



Borders and the Freedom to Move

Migration can be a well-planned choice, made with the hope of a better future. But when it is an urgent necessity – as it is for too many in our complex world – it can be fraught with danger, insecurity, and human rights abuses. We support migrant communities in their struggles for fair treatment, safety, and respect, and for a way to make a living and to support their families. This Bulletin features such work in Africa, Thailand, and Canada, starting with an excerpt from Inter Pares staff member Karen Cocq’s recent trip report from Central America.

On my first day in Guatemala City, I meet with Diego Lorente, coordinator of the migration program for our local counterpart, Project Counselling Service (PCS). Over the next few days we will travel from Guatemala to Mexico, and then to El Salvador to meet with our counterparts working on migration issues.



In Guatemala, we’re discussing temporary foreign workers in Canada. Under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), thousands of Guatemalans travel every year to work on Canadian farms. Labour rights abuses under the program have been widely documented: gruelling working conditions, overcrowded housing, and threats of deportation for those who dare complain. Critics say the Canadian government is using immigration policy as a revolving-door labour strategy, closing paths to citizenship while building a massive flexible workforce with fewer rights and protections than Canadian citizens enjoy.

The administration of the SAWP program in Guatemala came under fire a few years ago when workers who denounced abuses by Canadian employers were blacklisted and refused re-admission into the program. Diego set up a meeting for us with organizations that are helping these blacklisted workers. We talked strategy: educating workers about their rights, providing legal support, and carrying out advocacy with the Guatemalan and Canadian governments. We



Mural inside the Casa del Migrante Tecun Uman safehouse.

talked about how Inter Pares could help build relationships with organizations supporting migrant workers in Canada.

The next day, Diego and I jump into a pick-up truck and drive north to the Guatemalan-Mexican border, to the city of Tecun Uman. We weave our way through the crowded bustling streets. It’s noon, 40 degrees, and dusty. Down a side road, hidden away from view, we find the Casa del Migrante Tecun Uman.

The Casa is a safehouse for migrants, run on a shoestring budget under the auspices of the Catholic Church. It is part of a network of houses throughout the region that provide shelter, food, water, and training for undocumented migrants passing through, most on their way to the US.

They’re given information on their rights, the risks they’ll encounter, and how to protect themselves. The Casa gives out tiny maps to migrants that discreetly indicate the safest routes to follow, and where help can be found, in the hopes that they might be spared the fate of so many others – dehydration in the desert, kidnappings, violence, and often death. The house is a quiet and serene place, packed with people taking a break from the heat and fear. But the spectre of what lies ahead for these brave travellers weighs heavy in the heat of the day.



KAREN COCC

People in makeshift rafts travelling between Mexico and Guatemala near the official border crossing.

After our meeting at the Casa, we make our way to the river that marks the border between Mexico and Guatemala. There are two ways to get across. Most people cram onto makeshift rafts, crossing illegally and hoping to escape the raids by immigration authorities, or worse, by organized crime. Some – like us, with the benefit of a passport – use the modern and heavily fortified bridge that is the official border crossing, with checkpoints and searches by immigration enforcement, customs, and the marines. From this bridge, we can see the rafts crossing, not 500m away.

This is the irony – this border is being increasingly militarized, and yet militarization is not stopping people from trying to cross. More and more, immigration in Mexico is portrayed as a threat to ‘national security’, and the response has been criminalization of migrants and greater militarized enforcement. This approach has in part been a response to the demands of the US government – and increasingly, the Canadian government – for tougher border controls. The US has poured billions of dollars in military and police aid into this region, hoping to stem the tide of undocumented migrants into Mexico and, ultimately, the US. This border has also been the target of massive spending as part of the ‘war on drugs’ and on organized crime, but to little avail – the flow of illicit drugs and arms across these borders has not stopped. In fact, this ‘war on drugs’ has helped set off an explosion of violence in Mexico, and the impact on migrants has been severe. As borders become harder to cross, migrants are forced to take greater risks.

It is a harsh truth that the more governments try to stem the flow of migrants by securing the borders, the more lucrative a business it becomes for organized crime and the more dangerous migration becomes. Arming the borders does nothing to change the reasons why people choose to move in such a difficult way in the first place – in search of work and a way out of systemic poverty, or fleeing violence, insecurity, and war.

