stripped of protections and vulnerable to exploitation.

Undocumented immigrants comprise an estimated 36.1% of the U.S. agricultural workforce, 26.7% of maintenance workers, and 25.1% of food preparation workers.¹⁹⁴ Free trade agreements facilitate the offshoring of U.S. jobs to low-wage countries, displacing workers earning a living wage here and exploiting workers abroad, while immigration restrictions ensure a vulnerable workforce willing to accept exploitative working conditions.

Together, these policies form a transnational labor regime that delivers precisely what corporations demand: a steady stream of workers who are visible enough to be recruited, but marginal enough to be silenced. This is not a border crisis; it is a business model.

The Business Model of Migrant Labor Exploitation

Across sectors, corporations rely on legal mechanisms that reduce worker power. These include employer-tied visas, deportability, job misclassification, and legal barriers to unionization.¹⁹⁵ Each of these is a form of structural leverage, not just to extract labor, but to ensure it remains cheap, compliant, and replaceable.

Visa Dependency

Programs like H-2A (agriculture), H-2B (seasonal labor), TN (under USMCA), and L-1 (intra-company transfers) require workers to remain with a single employer.¹⁹⁶ Workers who report abuse or attempt to leave risk losing their legal status — and with it, their livelihoods.¹⁹⁷ This dependency traps workers into silence.

Employers, aware of this imbalance, often withhold wages or documents, knowing few workers can afford to speak up.¹⁹⁸ In the H-2A program, workers often experience violations including withheld passports, extortionate recruitment fees,

a lack of company grievance mechanisms, intimidation, dismissal for those who complain, and wage theft. In a report of 100 Mexican H-2A workers, 100% reported at least one violation.¹⁹⁹

Legal status becomes a leash. Visible enough to be policed, but not strong enough to protect.

This is not a new strategy. During the Bracero Program (1942–1964), Mexican workers were recruited on temporary contracts to fill labor shortages in the U.S., especially in agriculture and railroads.²⁰⁰ They were barred from settling permanently, excluded from basic workplace protections, and subjected to widespread abuse, including wage theft and unsafe conditions.²⁰¹



A Mexican farmworker during the Bracero Program.

Making matters worse, when economic conditions shifted, these workers were subsequently discarded. In 1943, Mexico temporarily banned Bracero recruitment to Texas due to the state's refusal to protect workers from abuse.²⁰² Then, in 1954, the callously named "Operation Wetback" initiated mass deportations, criminalizing migrants who had recently been encouraged to enter.²⁰³

By tying workers to a single employer, it creates a coercive dynamic where quitting a job due to abuse means losing legal status and facing deportation. This employer-tethering has made H-2 visa holders especially vulnerable to wage theft, retaliation, and labor trafficking.²⁰⁴

In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor and anti-trafficking organizations have documented widespread abuses under these programs — including cases where workers were forced to live in squalid conditions, charged illegal recruitment fees, or threatened with violence for speaking out.²⁰⁵

A 2021 report by Polaris, a leading anti-trafficking NGO, found that H-2A and H-2B programs were among the top visa categories associated with labor trafficking cases in the U.S.²⁰⁶

Deportability as Labor Discipline

Undocumented workers face even starker constraints. While many perform essential work — particularly in agriculture, where 73% of the workforce in the U.S. is from Latin America — they live in constant fear of immigration enforcement.²⁰⁷ Employers leverage that fear to suppress complaints, depress wages, and prevent organizing.²⁰⁸

Today's undocumented farm labor system is widely considered modern slavery due to widespread wage theft, pesticide exposure, and housing abuses — all enabled by legal exclusion and economic desperation.²⁰⁹

Anonymous

“ I came here to work. They know that. That’s why they hire us. But the moment you speak up about pay, about injuries, they remind you that you’re replaceable.

