In the debate over immigration, one critical question is often missing: Why? Why do people decide to leave their family, friends, and community; embark on a long and life-threatening journey; and start over in a country that may treat them as second-class citizens?

Among the many answers is one underreported fact: U.S. trade deals have contributed to the economic instability that has forced so many immigrants to leave home. Corporate deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) have eliminated jobs, exacerbated climate change, and destabilized communities in the U.S., Mexico, and Central America. These impacts, along with other root causes, have fed increasing insecurity, displacement, and violence, forcing many to leave their homes, communities, and families. We need a new trade approach that allows immigration to be a true, free choice.

After resettling in the U.S., many immigrants must live with the daily risk of their lives being torn apart once again, this time by a knock on the door from immigration agents seeking to deport them. Indeed, mass deportation currently threatens to tear apart millions of families across the U.S. Meanwhile, many immigrants also must endure the risks and harms that come with living in pollution hotspots, such as dangerous levels of air and water pollution.

No one should be forced to leave home and family, whether by an unfair trade deal, climate change, or deportation.

We need a fundamentally new approach to trade—one that supports workers, healthy communities, and climate justice in all countries. To achieve this vision of trade justice built on solidarity, we must reject the xenophobic approach of Donald Trump, which is rooted in border walls, attacks on immigrants, and climate change denial.

**FORCED FROM HOME BY CORPORATE TRADE DEALS**

**NAFTA: Flood of Corn, Wave of Forced Migration**

NAFTA—the 1994 trade deal between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.—was written for one primary purpose: to boost the profits of multinational corporations. NAFTA rules allowed large agribusinesses to consolidate power across all three countries, often at the expense of family farmers. Indeed, NAFTA forced millions of low-income family farmers in Mexico to compete directly with highly subsidized, high-tech U.S. agribusiness giants. The deal, for example, enabled U.S. agribusinesses to effectively “dump” corn, a staple crop, on the Mexican market. In just the first five years of NAFTA, U.S. exports to Mexico of cheap corn doubled.

The impact on Mexico’s family farmers was devastating. The NAFTA-enabled flood of cheap corn into Mexico contributed to a 66 percent drop in the price that Mexico’s corn farmers received, helping to drive one million farmers out of corn production. Poverty deepened for millions of people across Mexico’s countryside. In NAFTA’s first three years, extreme poverty spread to more than half of the rural population.

“No one should be forced from home.”

—WARSAN SHIRE, “HOME”
Meanwhile, the NAFTA trade model also failed Mexico’s manufacturing workers, just as it had failed their counterparts in the U.S. The trade deal made it easier for U.S. corporations to move factories to Mexico, spelling major job losses from Michigan to North Carolina. But those jobs didn’t stay in Mexico. The corporate trade model gives corporations—but not humans—the freedom to cross borders, allowing them to continually move from country to country in search of the lowest wages and weakest labor and environmental standards.

This “race to the bottom” erodes job security and undercuts environmental protections everywhere, from Michigan to Mexico. Indeed, factories and jobs in Mexico started leaving in earnest in 2001, when China, which had lower wages than Mexico, joined the World Trade Organization. The factories that stayed were able to use threats of offshoring to keep wages down, just as they do in the U.S.

While wages in Mexico have barely budged since NAFTA took effect, the cost of living has soared. The cost of tortillas, for example, more than tripled in NAFTA’s first decade, in part because NAFTA helped a few large agribusiness corporations solidify control of the tortilla market. In NAFTA’s first 10 years, the number of basic goods that could be bought on Mexico’s minimum wage fell by a third.

Whether they lost their farm, job, or ability to make ends meet, many people in Mexico had to confront a difficult reality: Staying at home was no longer a viable option. Millions headed north. In NAFTA’s first seven years, immigration from Mexico to the U.S. more than doubled.

**CAFTA: Fanning the Flames of Violence**

In recent years, tens of thousands of people from Central America, many of them children, have been making the dangerous trek to the U.S. Most are fleeing a surge in lethal violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that CAFTA, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2005, has done more to inflame than to reduce the violence.

In CAFTA’s first decade, family farmers in these three countries endured a near doubling of agricultural imports from the U.S., much as happened in Mexico under NAFTA. In all three countries, rural poverty has persisted or increased since CAFTA took effect.

