

Friday, March 21st, 2008

Building Bridges, Not Walls

By Erika Marquez and Molly Porter of Bridges Not Walls

For far too long communities of color have been targeted, used as scapegoats, and exploited by those in power, a trend that can currently be seen in the national rhetoric surrounding migrants living in the United States. The dominant culture is one of deep-rooted xenophobia based on a set of irrational falsehoods that are constantly being perpetuated by government and media led propaganda. The result of these prescribed myths has been the creeping militarization of our communities as borders are fortified, and migrants are taken violently, and in secrecy, from their homes by federal agents.

In response, the conversation surrounding the “immigration issue” must be reclaimed and viewed as a human rights issue. We as a society need to address the root causes of immigration - economic and social inequality, Free Trade policies, displacement, etc. - and move from the framework of “legal” vs. “illegal” when it comes to a human being, because this outlook negates our collective humanity.

Ideological borders, the base of an unjust immigration policy, are accompanied by physical borders, which are fortified with walls and weapons. Inflexible borders warrant a distinction between people, a determinant factor that is used only to separate and then subjugate one to the other. Borders and walls serve only to keep us apart, compartmentalize, and classify us, when the reality is that we are all together, united, and unclassifiable.

The issue of abuse intrinsic to the creation and enforcement of current immigration policies is not just a national problem, but is a local issue in so many ways. Our communities are shaped by those who comprised them and strengthened by the complexity that comes with diversity. Therefore, we as a society experience only detriment when our brothers and sisters are silenced. But there are other, more tangible forms of an increasingly militarized, oppressive presence within our immediate community here in the Pacific Northwest.

The Northwest Detention Center

Just thirty miles north of Washington State’s capital, near the Port of Tacoma, is the Northwest Detention Center. Run by a corporation called the GEO Group, the prison is contracted through the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) branch of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The GEO Group runs 45 other prisons, correctional facilities, and detention centers

in North America, including the Migrant Operations Center at Guantanamo Bay.

Essentially a minimum/medium security prison, the Center exists to conduct “Detention and Removal Operations”, meaning the incarceration and deportation of migrants apprehended in Washington, Oregon, and Alaska. To make a crass building even more dismal, the prison stands on a former Superfund site known as the Tacoma Tar Pits. Most who are held at the Tacoma facility, as with similar Detention Centers around the country, have done nothing other than subject themselves to the dangers of crossing national borders in hopes of a better existence.

While their “crime” is minor, migrant detainees are not treated as human beings. Within Detention Centers neglect is common - basic medical necessities denied, mass food poisonings, etc. - and constitutional rights do not exist, including the right to legal representation. And these examples only touch the surface of the deep injustices that are present within such detention facilities. In fact, 90% of detainee cases’ are denied the right to due process.

The lack of basic rights for migrant detainees highlights the racist policies surrounding human rights in the United States: U.S. citizens are afforded privileges - although these are also under attack - that this country does not grant non-citizens within its own borders.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement Raids on the Community -

Considering the often-clandestine nature of ICE raids, and the lack of transparency within this branch of government, the specific details surrounding each incident have come from community accounts.

From 200+ Del Monte factory workers targeted in Portland, to very recent early morning home abductions, and racial profiling at checkpoints set on public roads in the Shelton area, recent ICE raids in the Northwest have taken many forms. ICE officers have also targeted people of color in public places such as Safeway and Walmart, where they are singled out and commanded to produce documentation stating their legal status. If documents cannot be provided, then the arrests are indiscriminate.

The most recent raids in Shelton took place more clandestinely, targeting small groups in the early morning where there was neither anyone around, nor media coverage possible. Near the beginning of March of this year - according to reports from the community in Shelton, WA - approximately five people from Guatemala were drug from their apartments and arrested by ICE agents before dawn. Shortly after this incident, ICE officers chased down a vehicle of Mexican individuals on their way to do brush work (picking salal in the forest that surrounds the area). The occupants of the pursued vehicle were able to eventually get away on foot after abandoning their vehicle, at which point it was reported that the agents fired three shots.

Families and communities are being violently separated because of these raids and detentions. Children are being left behind without legal provisions because the State has no concern for the well being of these children. There are approximately five million U.S. children with either one or two undocumented parents, each child living with the risk of arbitrary separation every day. This generation of children will most likely grow up with a sense of abandonment, with psychological damage that will most likely only further perpetuate the extremely disproportionate amount of poverty and criminalization in communities of color.

Call to Action -

Is this the culture we want to live by? Do we value injustice, family separation and arbitrary criminalization of any member in our community? We are not accountable to our communities by remaining silent and passive in the face of all that is happening around us.

It is time for the residents of Thurston County to join our voices with the chorus of resistance and take a stand to demand an end to all raids in our communities. We need to take back this conversation and open discourse to look at how families-including mothers, fathers, sons and daughters- are being affected. The conversation surrounding immigration, however, cannot get very far if we are only looking at the issue through a lens of what is “legal”, because this mentality is based on the presumption that the law is right, and therefore absolute, which is just not the case.

We, as human beings, are obligated to speak up, for it is a violation of human rights for the government to intrusively enter our communities and violently take hard working mothers and fathers away from their children, and incarcerate them simply for being perceived as “illegal”; criminalized for trying to raise healthy families.

Bridges Not Walls

Bridges Not Walls is a broad coalition that will not be complicit in oppressive actions taken against our communities anymore. Through grassroots organization and networking (working closely with existing groups like the Cielo Project and Inmigrantes Unidos de Shelton) Bridges Not Walls hopes to begin a new conversation around immigration by presenting *The Immigration and Border Dialogues Conference*. Taking place May 15th-18th at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, the conference will be an opportunity for day-to-day folks to engage in the complexity of the discussion on migration, and will open up space for both community dialogue and the recognition of immigrant rights as human rights: rights that see no borders.

Through the conference we will tell the stories that have gone untold

and give this discourse a human face. We want to tear down the walls that have been placed on ourselves and in our communities and are committed to begin to build bridges around our common values, which include the respect and dignity deserved by all - no matter where we've come from and what our "legal" status is. Through this dialogue we will begin to take a stand and speak out against the injustices in our society, and will no longer abide by the forces of repression that will continue to hurt our families and communities as a whole.

For more information please visit our website -
<http://oly-wa.us/bridges>

Or email us -
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