



U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM

Harley Shaiken, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Gil Cedillo speak with locals in the Jerez plaza.

Immigration Viewed From the Other Side

by Jude Joffe-Block

Over the past nine years, Armando Fernández has helped raise tens of thousands of dollars for public works projects in his hometown of San Juan del Centro in the central Mexican state of Zacatecas. But 35-year-old Fernández lives in Corona, California, and left Mexico at the age of 13. He and other migrants from San Juan del Centro pool their earnings in the U.S. to build public works projects back home. They are organized as a hometown association, a club of migrants dedicated to working together to improve their native communities.

“I’ve always been attached to my town,” Fernández explained at the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum in Zacatecas. “I call it my town because I was born here.” Fernández’s hometown association began by making improvements to the elementary school he once attended. “I believe if we

support education, any country will develop into a great nation,” he said. “This is why we are we are trying to improve quality of life, so they can have a better future.”

For many Mexicans, the desire for immigration reform in the U.S. is just as much about ensuring a better future for those who remain in Mexico as it is about gaining rights for migrants abroad. Reforms that would make it easier for Mexicans to work in the United States legally could actually help those workers support their home communities in Mexico. Fernández, a civil engineer, now holds dual American and Mexican citizenship, which allows him to travel freely between his two countries and to help bring prosperity to both his hometowns. In fact, he is the fourth generation in his family to lead a binational life. His great-grandparents worked in Arizona early in

the century when many Zacatecos were recruited for mining and agriculture jobs. His grandfather was born in the United States, but later returned with his parents to Zacatecos after the Mexican Revolution. Fernández's father then headed north as one of the 4 million Mexicans who worked on American farms as part of the *bracero* guest worker program that ran from 1942 to 1964. But tighter enforcement at the border means that undocumented immigrants working in El Norte today are increasingly less likely to go home since they know it could be too risky or expensive to ever make it back to the United States.

Zacatecos, which is among the Mexican states with the highest proportion of residents living abroad, is emblematic of the challenges and opportunities that migration to the United States poses for communities on the southern side of the border. There are an estimated 600,000 natives of Zacatecos currently living in the U.S., a figure which is equal to 40 percent of the 1.5 million who still live in the state. This dramatic outflow of people has forced both the government and migrants abroad to develop innovative programs in the hopes of building a productive future for the state.

Fernández's hometown of San Juan del Centro is located in the mostly rural municipality of Jerez, where the morning session of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum was held on March 29, 2010. The municipality's 55,000 residents have had ties to the United States for the past century, a fact which became immediately evident after just a few minutes in the leafy central plaza in the town of Jerez, the municipal seat. An older man operating a shoeshine stand told participants of his son who disappeared while crossing the desert to work in the U.S. A young man strolling with friends turned out to be a U.S. citizen visiting his extended relatives while on spring break from a California college.

The state government of Zacatecos is at the forefront of public policy intended to turn migration into an advantage rather than a catastrophe for the state. Zacatecos has pioneered three innovative strategies to maintain unity and progress in the face of mass migration, all of which are on display in Jerez: active hometown associations in the U.S.; government programs that encourage migrants to remain connected to the state and even to return; and a political voice for migrants.

In recent years, the state has received roughly \$480 million annually in remittances. In addition to sending money back to individual families, Zacatecos have trail-blazed initiatives to donate to their towns. Zacatecan migrants first started organizing themselves in hometown associations in Southern California in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the clubs began to coordinate with state and municipal authorities to support development projects back home. The number of such associations throughout the

United States is estimated to be in the hundreds, and they are widely considered to be a model for how transnational communities can achieve progress.

The state of Zacatecos instituted a matching program to encourage these communal remittances. The program has been adopted by the federal government and is called *Tres por Uno* (Three for One). If a project passes a feasibility study, for each dollar that migrants give, the municipal, state and federal governments will match that dollar so that the total donation quadruples in value.

According to Zacatecos Governor Amalia García, the Three for One program has supported more than 1,000 projects in the state. Classrooms, playgrounds and roads have been built with the funds. In the town of Jerez, the program helped support a project to build a new campus of the state university. Migrants also donate money for scholarships so that young people can continue studying rather than crossing the border for work. "Even with the economic crisis, they contribute," said García. "They do it for the love of their country."

García has also tried to attract migrants back to the state to live. Her administration has instituted a program called *Para los que Regresen* (For Those Who Come Back). This program offers scholarships to young migrants who return to Zacatecos to study.

Ideally, the governor said, returning migrants could use experience gained abroad to help build industries that would in turn employ other Zacatecos so they would not have seek work in the United States. Migrants who have learned English or acquired skills in the culinary or hospitality industries have the potential to improve tourism ventures in Zacatecos. Others might return with knowledge that could help advance new high-tech industries in areas such as solar technology or software, García said.

Given the centrality of migration to the economic and family life of state residents, Zacatecos also has pioneered avenues toward incorporating migrants into civic life. In 2000, a Zacatecan entrepreneur living in Winters, California, ran for mayor in the town of Jerez, which sparked a national debate and legal fight about the place of migrants in Mexican politics. Ultimately, in Zacatecos, it became possible for migrant candidates to run for political office. Two seats are now reserved for migrants in the state assembly.

One of the current migrant assembly-members, Sebastián Martínez, was president of a hometown association in Fort Worth, Texas, where he lived for 20 years before assuming political office in Mexico. He said he has created opportunities for Zacatecan youth, such as baseball, music and *ballet folklórico* programs, with the goal of enriching civil society and making it easier for Zacatecos to choose to stay in their communities. "I believe there are

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opportunities in this county,” he said of his native Mexico. “They just have to be made.”

While García, Fernández and Martínez all work to improve life in Zacatecas, they each asserted that comprehensive immigration reform in the U.S. was badly needed for Zacatecans on both sides of the border.

“We all have relatives in the United States — all of us,” said García, whose uncles picked citrus in California. “For us, it is part of our life.” But she says increased border security has made it more difficult for Zacatecans to come and go as they did in years past.

The American debate over immigration does not usually recognize that some Mexican families have been crossing the border periodically to work for more than a century, said Harley Shaiken. “That was very enriching, in cultural and in economic terms, to all concerned,” he said.

Yet for some Mexican migrants to the United States, their dreams go beyond the right to legally cross the border and work in the U.S. A migrant, who gave his name only as Enrique, explained that he had returned home to Jerez after he couldn’t find work as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. When Maria Echaveste of the Berkeley Law School asked him what kind of immigration reform

he would most like to see the American Congress enact — a path to citizenship, a temporary guest worker program or a permanent guest worker program without the option of citizenship — Enrique’s choice was clear. “I would like people to be legalized the way they were legalized back in ’86,” Enrique said, referring to the last amnesty passed under President Ronald Reagan. “That if you have a good record, if you haven’t committed felonies, that you have a chance to become a citizen.”

A visit to Jerez was part of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum held in Zacatecas, Mexico, March 28-30, 2010. Forum participants heard from Amalia García, Governor of Zacatecas; Sebastián Martínez, Migrant Representative to the State Assembly; Fernando Robledo, State Migration Office; Alma Ávila, Municipal President of Jerez; Armando Fernández, San Juan del Centro Hometown Association; and Enrique, a Jerez resident and returned migrant who declined to share his last name.

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A group of Mexican cowboys, or *charros*, parades through the streets of Jerez.



Photo courtesy of the Zacatecas Ministry of Tourism