Meanwhile, workers in the region’s apparel factories have lost jobs as corporations, enabled by the global march of “free trade,” have decided to offshore production and jobs to lower-wage countries. Contrary to the predictions of CAFTA advocates that the region’s sweatshop production would grow, apparel exports to the U.S. from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala dropped 23 percent in CAFTA’s first year, and are even lower today. Such loss of jobs and livelihoods under CAFTA has fed economic instability in the region, contributing to the desperation and violence that is driving so many people to leave their homes.

**FORCED FROM HOME BY CLIMATE CHANGE**

Climate change is emerging as another factor that is pushing people to migrate. Evidence suggests that droughts—which are becoming more frequent with climate change—may have played a role, alongside NAFTA, in pushing Mexico’s family farmers to migrate north during the 1990s. One study finds that states in Mexico that endured drought-related declines in corn harvests tended to see more migration to the U.S. than other states. A multi-year drought, likely exacerbated by climate change, also has contributed to the recent wave of immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The drought has devastated harvests in the region, causing more than 3 million people to need humanitarian aid. In a United Nations survey of the three countries, families repeatedly
cited the drought as a reason that their family members had decided to leave home and migrate north.\textsuperscript{26}

While climate change is contributing to forced migration, corporate trade deals like NAFTA and CAFTA are contributing to climate change. Such deals have empowered corporations to attack climate protections in private tribunals, while encouraging increased dependency on climate-polluting industrial agriculture and fossil fuels.\textsuperscript{27} The struggles to transform trade, tackle climate change, and achieve justice for immigrant workers cannot be separated.

**FORCED FROM HOME BY DEPORTATION**

In 1996, 14-year-old Guadalupe García de Rayos left the poor, rural town of Acámbaro,\textsuperscript{28} Mexico with her family, crossed the U.S. border, and tried to make a new life in Phoenix, Arizona. Over the next two decades, she went to school, worked, married, raised two children, and deepened ties to her community. About two weeks after Donald Trump's inauguration, Guadalupe went to a routine check-in with federal immigration agents. The agents promptly deported her back to Mexico.\textsuperscript{29} Within hours, Guadalupe was forced to leave the place she had called home for 21 years, suddenly separated from her family. Her 14-year-old daughter, the same age Guadalupe was when she left Mexico for the U.S., said, "We don't deserve to go through this. No family deserves to go through this."\textsuperscript{30}

Millions of undocumented immigrants like Guadalupe, having already been uprooted once, now live with the daily threat of being forced from their homes once more, this time by deportation. The Obama administration deported more than 2.5 million immigrants,\textsuperscript{31} and now the Trump administration is threatening to deport millions more to fulfill xenophobic campaign promises. In his first week, Trump signed an executive order giving federal agents wide discretion to use racial and ethnic profiling to round up people for deportation.\textsuperscript{32}

**TIME TO TRANSFORM TRADE AND IMMIGRATION**

Mass deportation is separating parents from children, upending livelihoods, and destabilizing our communities with fear, loss, and isolation. Unfortunately, corporate trade deals have had the same effects on millions.

We urgently need new approaches to immigration and trade that keep communities and families intact, that support rather than destroy livelihoods, and that allow people to stay, if they wish, in whatever place they call home.

To stop tearing apart families and communities across the U.S., we urgently need a moratorium on deportations. Undocumented immigrants deserve a path to citizenship that allows them to come out of the shadows, gain the protection of labor and environmental standards, and be recognized as equals.

Meanwhile, to stop fueling the instability that forces people from home, we urgently need to transform trade. That means replacing trade rules that enable agricultural displacement with ones that support local family farmers.\textsuperscript{33} It means stopping the corporate race to the bottom in wages, working conditions, and environmental protection by including strong and enforceable labor and environmental standards in our trade agreements.\textsuperscript{34} It means tackling climate change rather than exacerbating it, by restricting fossil fuels trade, requiring the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, and removing trade rules that allow corporations to attack our climate protections in private tribunals.\textsuperscript{35}

We now have a unique opportunity to push for such a trade transformation. A broad, cross-border movement...
We urgently need new approaches to immigration and trade that keep communities and families intact, that support rather than destroy livelihoods, and that allow people to stay, if they wish, in whatever place they call home.

ENDNOTES
17 Raul S. Llevarios, “Race, Deprivation, and Immigrant Isolation,” Social Science Research, June 24, 2015, p. 64.