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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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St. Patrick's Day Weekend Edition

March 17 / 18, 2007

"Mothers are Rounded Up in Massachusetts and Sent to a Texas Jail Without Saying Goodby to Their Families"

Jailing Immigrant Mothers in El Paso

By GREG MOSES

"We are drawing attention to a humanitarian crisis," says Penny Anderson, speaking from a Saturday morning protest outside the El Paso immigrant jail (March 17). She is the first person to take the cell phone being passed around by activist Amber Clark.

Among the prisoners in the nearby 800-bed jail are about one hundred women flown in from New Bedford, Massachusetts following an immigration raid at a manufacturing shop. Immigration authorities have reported that 116 of the women, believed to be mostly from Guatemala, were brought here to the El Paso Service Processing Center (EPC) on Montana

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Street. Another 90 were reportedly taken to another immigrant jail in Texas.

"We have heard horror stories of women rounded up at work in Massachusetts and sent to jail in Texas without being given a chance to say goodbye to their families--children coming home from school and not knowing where their mothers were," says Anderson who is president of the El Paso Borderlands Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Word of the raid reached the Borderlands Chapter from NOW national offices, explains Anderson. And several news reports have followed the response of Massachusetts officials. Last Saturday, Massachusetts social workers visited both jails in Texas and managed to get nine mothers released on humanitarian grounds.

Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy visited New Bedford and described the situation as Katrina-like, with family members missing and nobody knowing where they were or if they were okay. The response of Massachusetts state workers and elected officials is an embarrassing contrast to the silence and inactivity that has accompanied news of Texas families rounded up by immigration authorities in recent years.

On Montana Street in El Paso Saturday morning, 20 protesters drew most of the local media, along with honks of support from passing cars, says Anderson. "The larger picture shows that current immigration system is broken," she says. "The Bush administration claims to be pro family, but when they allow this to happen, it shows they are tearing families apart."

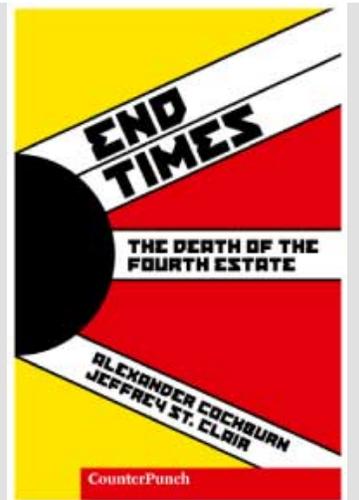
Joining the protest is Kathy Staudt of the Coalition against Violence toward Women and Families at the US-Mexico Border (CAV). "We see this as part the structural problem of violence against women," she says. "Many of the families affected by the immigration raid in Massachusetts were in the US for five or ten years working at the factory. All of a sudden there was this raid. Women were sent away. And people were frantic to find out what happened to them."

CAV was formed in 2001 to address the issue of femicide in Juarez, where 370 women were killed between 2000 and 2003. "They think in Mexico there has been some limited institutional response to the issue, but many killers remain on the loose," says Staudt. "And Mexico is only recently taking violence against women as a serious issue at the national level."

Staudt says the problem of stopping violence against women in Mexico is made more difficult by a widespread distrust of police, because of a feeling that police are corrupt and can act with impunity.

As Staudt speaks we think of 20-year-old Suzi Hazahza and her sister Mirvat, two immigrant women rounded up with their family at gunpoint by Dallas immigration authorities in early November, 2006, now serving hard time at the Rolling Plains prison in Haskell, Texas, for the crime of allegedly missing an appointment-an appointment they claim not to have known about.

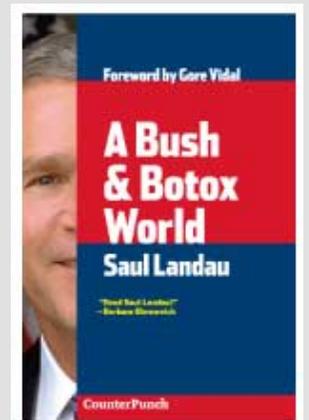
"There is a whole structure of violence and lack of respect for women that transcends borders," says Staudt. It is a structure that the militarized posture of border enforcement will only



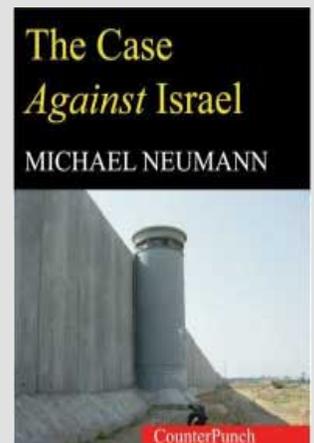
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continue to make worse.

Next at the cell phone is John Boucher of El Paso's Annunciation House. "We are a house of hospitality," he explains. "We work with undocumented immigrants in the area and with student groups in the USA. We have Catholic origins. I'm just a volunteer."

For Boucher, the treatment of Massachusetts workers is connected to what he sees closer to the border, "from the economic policies that force people to be displaced, continued in our country by a lack of acknowledgement that people who work cheap subsidize our lives." Boucher sees fewer undocumented workers crossing the border these days, but he sees evidence that "people are being forced into more desperate situations."

As the border is militarized, migrants are relying on paid help to get across. "Coyotes and smugglers are in the family reunification business, too," explains Boucher. "And their involvement makes crossing the border more dangerous for everyone."

With her cell phone returned, Amber Clark promises to email photos and media links.

"The treatment of the factory workers differs sharply from the treatment of the factory owner who had abused undocumented workers for years by underpaying and overworking them while reaping profits from lucrative government contracts," says a press release circulated by Clark. "The factory owner is free on bail and was allowed to take a trip to Puerto Rico."

If an image of corrupt and arbitrary law enforcement is not actually what immigration authorities are trying to convey by their recent activities in Texas and Massachusetts, you'd be hard pressed to say why.



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