

Sharing the Plunder of the South: The NAFTA corridors and Canada

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Our action will be guided by shared principles. We'll take concrete steps in the coming 24 months to improve security at our borders and to ensure the smooth and efficient flow of goods and people, particularly with particular discussions with President Bush on the Windsor-Detroit Corridor.

—P.M. Stephen Harper, following the North American trilateral summit (Cancun, Mexico, March 2006)

Canadians should regard Prime Minister Harper's specific reference to a NAFTA corridor and general reference to shared principles as a warning, because the developing continental transportation infrastructure and the plan behind it are shaping the future of North America, including Canada, at the expense of all working people on this continent.

The Cancun summit where Harper delivered his comments was a follow-up meeting of the trilateral Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), which was formally announced in Texas in 2005. Canada hosted the next meeting in late February of this year. To understand what is really going on, however, we must see through the carefully staged press conferences and focus on the concrete developments across the continent.

Dubbed "NAFTA Plus" by pundits in the popular press, the SPP is the continuing expansion of free-trade policies that were consolidated under NAFTA ten years earlier. The winners and losers of this ongoing trilateral power alliance remain the same: big capital in the North continues to expand its power at the expense of workers, their communities, and the environment in both the North and the South.

The U.S. is geographically, economically and politically the centre of this alliance, but the ruling classes of Canada and Mexico are willing partners in the plunder of the South. The current political strategy of big capital is to maintain power by extracting more profits than ever through the manipulation of various trade arrangements. To accomplish this goal, capitalists operate internationally, cementing cooperation between the ruling classes while pitting the working people of the three nations against one another through various offshoring and importing schemes.

The NAFTA corridor system is the backbone of the North American alliance of capitalism. A close look at the infrastructure of the NAFTA corridors exposes the long-range strategy of the trilateral partnership.

The Infrastructure

The North American SuperCorridor Coalition (NASCO) is a public facade of the trilateral trade alliance. [On its website](#) is a map of the NAFTA corridors with arrows radiating out from the heartland of the U.S. through Canada and Mexico, implying net export activities and prosperity for all three countries. The reality of NAFTA economics, however, is the predominance of imports of both goods and people from the South for consumption and service in the North.

The map pictured to the left is a more realistic representation of the NAFTA corridors. It features the two NAFTA supercorridors presently under construction in the U.S. The I-35 corridor parallels existing U.S. Interstate 35 from Laredo on the Texas border to the U.S.-Canada border at Duluth, with a major branch from Kansas City due north to the border at Pembina-Emerson, via I-29. This international route links Mexico City to Winnipeg and beyond.

The clear purpose of the I-69 corridor, the other supercorridor already under construction in south Texas, is to link the interior of Mexico to southeastern Canada through Port Huron, just north of the Detroit-Windsor crossing. The heavy traffic on the existing I-69, and the plans to route the new supercorridor through Port Huron, accounts for Harper's emphasis on this critical Point of Entry into Canada.

In addition to the supercorridors, the above map also tracks the proposed Canamex corridor, which will link Mexico City to Edmonton, Alberta. Although Canamex is not slated to become a supercorridor, its primary function is essentially the same: to move goods and people from the South to the North. Highway construction along this route is presently focused on linking existing highways and easing traffic congestion in the urban areas located in the path of the corridor.

The South-North orientation of the NAFTA corridors offers a distinct contrast to the historic East-West transportation infrastructure developed during the 20th Century, and reflects the overall strategy of the North American alliance of capital to tap the South for raw materials, offshore finished goods and labour.

The size and configuration of the corridors also highlight their function. In the state of Texas, where traffic from Mexico will be heaviest, the NAFTA corridors are being constructed in a 1,200-foot right-of-way that will ultimately include six passenger

vehicle lanes, four truck lanes and six rail lines, with utility, maintenance and safety zones. As the corridors progress north, they will carry increasingly less traffic and will be constructed accordingly.

The designation of specific locations along the I-35 NAFTA supercorridor as inland ports also reveals the ultimate function of the transportation system. From South to North, the official Inland Ports Network publicized and promoted by NASCO includes: Bajio/Central in Mexico; San Antonio, Alliance, Texas, and Kansas City in the U.S.; and Winnipeg in Canada. The inland ports on the I-69 supercorridor have not yet been named. The significance of these inland ports will be discussed in conjunction with the following analysis of the traffic on the corridors. Though both the South-North orientation and the size and configuration of the NAFTA supercorridors establish the ultimate function of the massive transportation infrastructure, the full implications of this project for the working men and women of North America cannot be appreciated until the traffic to be accommodated by the corridor system is examined.

The Traffic

The NAFTA corridor network is without a doubt the biggest surface transportation project in the history of North America. The economic and political significance of the project is not only in its size, however, but also in its ultimate purpose. The intended function of this extensive infrastructure can only be understood by looking at the traffic of both goods and people that the corridors are designed to carry.

The Goods. The freight that is already transported on existing NAFTA highways includes agricultural products and capital goods from Canada and the U.S. to Mexico and raw materials and value-added goods manufactured in Mexico or the far-eastern Pacific Rim and land-bridged across Mexico for consumption in the North. (For an in-depth analysis of using Mexico as a land bridge to avoid unionized labour of northern ports and roads, see my article "[The NAFTA Corridors: Offshoring U.S. Transportation Jobs to Mexico](#)," *Monthly Review*, February, 2006.)