At my last job, I was maimed by a[n agricultural] machine and couldn’t work for 3 weeks. They told me if I went to the hospital or told anyone what happened, they would call ICE and deport my family. They didn’t pay me. I didn’t complain, but they still fired me. ”

- Undocumented Mexican agricultural worker, Pennsylvania, 2025

According to labor data, immigrant workers are 1.8 times more likely to die on the job than U.S.-born workers.²¹⁰ Despite this, many go without safety training, injury protections, or access to legal remedies. The industry’s dependence on turnover and subcontracting keeps workers fragmented and organizing nearly impossible.

It is not incidental that immigration raids often target workplaces during labor disputes.²¹¹ Deportability is wielded as a tool to suppress collective action.

In industries heavily dependent on migrant labor, such as agriculture, construction, and retail, employers are increasingly reporting workers to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This practice, widespread in places like Home Depot and Lowe's, targets individuals whose labor powers key industries.²¹² These actions are symptomatic of a broader, exploitative system where labor rights are subordinated to enforcement goals. It creates an environment in which migrant workers, whose labor is crucial to the economy, are continually at risk of deportation, and their families face disruption and hardship.

These reports highlight the intersection of immigration enforcement and trade policies, where the demand for cheap labor in industries linked to trade agreements further marginalizes and criminalizes migrant communities.

Misclassification and Legal Evasion

In industries like construction, employers routinely misclassify migrant workers as independent contractors.²¹³ This classification allows them to avoid paying overtime, health insurance, or payroll taxes.²¹⁴ It also strips workers of the right to organize or seek workplace protections.²¹⁵

Misclassified workers earn less than their properly classified counterparts and are far more likely to be injured or denied compensation.²¹⁶

Union Suppression and Surveillance

Even when organizing is technically legal, immigration status makes it perilous. Workers on temporary visas may be surveilled or warned against union activity, while undocumented workers often avoid any formal engagement out of fear that their information will be shared with authorities.²¹⁷

Corporations understand this and lobby accordingly. The same industries that benefit from migrant labor also fund campaigns to weaken labor protections, both domestically and abroad.²¹⁸ Legal precarity becomes a cost-saving strategy, embedded in the business model.

Major industry groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Farm Bureau Federation, have consistently lobbied against stronger labor protections and in favor of expanding or maintaining visa programs that tie workers to employers (H-2A, H-2B).

U.S. Chamber of Commerce:

- In a 2023 letter, the Chamber supported the H-2B returning worker exemption, emphasizing the program's importance to seasonal employers.²¹⁹
- The Chamber has expressed opposition to increased compliance burdens on employers hiring H-2A workers, arguing that such requirements are impractical.²²⁰
- In collaboration with other industry groups, the Chamber filed a lawsuit against the DOL's finalized H-2A rule, which aimed to grant temporary agricultural workers the right to collective bargaining. The lawsuit contended that the rule represented unconstitutional regulatory overreach.²²¹

American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF)

- AFBF has lobbied for streamlining the H-2A and H-2B visa processes to make them more "farmer-friendly," advocating for policies that reduce regulatory burdens on agricultural employers.²²²
- The organization has opposed Department of Labor rules aimed at enhancing H-2A worker protections, labeling them as overreaching and urging for their reconsideration.²²³
- AFBF has supported legislation like the HIRE Act, which seeks to simplify the H-2A and H-2B visa programs, indicating a preference for less stringent labor regulations.²²⁴
- The AFBF has consistently opposed increases to the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR), which establishes the minimum wage for H-2A workers. They argue that higher wages would burden farmers financially.²²⁵

The function of immigration policy is not simply to regulate borders but to structure labor markets in ways that maximize corporate control.

V. Criminalization as a Business Model

El Salvador's presidential press office/Associated Press



The U.S. does not respond to trade-displaced migration with protection or structural reform; it responds with criminalization. Militarized borders, mass detention, and work restrictions drive migrants deeper into precarity.²²⁶ This is not the failure of a broken system. It is the function of an economic model that weaponizes immigration enforcement to suppress labor, extract profit, and maintain corporate control.

