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Community Resistance to Immigrant Scapegoating

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By A. Beltran

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Prince William County, Virginia has become 'ground zero' in the war against immigrants. Prince William has implemented a draconian policy targeting the immigrant community. Mexicanos Sin Fronteras, a community-based, all volunteer organization, has been working tirelessly since last July to organize mass resistance.

In October of 2007, the all white Prince William County Board of Supervisors, in search of an election issue, unanimously passed this resolution in a county that has over 40% people of color. The resolution requires PWC police to investigate a person's immigration status when detained if they have 'probable cause' to think that person has violated immigration laws. This could happen during a routine traffic stop, if the person stopped for trespassing, jaywalking, or even spitting on the street. Undocumented individuals will then be reported and in many cases turned over to Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) for deportation. For the immigrant community, this resolution has created an atmosphere of terror, discrimination, and desperation.

For over a hundred years, migrant workers from south of the border have been recognized as essential to many parts of the U.S. economy. The NAFTA agreements have resulted in the loss of farmlands and the displacement of millions of rural farmers and urban workers. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has forced additional millions from Mesoamerica to flee northward as well. The undocumented immigrant population in PWC is here to work and provide for their families just like any of us. They work hard, pay taxes

and abide by our laws and singling them out for our societal problems is racist, unjust, and unconstitutional.

Despite the fact that the resolution was not actually implemented until March 3, 2008 the community has felt its impact since October. People have already become victims of racial profiling and some have commented that they feel like it is "open season" on Latinos in PWC. Fear is causing many immigrant families to move out of the county. Businesses are beginning to close down as customers diminish. The foreclosure rate in Prince William County is the highest in the Mid-Atlantic region. Many immigrants feel they are being forced to walk away from their homes because they cannot risk waiting until they sell. Families have been separated as fathers and mothers have been detained leaving citizen children behind to be cared for by family members or friends.

The community has been fighting back. In July, 2007, after the Board of Supervisors passed its preliminary version of the resolution, Mexicanos Sin Fronteras organized three community gatherings to listen to the community's recommendations for resisting the resolution. Over 4,000 members of the immigrant and indigenous community came together along with African American and white supporters. The community decided unanimously on the following resistance actions: a week long economic boycott over Labor Day weekend; a massive march and rally on Sunday, September 2; and a one-day work stoppage on October 9. All three actions were successful and attracted local, national and international attention. The mass rally attracted approximately 7,000 participants, the largest protest rally held in Virginia in over 100 years.

In an effort to resist the present implementation of this resolution we have developed a legal support program which provides "know your rights" seminars on a regular basis to the immigrant community. We also provide referrals for persons in need of legal representation as a result of the increasing number of immigration and criminal cases. In addition, through our hotline, we document and record cases of discrimination and racial profiling in order to build civil lawsuits in federal courts. Finally, we are conducting a campaign of outreach, education, empowerment and mobilization of county residents. On Sunday, March 2, 2008 another community meeting was held in order to inform and educate people about the resolution and how to protect themselves when approached by the police. Over 1300 people attended this gathering. To continue our work, we need your immediate help. We need immigration and criminal attorneys to volunteer to provide legal representation to the many who cannot afford such services. We also need financial assistance for materials, printing, equipment, and outreach. Our hope is to also be able to fund at least one part-time or full-time position to help coordinate this effort. The demand for our work has grown exponentially and it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet this demand with all volunteers and occasional donations. Any assistance from supporters around the nation would be greatly appreciated.

North and South, the victims of neo-liberal economic policies like NAFTA, and CAFTA are the working poor. Our mutual struggle for justice and dignity requires us to stand in solidarity with our immigrant and indigenous sisters and brothers. As we establish alliances within our communities, across the state, and across borders, we must develop bottom up alternatives to divisive transnational economic policies, acts of oppression, and environmental catastrophe.

For more information on this struggle you may contact: Nancy Lyall at lyallna@comcast.net or 703-969-0197 John Steinbach at johnsteibach@starpower.net or 703-703-822-3485

Donations may be mailed to: Mexicanos Sin Fronteras PO Box K Woodbridge, VA 22194

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