Twenty-first Century Jungle: Displaced Workers in the New Transnational Economy

by Aaron Schneider

“To lose a leg is not to lose one’s dreams,” Ms. Olga explained. We were visiting her clinic at the border of Guatemala and Mexico, where men and women convalesce after losing a limb in their attempts to hop a train north. Ms. Olga provides a glimmer of hope to those who might otherwise have lost everything, offering shelter from criminal gangs, corrupt authorities, and dangerous transport that afflict workers seeking the American dream.

Ms. Olga and others like her have created an underground railroad of sorts, helping workers recover their dignity. In August of 2008, I retraced the path of migrants, starting in Guatemala, passing through Mexico, and crossing the U.S. border, accompanied by Fr. Tom Greene, S.J., of Loyola, independent researcher Rebeca Zuniga-Hamlin, and four Tulane graduate students: Marcelle Beaulieu, Jennifer Boone, Lori Dowell, and Bradley Hentschel. This article is an effort to provide witness to the evidence we observed of rape, kidnapping, extortion, abuse, and injustice. Areas of vulnerability appeared at sporadic intervals, especially around borders and transport junctures, culminating on the other side of a chain link fence from El Paso, Texas, where Juárez has experienced more than 800 murders this year.

What could make people brave this journey, when life and limb were anything but secure? Poverty, we were told in indigenous villages in Guatemala and Mexico. For Otomi villages outside León, Mexico, land produces fruit and vegetables no more, as water has been diverted to nearby leather tanning factories, and chemical run-off turns children’s teeth brown. Wealthy factories sustain corporate names like Home Depot and Wal-Mart along Mexican highways, but villagers can neither eat leather nor shop in the brand-name stores.

So they migrate, leaving poverty to make their way to the U.S. Some are lucky enough to cross the border with documents, secured by a labor contractor who plucks them from villages with promises of steady work. One young woman we met packs fruit in Georgia for minimum wage while living in a company-dorm, eating in a company-cafeteria, and riding a company-bus to work. She could not say if she had worked overtime, and one doubts if she was ever told what overtime is. “If you are quiet and a good worker, they will renew your temporary visa for another three months.”

Others are not so lucky to have three months of permission, so they pay up to six thousand dollars to human traffickers who smuggle them across. Some gravitate to farms; others care for our children and our elderly. In New Orleans, one can see teams of them sweating to rebuild homes they will never occupy, knowing full well that many contractors pay only a portion of the wages they promise.

Our journey has ended but provokes important questions. Does our shortage of work-visas and legal mechanisms construct a system that breaks a person’s body and strips away their humanity before they enter our workforce? What does this mean for the rights of hardworking people more generally? Perhaps we need to learn from Ms. Olga, who takes broken bodies and souls and makes them whole again. As the summer ends and Labor Day approaches, we should remember that all people possess human dignity, and ensure that all people who work enjoy a living wage and decent conditions. These rights move with us wherever we go.

Neither a moving train nor a border fence can take them away.

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