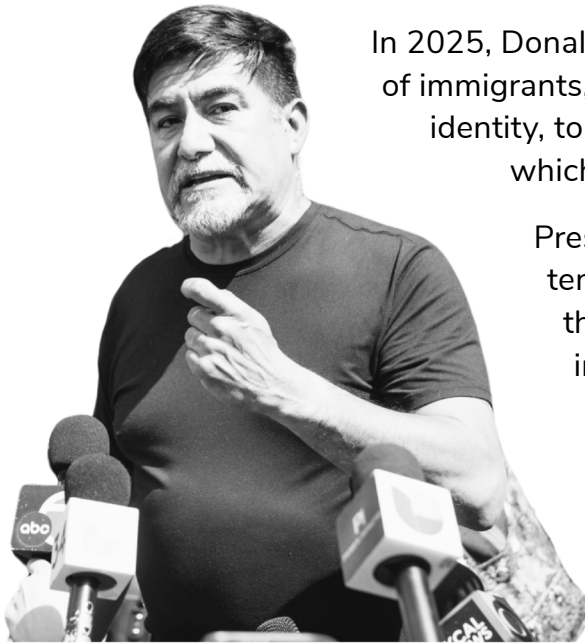
Upon arrival, migrants are not treated as displaced individuals fleeing policies shaped by the United States, they are treated as threats. The southern border is not framed as the consequence of economic intervention, but as a “crisis zone.”²²⁷

The Human Toll of ICE Raids

In his second term, President Trump has directed his administration to intensify its crackdown on immigration, marked by aggressive ICE raids targeting a broad

spectrum of individuals, including Native Americans, U.S. citizens, and university students with visas.²²⁸ These operations, conducted with militarized tactics and unmarked vehicles, have sparked widespread peaceful protests.²²⁹

In Los Angeles, community resistance was met with an unprecedented deployment of federal troops. The raids have affected diverse communities such as garment workers, day laborers, and local businesses, leading to mass arrests and heightened community unrest.²³⁰



David Crane, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG

“This fight is ours, it’s our community’s, but it belongs to everyone. We all have to fight for them.” -David Huerta

In 2025, Donald Trump ordered the deportation of hundreds of immigrants, including some rounded up due to mistaken identity, to an anti-terrorism prison in El Salvador, for which the U.S. is paying El Salvador.

President Trump used the excuse of escalating tensions to send 700 U.S. Marines and doubled the National Guard presence to 4,000 troops in the city against the express wishes of state and local authorities, a move condemned by California leaders who feared this would only escalate tensions and promote civil unrest.²³¹

Trump responded by threatening to invoke the extreme emergency powers of the Insurrection Act, which would authorize him to deploy military forces to suppress rebellion or enforce the law in specific circumstances.²³²

The beating and arrest of David Huerta, president of SEIU California and SEIU-

USWW, further fueled public outrage, prompting legal challenges from California against federal troop deployments and highlighting profound concerns over civil liberties and due process.²³³

In the early days of Trump’s second administration, ICE arrests averaged around 660 daily, but just four months later, the agency arrested a record 2,300 individuals in a single day.²³⁴ White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller made clear the administration’s goal is to increase arrests to 3,000 per day.²³⁵

Private Prisons: Cashing In on Detained Migrants

The Trump administration's xenophobic campaign rhetoric and ensuing ICE raids have proven highly profitable for private prison companies, especially GEO Group and CoreCivic. Since Trump took office, their stock value soared — GEO Group's by 35% and CoreCivic's by 57%.²³⁶ Their financial success is intricately linked to Trump's policies, particularly his rescission of a Biden-era order aimed at reducing the use of private prisons.²³⁷ These companies run detention centers and create surveillance technology to monitor immigrants, capitalizing on the mass deportation strategy.