The NAFTA supercorridors are designed to accommodate the ever-increasing deluge of cheap goods needed to keep North American capitalism afloat. The Inland Ports Network will streamline this flow of goods by pre-inspecting international shipments to avoid congestion at international borders. Under the SPP, shipments of offshore finished goods received through Mexican ports or manufactured in Mexico will be consolidated, staged and inspected at Bajio/Central and transported via the NAFTA supercorridors all the way to inland ports in the North and consumer outlets in the U.S. and Canada. Likewise, northern inland ports will expedite freight and the return of empty containers to the South.

The Inland Ports Network will also have a central role in managing the flow of human traffic from the South.

The People. The passenger-vehicle lanes and commuter rail lines in the NAFTA supercorridors will accommodate all manner of intra- and inter-state travelers, but, under the authority of the SPP, a large proportion of the human traffic will be the millions of transient servants recruited in Mexico and Central America to work in the North under the guest-worker programs that are pending in the U.S. and Canada. (For an analysis of the U.S. guest-worker program introduced in the U.S. Congress in 2006 and currently under consideration, see my article "[Transient Servitude: The U.S. Guest Worker Program for Exploiting Mexican and Central American Workers](#)," *Monthly Review*, January, 2007.)

To understand the impact of the guest-worker programs being promoted by the trilateral alliance, it must be kept in mind that they are not like the agricultural guest-worker programs of the past. Under the new programs, workers from the South will be admitted with non-sector-specific visas, and will be available to all industries in the North. The demand for this cheap labour will create unprecedented human traffic on the NAFTA corridors.

The resulting flood of guest workers from the South, which is projected to be between a half-million and a million persons in the first year alone, will exceed the present unauthorized migration to the North that has already been acknowledged as the biggest migration of workers in history. Though the dominant flow of workers, like goods, will be from the South to the North, strict time limits on workers' visas (three years, under most of the proposals) will ensure heavy two-way traffic on the NAFTA corridors, especially after the initial period.

The Inland Ports Network will also expedite this human traffic. Because these customs facilities are also official Points of Entry, they can issue visas and be used as recruitment and dispatch centres for labour contractors under international guest-worker programs. In effect, the Inland Ports Network will relocate and concentrate cheap labour from the South close to employers in the North.

This is, in essence, the grand plan behind Harper's promise that the SPP will "ensure the smooth and efficient flow of goods and people" into Canada. What all of the representatives of the trilateral alliance of capital avoid in their public pronouncements is any mention of the impact of their plans on the working people, their communities and the environment of North America.

The Impact

The impact of the SPP, as an extension of the free-trade policies established by NAFTA and manifested in the developing NAFTA transportation infrastructure, is reflected in the tag of NAFTA Plus: It will add to and intensify the problems created

by NAFTA in both North and South.

The primary impact of the SPP scheme on working people in the North will be job-related. The trend of offshoring work from the North to the South and beyond to the far-eastern Pacific Rim will increase and continue to undercut the value of native labour as it has under NAFTA; the mass influx of Mexican and Central American workers under the terms of transient servitude that will accompany any North American guest-worker programs under NAFTA Plus will reduce the value of labour in the North to unprecedented lows.

Promises of new jobs in the North under the SPP scheme are as misleading as those offered by the promoters of NAFTA. Under the new trilateral agreement, there will be many new transportation jobs, but the workers on the NAFTA corridors the longshoremens, truck drivers and warehouse and support workers will be recruited from the South and will be paid minimal wages.

The disintegration of workers' communities in the North that started under NAFTA will continue apace. The contraction of social services due to reduced incomes and diminished tax revenues will result in declining housing and health-care standards and practices for all working people, and will undercut public education even further.

The political controversy over controlling displaced native workers and poor migrant populations currently growing in the U.S. foreshadows a much deeper and wider crisis that will accompany mass transient servitude in North America under the SPP.

And last but not least environmental damage, the not-so-hidden cost of NAFTA, will be compounded under the SPP. The increased flow of passenger, truck and rail traffic on the NAFTA corridors, along with the massive new construction of the supercorridor infrastructure, will significantly accelerate ongoing environmental degradation.

Working people know that the "shared principles" cited by Harper at Cancun are not shared by everyone. We have experienced more than a decade of life under NAFTA, and we know that competition between the working people in North America is a strategy of free trade that profits only big capital. Under NAFTA Plus, we face more of the same. The task of our times is to turn back the juggernaut of blind profit mongering that is consuming North America and spoiling much of the rest of the world.

The Political Imperative

The current political imperative for working people is clear: to check the momentum of free trade by all available means and to repair the damage it has wreaked on our lives, our communities and our futures. We must put people and the environment before profits. We must insist that all future development is sustainable and contributes to the common good.

Above all, we must renounce any competition between workers, either domestic or international, and specifically we must stop the implementation of mass transient servitude under the guise of guest-worker programs that will seriously degrade all working people in North America.

Big capital has ruled North America unchallenged for the last 25 years with devastating results. One of the ways that they have maintained control is by imposing austerity measures that they call "structural adjustments" on the working classes of Mexico, the U.S. and Canada.

It is time that we, the working people of North America, join together and impose structural adjustments on capital that will shift the balance of power back towards labour and ensure the sustainability of economic development.

There's too much at stake to avoid the fight.

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