

Polarization and protest in Ciudad Juárez

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Residents and migrants in Ciudad Juárez have ramped up protest in the wake of the fire that killed forty men detained by the National Migration Institute. Over the past weeks, they have challenged the president, set up a resistance camp and held activities against xenophobia. Groups of migrants have also started occupying two previously abandoned buildings in the border city.

“Beginning on March 27, when the tragedy happened, hundreds of migrants began to gather outside of the National Migration Institute,” said Gerónimo Fong, from the Movement Against Militarization in Juárez. By mid week last week, the protest camp was quiet, with just a handful of people present among a lot of tents set up on the sidewalk in front of the National Migration Institute (INM).

According to activists, rumors that the US will let people cross the border are spread regularly and migrants—mostly Venezuelans, but also people and families from Central America—move toward the border.

“The rumors that the door is being opened for migrants have been constant,” said Fong. “Every so often the rumor spreads and some of the migrants go and hand themselves over in the United States, only to be deported,” said Fong in an interview last week.

Activists in the city are calling what happened in the INM facilities a “state crime” in which all three levels of government participated. A federal judge in Chihuahua has requested Francisco Garduño, the head of the INM, and the organization’s delegate in Chihuahua state, retired admiral Salvador González Guerrero, appear before the court.

Allied organization

Compañeras in Juarez have been organizing and coordinating together with migrants in an especially intense way in the weeks since the fire.

First, they arrived at the scene of the tragedy to assist with basic necessities. Later, they met with migrants to determine how best they could lend political support. It didn’t take long for them to articulate a support network and begin to protest together, something that has historically been difficult as most of the migrants in the city are there only temporarily.

Local activists alerted others that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador would be travelling to Ciudad Juarez on March 31, and migrants expressed a desire to speak with him. That day, a peaceful demonstration was called at the Colegio de Bachilleres, near the central park in the city’s downtown, where López Obrador participated in a private event related to his social programs.

“We got in front of his truck to speak to him and ask him to address the migrants,” said Cony Gutiérrez, an activist and resident of the city. But instead of listening or speaking with migrants, the president accused the people gathered of having been sent by Maru Campos, the conservative National Action Party (PAN) governor of Chihuahua.

“No, the Movement Against Militarization has no relation with political parties,” Gutiérrez told *Ojalá*.

But López Obrador's words shifted media coverage of the action, obscuring the demands of the migrants and imposing instead the theme of confrontation between political parties.

Gutiérrez, like many in Juárez, is herself a migrant. She arrived in the city from a rural community in 1992, and worked for years in the maquilas before starting university. She has been involved in activism for decades, accompanying mothers of women who have been killed or disappeared, and working with migrants in the city. Her political clarity and commitment have been sharpened in the streets of one of the most hostile cities in the Americas.

“With his words and his gestures, the president eliminates our political agency, as women, by saying we’re pawns of someone else,” said Gutiérrez.

Following the confrontation with the president on the last day of March, activists and migrants in Juárez organized a series of vigils, a Way of the Cross procession and other political actions to demand justice and remember the 40 people killed in the detention center.

In the face of xenophobia, direct action

The shutting down of the US border for people seeking asylum began before the pandemic, and it led to the streets of Juárez filling with people who are migrating being increasingly stuck on the Mexico side of the border. The first to be exposed to this system were from Central America and Haiti. More recently, since Title 42 was expanded, there are many Venezuelans.

Cruz Pérez Cuéllar, the mayor of Juárez, who was a PAN activist before joining the Morena Party, has been accused of promoting xenophobia against migrants. Two weeks before the fire, Pérez Cuéllar said that, with respect to migrants in the city, “The truth is that our level of patience is running out.”

Pérez Cuéllar is in charge of the municipal police, who have an increasing role in policing migration. Well before the fire there had been accusations of violent raids and harassment against women migrants.

“The police, be they municipal, or state level, can put [a migrant] in jail just for being in the street or for getting on a bus, that’s been the policy since López Obrador took office,” said Graciela Delgado Ramírez, an activist in the city. “Here there’s a wall, but it’s not like Trump’s wall. Here the wall is made up of people, where the National Guard, the police, and the bus stations won’t let anyone through.”

Delgado Ramírez is 63 years old and has been fighting for social justice in Ciudad Juárez for decades. She told me the mood in Juárez is different from what it was like prior to the arrival of thousands of migrants.

“The mayor and his team have taken it upon themselves to create an environment of xenophobia, which hasn’t always existed here,” she said in an interview with *Ojalá*. “People, especially on social media, are expressing a lot of hate against the people who are on the bridges, or elsewhere... Even so, there’s many people who have responded with solidarity.”

In the last weeks, migrants in Juárez have occupied two abandoned buildings, cleaning and organizing them to host those arriving to the city, so they don’t need to be in the streets.

“They are in a very vulnerable and difficult situation, where it might seem like it’s only possible to think of one’s self, and they’ve taken over two spaces,” said Gutiérrez. “That represents an incredible level of organization, and that, to me, is political.”