Lobbying

GEO Group and CivicCore have aggressively lobbied to expand immigration enforcement and detention to boost their revenue. Between 2008 and 2014, they collectively spent over \$16 million on federal lobbying, targeting the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, which oversees immigration detention funding and policies.²³⁸

In 2017, during Trump's first administration, GEO Group significantly increased its lobbying expenditures, spending \$1.7 million — a more than 70% increase from the previous year — to influence policies related to immigration enforcement and detention. This marked the highest amount on record for a private prison contractor at the time.²³⁹

In 2024, GEO Group reportedly spent \$1.38 million, and CoreCivic allocated \$1.77 million to federal lobbying, continuing their efforts to influence immigration and detention policies.²⁴⁰ In the first quarter of 2025 alone, GEO Group invested \$350,000, while CoreCivic spent \$490,000 on lobbying efforts.²⁴¹ These expenditures help secure favorable government policies that align with their business interests.

Government Contracts

That lobbying has paid off. Following its surge in lobbying in 2017, GEO Group announced it had won the Trump administration's first federal contract for a new immigration detention center: a \$110 million, 1,000-bed facility in Conroe, Texas.²⁴² GEO Group and CoreCivic have continued to benefit directly from mass deportation efforts, securing lucrative ICE contracts to run detention centers and provide detention beds. GEO Groups secured \$747 million in contracts in 2023 alone, and CoreCivic received an ICE contract worth \$2.2 billion, representing 30% of its total revenue.²⁴³

The companies' profit model thrives on the detention of immigrants, with "bed quotas" mandating a minimum number of immigration detention beds, thus ensuring a steady demand for facilities.²⁴⁴ This "bed quota" policy, which guarantees payment of \$150 per detainee per day, is funded by taxpayer dollars.²⁴⁵ This financial incentive to maintain high incarceration rates further fuels the cycle of mass detention, as private interests profit from the very policies that fuel the raids targeting the displaced.

Revolving Door

The revolving door between government officials and high-ranking roles within companies raises serious ethical concerns. For example, Pam Bondi, Trump's Attorney General, previously lobbied for GEO Group.²⁴⁶ Most recently, David Bible, a top ICE official, left his position to become Executive Vice President at GEO Group, shortly after advocating for more funding to expand detention capacity and technology to monitor migrants — efforts that directly benefited his future employer.²⁴⁷

Forced Labor and Inhumane Conditions

A key element of the profit-driven model is the exploitation of detainees as cheap labor. GEO Group, which operates 16 ICE detention facilities, has faced multiple lawsuits over inhumane labor practices, including forcing detainees to prepare meals, wash laundry, and scrub toilets for just \$1 per day.²⁴⁸

Forcing detainees to do this work for so little avoids the costs associated with hiring paid employees. A federal court ruled that GEO must pay \$17 million in back wages, plus \$6 million for "unjust enrichment" — still accounting for less than 1% of GEO's total revenues in 2024.²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, GEO Group is refusing to pay and vowing to "vigorously pursue all available appeals."²⁵⁰

The company has also faced numerous lawsuits for mistreating detainees, including children.²⁵¹ These conditions include moldy food, solitary confinement, and severe medical neglect, resulting in preventable deaths.²⁵²

In 2023, GEO Group was sued for using toxic chemicals to clean its facilities, causing detainees to fall ill and suffer long-term health consequences.²⁵³ Such inhumane conditions are unacceptable under any circumstances. Importantly, migrants detained in ICE centers are not criminals. They are held in legal limbo while an immigration judge determines whether they should be deported.



Detainees spell “SOS” during a protest against inhumane conditions in the courtyard of ICE’s Krome Detention Center in Florida, 2025.