The next stop for me and Diego on our trip is El Salvador, a country that has become economically dependent on migration. The Salvadoran community working abroad is massive, and the remittances they send home account for roughly 20% of El Salvador’s Gross Domestic Product. Migration in El Salvador is simply a fact of life.

As migration has become increasingly dangerous over the years, many people have lost loved ones who have gone north, never to be heard from again. Our first morning in San Salvador, we met with Inter Pares counterpart COFAMIDE, the Committee of the Families of Disappeared Migrants. COFAMIDE started out as a small association of family members of migrants who had disappeared. Families came together to support each other, get information about their missing loved ones from Guatemalan, Mexican, and US authorities, and assist with the administrative and financial burden of repatriating the bodies.

But the scope of the problem continued to grow, and before long, COFAMIDE became one of El Salvador’s leading migrant rights organizations, providing ongoing support to migrants and their families and advocating for their rights with the government. The Salvadoran government now has a special section within the migration department dedicated to the repatriation of bodies, and COFAMIDE’s work defending families has been central in making such measures effective.



KAREN COCC

Families on a pilgrimage, retracing the steps of their loved ones’ perilous journey north.

In 2009, COFAMIDE organized its first pilgrimage into Mexico to raise awareness and honour the missing and dead. Following the routes that their loved ones would have taken on their perilous journey north, families of disappeared migrants walked from El Salvador to Oaxaca, Mexico, carrying photos of their missing. It was moving to see photos of places along their journey where I had been just a few days before. Inter Pares’ support has helped COFAMIDE grow as an organization, to build its capacity to support families, and importantly, to develop its skills to demand action from their own government and others. COFAMIDE is now central to the struggle for justice for migrants and their families.

Inter Pares, together with our regional counterpart Project Counselling Service, has helped the Casa del Migrante Tecun Uman and COFAMIDE reinforce their impact by linking them with other organizations in the region doing similar work. Inter Pares collaborates with them to develop an analysis of Canadian policy on immigration, border control, anti-crime and counter-narcotic initiatives. We build relationships with Canadian organizations that are defending migrants’ rights domestically, and we disseminate information about the realities of migration in Central America to the Canadian public and to policy makers. Together with our counterparts, our collective efforts raise awareness about these realities, and support efforts led by migrants to build communities where they can live with freedom and dignity. ☞

Africa Beyond Borders

Much of the conflict and tension in Africa today stems from the artificial creation of nation states by colonial powers, which divided some societies and forced others to live together. Many countries also share a common experience of thirty years of privatization of the public and social sectors, imposed by Northern governments. Firoze Manji, editor of Pambazuka Press and News, dubs the result “accumulation by dispossession” – a small group is made fabulously wealthy while countless are left landless, homeless, and unemployed. In order to survive, people have had to migrate across and beyond Africa.

Enter Inter Pares’ counterpart Fahamu, Pambazuka’s publisher, and its vision of pan-Africanism. Fahamu provides research, learning, and platforms for advocacy and communication to strengthen African human rights and social justice movements. Hakima Abbas, its dynamic Executive Director, explains: “To transform conflicts, we need to move away from narrow notions of ethnic identity, and move towards a pan-African understanding in which freedom of movement



is a key principle.” Part of their research and advocacy is centered on highlighting the root causes of migration in Africa and pushing back on the criminalization of movement – what should be a basic human right.

Currently, Fahamu is expanding its work with refugee and displaced persons to respond to the increasing number of people on the move in the global South. Fahamu houses the Southern Refugee Legal Aid Network and hosts its website, which is an information portal to promote and support the provision of refugee legal aid. In addition to useful resources for refugees, the site has a directory of NGOs in various African countries that provide services to refugees.

