

Indigenous migrants in the US fight renewed segregation

written by Gladys Tzul Tzul | February 5, 2025



The beginning of Donald Trump's second presidential term on January 20 was a crucial day in international politics and for Indigenous migrant communities in the United States.

The inauguration took place in the wake of the brutal fires in Los Angeles that began on January 5, devouring more than 37,000 acres, including large parts of Pacific Palisades, Altadena, and Pasadena.

The fires destroyed more than 12,000 structures, including homes, schools, churches and businesses, but they impacted far more than buildings alone. They killed at least 29 people, exacerbated the already existing housing crisis in the city and will likely worsen unemployment.

Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo (CIELO) set up food pantries and distributed masks to Indigenous migrants affected by the fires. This enabled them to appreciate that the fires will have a vast impact on people's lives, given that countless jobs no longer exist: dishwashers; waiters; cooks; plumbers; window cleaners; house cleaners; gardeners and caregivers for children, the elderly and pets among other essential jobs.

To a great extent, Indigenous migrants from Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, the Philippines and elsewhere do this work. Many have had to migrate because of the effects of structural adjustment or after extractivist policies displaced them from their territories.

Structural adjustment policies or extractivist policies that displaced them from their territories forced many to migrate, and Indigenous communal lifeways have long been antagonistic to the capitalist economic system.

Upon arrival in the United States, Indigenous migrants work two or three shifts, while also facing structural racism. Among Los Angeles's large population of Indigenous migrants, Zapotec, Q'anjobal and K'iche peoples are the majority, according to a census that CIELO conducted in 2024. The survey also details the main areas in which Indigenous migrants from Mexico and Central America are employed. This includes restaurant, domestic, and janitorial work. They typically work in the

most exploitative sectors and, because few have papers and many do not speak colonial languages, they have limited possibilities of career advancement and often face long periods of unemployment.

On the first day of his second term, Trump initiated a package of presidential actions against immigrants, enabling mass deportations and allowing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to enter schools, child care centers, shelters and churches. He declared a national emergency on the U.S.-Mexico border, threatened family separation, and called for the elimination of birthright citizenship. These are just some of the actions that the white supremacist billionaires now running the country have implemented.

Disciplinary strategies

Discipline involves imposing norms and rules on social behavior in order to compel obedience and facilitate maximum exploitation. What migrants in the US are experiencing today is another phase of disciplinary anti-immigrant policy.

For the last three years, I have been in Los Angeles researching a new book titled *No es por el sueño americano, es por el despojo* [*It's not the American dream, it's dispossession*]. The book includes a series of interviews with Odilia Romero, a Zapotec woman who directs CIELO. I spoke with Romero the day after Trump's inauguration, and she shared reflections on the impacts of the state of terror among migrants.

"The government's announcement that immigration agents will be entering schools, hospitals and churches has sparked fear among undocumented Indigenous migrants and the children of migrant families, and has caused many migrants to stop going to work," she said. This strategy of disciplining migrants is part of the scaffolding of migration governance: a political system that puts lives on a hierarchy, creating a system of differentiation and racialization among migrants, differentiating between those who are undocumented and those who are not.

Various people are among those considered undocumented: people who have work permits and those who do not, people awaiting an asylum or refugee claim, those who already have refugee or asylum status, and other categorizations that divide and fragment. In the lexicon of migration, undocumented people are a complicated and heterogeneous population.

According to Romero, there are several mechanisms for containing and disciplining migrants, but they have precedents in U.S. immigration policy. They are not new. "Anti-immigrant policies have always worked, and in fact, several deportation flights that took off on the day Trump took office were the result of processes initiated by the previous administration," said Romero. "This was also true of the approval of the bill to deport undocumented immigrants who commit minor crimes."

According to Romero, there is a continuum of anti-immigrant policies, although they will intensify in the Republican era.

Indigenous migrant communities in the US

It has been several decades since one could say that Mayan, Otomanguan or Quechua Indigenous communities live exclusively in Mesoamerica or the Andes. Today there are K'iche', Zapotec, Mixtec, Miskito, Lenca, Kichwa, Garifuna and Ixil communities, among hundreds of others, in the U.S. They work in construction, agriculture and restaurants, in caregiving, delivery and many other industries across the country. Guatemalan consular records indicate that Guatemalans live in 50 states, including Hawai'i.

The Guatemalan Consular Network indicates that 3,256,047 Guatemalans live in the U.S. Of them, 1,152,699 live in Los Angeles, with the K'anjobal, Mam, K'iche' and Kaqchikel peoples being the predominant among Indigenous peoples. With Guatemala's population at 14.9 million, 21 percent live in the U.S.

Thus, K'iche' people no longer only live in Momostenago, Totonicapán or Nahualá, in the western Guatemala, but also in Los Angeles, New York, Texas and Boston. Likewise, Chuj, Akateko and Q'anjob'al people live in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta, Kentucky, Chicago and New York. This is true of several other peoples, including the Garifuna, Miskito and Kichwa.

Information compiled by CIELO allows us to build a more complete vision of how these communities contribute to the economic stability of the places they're from, where improved access to health, education and local living conditions are overseen by communally organized political systems. To do so, remittances from migrants are vital.

"Indigenous migrants do more than contribute to their communities of origin. They sustained the city before the fires and during the pandemic and they are the ones who will rebuild Los Angeles," Romero said.

A time for reorganization

Migrant workers have responded to the persecution and terror in different ways.

Notably, agricultural workers in California, Florida and Texas have taken direct action by refusing to show up for work. There are poultry workers who did not go to their workplaces out of fear of raids. Worried about their parents' arrests, children stayed home from school. Religious services have been moved online for the same reason.

"We should learn from the struggles of the African-American communities in the United States, who with their strength and organization managed to break the country's segregationist system, because we are entering a new regime of segregation," said Romero. "There is a precedent for this, because in 2022 our African-American comrades fought alongside us against racist and anti-Indigenous policies, when LA City Council members made statements against Indigenous migrants from Oaxaca."

Mam, Ixil, Mixe and other Indigenous migrants from across the continent have, despite devastation, displacement and injustice, shaped our world. With their remittances and their knowledge they have supported their families, the defense of their territory, and the creation of important communal festivities and gatherings. In doing so, they have sustained the economies of their countries of origin.

It is urgent that we focus our attention on the struggle and strategies of resistance of migrant Indigenous communities, heed the call to learn from the history of people of African descent, support potential alliances and think beyond the terror and inter-elite disputes so that we can imagine the actions we want to take.

It is up to all of us to break the system of segregation and institutional racism.

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