Booming Business

As the mass detainment of migrants following ICE raids intensifies, the financial incentives of this punitive system become increasingly apparent as corporations housing detained migrants profit from human suffering, funded by taxpayer dollars.²⁵⁴

In 2022, GEO Group reported \$4 billion, accounting for approximately 43% of its revenue, from ICE contracts.²⁵⁵ This revenue stream has only grown as demand for detention space surges under the Trump administration’s mass deportation agenda. In 2025, CoreCivic signed a new contract with ICE to expand its detention capacity, accommodating up to 784 additional detainees at correctional facilities that the company runs in Mississippi, Nevada, Ohio, and Oklahoma, including a maximum-security prison.²⁵⁶

Criminalizing migrants does not protect national security — it protects corporate profits. It sustains a system in which workers displaced by trade are penalized for surviving, and where their legal precarity is exploited as a tool of wage suppression.

VI. Policy Recommendations

To end the cycle of displacement, exploitation, and criminalization, the United States must rewrite both its trade and immigration policies. Addressing the root cause of forced migration requires systemic change, particularly in trade policies that drive economic inequalities and the absence of lawful migration pathways.

U.S. trade and immigration policies must prioritize human rights, labor protections, and climate resilience, replacing corporate-centered agreements with policies that promote economic justice across borders.

Transform Immigration Policies to Respect Humanity and Address Root Causes

Addressing systemic immigration challenges requires significant investments in infrastructure to welcome newcomers, support communities, and ensure the economic well-being of immigrants and their families. It is crucial to exhaust all legal and political avenues to protect lawful pathways from further attacks.

- **Uphold Due Process:** Ensure due process protections for all individuals at risk of removal, safeguarding fairness in all legal proceedings. This includes ensuring access to counsel for individuals facing deportation, regardless of ability to pay, and legal representation for unaccompanied children. This is critical to ensure that immigrants are not subjected to unfair deportation proceedings, particularly from countries destabilized by U.S. foreign policy or trade agreements.²⁵⁷



- **Expand Protections and Legal Pathways for Vulnerable Populations:** Reinstate, safeguard, and expand access to protections and ensure that they remain robust and free from punitive enforcement measures that undermine their effectiveness:
 - Reinstate and expand parole and refugee resettlement programs to offer relief to vulnerable populations seeking safety, and rescind the Trump administration's racist travel ban.
 - Expand protections for immigrant survivors of violence, trafficking, and crime through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), U and T visa programs, offering protection from deportation, work permits, and a pathway to residency.
 - Fortify the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protections and pass legislation to provide a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers.
 - Maintain access to the Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement (DALE) for immigrant victims of employer exploitation, ensuring that worker abuse is not politicized and that application processing continues without the risk of enforcement.
- **Restore and Strengthen Asylum Protections:** Repeal anti-immigration policies that limit asylum access, restore asylum protections, and ensure full consideration of claims before an immigration judge.
- **Safeguard Temporary Protected Status (TPS):** Protect and expand TPS designations, extensions, and redesignations for eligible countries facing climate disasters, humanitarian crises, and armed conflicts. Rescind the Trump administration's arbitrary termination of country designation to fuel his mass deportation agenda.
- **Decouple Immigration Enforcement From Labor Policy:** To create a fair and humane immigration system, the U.S. must decouple immigration enforcement from labor policy. This separation is necessary to ensure that workers, regardless of immigration status, can report abuse, join unions, and advocate for their rights without the fear of deportation. Congress must pass comprehensive legislation that creates pathways to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers and essential workers, while ensuring labor protections for foreign workers under the H-2A program. Support federal, state, and local labor and

employment agencies to enforce wage protections, workplace safety, and labor rights.