Inter Pares is supporting Fahamu and Pambazuka, Fahamu’s online and print publishing arm, because they situate African peoples’ perspectives at the centre of a vision for change – change that will allow people who migrate to do so with dignity, and a vision of Africa “where people are organized to emancipate themselves from forms of oppression, and can realize their full potential.” ☞

Learn more about Fahamu and Pambazuka Press and News: www.fahamu.org and www.pambazuka.org

Solidarity Across Borders, Solidarity at Home

Most of us don’t worry about whether we can go to the emergency room when we’re injured, or whether we’ll be able to send our children to school. But these services, and so many others we tend to take for granted, are inaccessible for almost half a million people living in Canada without full immigration status, that is, so-called “illegals.”

Mahatma Gandhi once said that a society can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. Inter Pares agrees, and believes that all people living in Canada – no matter their legal status – should have access to essential services.

People have always migrated. But all over the world, including in Canada, people are forced to live without legal status: they may be refugees fleeing persecution, workers looking for livelihoods, or families reuniting. Above all, they are people. They are our neighbours, our co-workers, our classmates, our friends. They contribute to the economy, they work – usually in the most dangerous, underpaid, and undesirable jobs – and they participate in building our communities every day.

Yet many people without legal status are denied access to essential services like health care, education, food banks, or housing, or choose never to access them for fear they may be reported to immigration enforcement.

In response, people are organizing across Canada to build caring communities and cities that are safe for people without status. Solidarity Across Borders (SAB), in Montreal, is one such organization. SAB is an alliance of migrants and their supporters working to build a ‘Solidarity City’. This campaign, which Inter Pares supports, aims to build a culture of solidarity that includes networks of services that migrants can access without fear.

To this end, SAB developed toolkits for mainstream service providers to educate them on the Canadian immigration system. SAB also compiled an audio archive highlighting the resilience and courage of migrants and their struggles for justice. To raise public awareness and generate support, SAB also produced a series of short videos articulating the principles that support regularization for all people without status in Canada, including universal access to essential services.

The Solidarity City campaign is an example of the collective action being taken by organizations across the country to break the fear and isolation in which people without legal status live, building cultures of solidarity from the ground up. ☞

To listen to SAB’s audio archives visit: <http://solidaritesansfrontieresaudio.wordpress.com>

Empowering Migrant Communities



MAP staff distributing materials to migrant workers at a community event.

There is a continuous flow of people moving to Thailand from Burma – people seeking employment, livelihood, and, for some, refuge. They leave the oppressive regime in Burma in search of a safe and stable life. Individuals and families from various regions and ethnic groups migrate, all with different experiences and aspirations. But when they arrive in Thailand, they are uniformly categorized as “illegal alien workers.” Inter Pares’ counterpart MAP Foundation works to defy this labeling.

Since 1996, MAP has supported people from Burma living in Thailand. MAP began as a network of activists from the migrant and exiled community, pooling resources and skills to respond to the needs of people who were isolated and marginalized. Initially the needs were vast: migrants had no voice and no access to services. Today, MAP is active with those in the labour force, helping them to defend their rights and demand what they are entitled to by law in Thailand. In the past three years, MAP has supported nearly 1,000 workers to file exploitation complaints against their employers and secured over 7.5 million baht – equivalent to almost 43,000 days’ salary – in compensation for unpaid wages.

Last September, MAP provided paralegal support for another 1,000 migrants at a fishing net factory in north-east Thailand. The Burmese workers were angry that their immigration documents had been confiscated by the employer and, once returned, they discovered that some of the

documents had been tampered with. They went on strike, and tensions rose when the employer sent in armed men to suppress the protest. What the workers feared most was deportation: most had been through a new, complicated, and expensive process to secure a temporary passport; deportation would mean losing their passport and everything they had invested. MAP staff accompanied the workers and assisted in negotiations with the employer and local authorities. Ultimately, the migrants were able to maintain their legal status, leave the factory with their last month’s salary, and safely gain new employment.

MAP works towards a future where people from Burma have the right to stay and the right to migrate safely, and where the human rights and freedoms of all migrants are fully respected and observed. Through community radio, resource centers in various locations, and monthly gatherings all over Thailand, MAP has built solidarity and broken down the isolation migrants experience. Inter Pares is proud to support the valuable work of MAP. ☘



Fleeing from fighting in eastern Burma, these people are crossing into relative safety in Thailand.

 **Inter Pares**

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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