- **Support Immigrant Communities:** In response to Trump's funding cuts and threats to defund state-run immigrant services, local governments must expand efforts to support immigrant communities. This includes implementing welcoming ordinances, providing legal assistance, language access, and fostering civic engagement. Educational resources on housing, healthcare, and education are vital to addressing equity gaps in marginalized communities.
- **Oppose Punitive Immigration Laws:** The U.S. must oppose anti-immigrant bills that criminalize marginalized communities and undermine workers' rights. Scrutinize funding for immigration enforcement to prevent the expansion of deportation infrastructure and ensure resources are directed toward supporting and providing critical resources to vulnerable communities rather than penalizing them and separating families.
- **Access to Pathways for Climate-Displaced Populations:** For the United States to fulfill its share of responsibility in global climate change adaptation and disaster response, it should authorize the admission of individuals displaced by climate change. The U.S. should also develop a data-driven, equity-informed global climate change resilience strategy to mitigate the effects of climate change on displacement and reduce the humanitarian crises that push people to seek refuge.

Transform Global Trade Policies That Displace and Exploit Workers

The U.S. must move away from the failed NAFTA and CAFTA trade model to foster a more equitable global economy, addressing historic harms and dismantling the structural causes of displacement. Any U.S. trade agreements should prioritize human rights, labor protections, and environmental sustainability instead of corporate profits.²⁵⁸ A positive trade agenda at a minimum must:

- **Implement Transparent and Inclusive Trade Policymaking Processes:** Replace corporate-dominated trade advisory committees with an on-the-record public process for trade policymaking, publishing all U.S. proposed texts before negotiations, as well as composite negotiation texts in real-time. Negotiating

processes must be inclusive and transparent, centering the voices of the Global South, labor, Indigenous, and migrant communities. Consistent with the U.S. Constitution, Congress must approve any trade agreements.

- **Conduct Impact Assessments:** Before negotiating or renewing trade agreements, conduct human rights and displacement impact assessments that center affected communities and respect the right to free, prior, and informed consent for Indigenous peoples.
- **Incentivize Living Wages, Decent Working Conditions, and Robust Environmental Standards:** To end the race to the bottom, ensure that any trade agreement includes strong and binding labor, environmental, and human rights standards with swift and certain enforcement at the facility-specific level. Include binding and enforceable labor protections for migrant workers. Condition the application of any agreement's benefits to goods and services produced by workers making a fair wage and require better supply chain transparency, including tracking of the wages associated with traded goods and services. To mitigate climate change, any trade agreement should also include commitments to reduce emissions from the industrial sector and ensure data transparency on the pollution intensity of major energy-intensive products.
- **Safeguard Small Farmers' Livelihoods:** Reform trade rules to safeguard governments' rights to manage agricultural supplies at fair prices that at least cover farmers' costs of production, and through tariff protections that allow for stable domestic supplies that meet demand by discouraging dumping.
- **Respect Sovereignty:** Reform or replace trade agreement rules to respect the sovereignty of countries, allowing them to enact policies that protect agriculture and other critical industries, and regulate foreign investment in the best interest of their people. This prioritizes national development goals and the rights of local communities over corporate interests.
- **Remove Corporate Giveaways:** Eliminate damaging "digital trade" trade rules that impede governments from protecting online privacy or holding Big Tech companies accountable. Remove "intellectual property" rules, including those that allow Big Pharma companies to expand their monopolies, reducing access to lifesaving medicines.
- **Eliminate ISDS:** Remove foreign investor rights and ISDS provisions — which corporations use to challenge labor, environmental, and Indigenous rights protections — from all U.S. trade and investment agreements.

- **Support Regionally Led Economic Development and Climate Justice:** Redirect U.S. development finance and climate funds away from extractive foreign investments and megaprojects and toward local initiatives focused on climate adaptation, agroecology, and social infrastructure.

The mandated review of the USMCA in 2026 provides a crucial opportunity to fix the damaging trade rules that have contributed to the root causes of migration from Mexico. Additional free trade agreements in force, such as CAFTA, should be replaced, and all future international trade-related arrangements should be consistent with these principles.

Migration is not a crime. It is a consequence of systems that prioritize corporate profits over human life.

The time for a new global trade model that puts people, workers, and the environment at the center, rather than corporate interests, and where no one is forced to leave home to survive, is long overdue.

Until that vision becomes reality, migration will remain a necessity rather than a choice.

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