

“Heeding the Call of the Minutemen”

Joanna Swanger

For the month of April 2005, a group of U.S. citizens who called themselves the Minutemen and who had been deputized by the Arizona Rangers made a public display of patrolling the stretch of the Mexico-U.S. border between Sonora and Arizona where crossings of undocumented migrants from Mexico have become especially prevalent in the last ten years. They did so in order to highlight what they saw as the U.S. government’s failure to enforce the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico and halt illegal immigration. As a piece of political theater, their actions achieved the intended result: the media-savvy Minutemen were entering a public discourse dominated by calls for increased militarization of the southern U.S. border. Lou Dobbs of CNN has continually reiterated this theme in a segment entitled “Broken Borders” over the course of 2004-05, and Bill O’Reilly of FOX News has been calling for the U.S. military to be stationed along the southern boundary of the U.S. to supplement the work of the Border Patrol for the past several years, pointing to the events of September 11, 2001, as, in his estimation, the strongest evidence for his case. The mainstream media were therefore eager to give the Minutemen their desired coverage. Despite the fact that they have the dominant public discourse on their side, the rage that fueled this political action staged by the new self-proclaimed Minutemen is nevertheless understandable. The U.S. economy is weak, chronic unemployment and underemployment appear to be intractable and intensifying problems, and deindustrialization is proceeding apace, resulting in relatively high-paying manufacturing jobs being replaced by relatively low-paying jobs in the service sector, if in fact they are replaced at all.

When something as massive and as impersonal and yet as important as the economy seems not to be working for us as individuals and seems also not to be working for many among our friends and acquaintances, what on earth can we do about it? It would be easy, as so many within the progressive movement have attempted to do, to dismiss the Minutemen as the latest overtly racist manifestation of a long historical tendency toward the scapegoating of groups of people who have limited defenses. U.S. history is replete with examples of such nativism, and sadly, progressive movements like the movement of organized labor in the U.S. have often not escaped the grip of the nativist tentacles of anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, anti-radicalism, and Anglo-Saxon racism. Yet I think it is far more fruitful in this instance to take the Minutemen at their word—for they have publicly disavowed the white supremacist movement that tried to latch on to their political action and have distanced themselves from racism and xenophobia—and to inquire as to what common ground might be shared by those who participated with the Minutemen and those of us who live and work in the U.S.-Mexico border region for the cause of social justice.

In this pursuit, I begin with the words of one of the Minutemen organizers who was interviewed on National Public Radio but whose perspective was widely overlooked by much of both the mainstream and the alternative media. He stated, “I’m mad at my government. I’m not mad at these economic refugees who come here for a better life. . . . [T]he government’s colluding with big business” (National Public Radio, “All Things Considered,” 1 April 2005).

Such a statement is rich with implications and lessons we can draw from it. The collusion that he criticizes is that between businesses in the U.S. who hire undocumented

migrants for the explicit purposes of paying sub-minimum wages and thus keeping down the prices consumers pay for final products, which in turn serves to increase sales volumes and enhance profit-margins. Among the most visible of such large employers are Wal-Mart, owners of meat-packing and processing facilities such as Tyson Chicken, and, of course, growers of fruits, vegetables, and other crops. In one sense, the man who uttered this statement can be congratulated for having seen through the smokescreen of the culture of liberal individualism that would have us believe that if we are unable to find employment at decent wages, we ultimately have no one to blame but ourselves. He has correctly identified a systemic problem: a large segment of society acting in the illegal and unethical fashion of hiring people to work at sub-minimum wage, as well as the unethical stance of the U.S. government that does not hold these employers to account. On the other hand, though, he does not escape the culture of liberal individualism, for the actions of the Minutemen are steeped in this particular cultural strain that is so predominant in the United States. First, their act of political theater falls into the “valiant” and much admired tradition in the U.S. of “taking the bull by the horns”: a relatively small group of individuals has heroically stood up to the U.S. government and exposed the government’s ineffectiveness, hypocrisy, and corruption. Second, however, after having identified a systemic problem, the Minutemen devised and executed an action that targeted not the structural causes of the problem but rather individuals. The aforementioned colluding employers did not feel the sting of the Minutemen’s act, nor did the U.S. government. The sting was felt directly by small groups of individuals who, probably like many of the Minutemen themselves, have been disenfranchised by the workings of the global economy: people who were forced to migrate from their home communities in search of some means of survival.

This brings me back to the statement by the organizer of the Minutemen. While he is correct in pointing out that the government is colluding with big business in a way that contributes to the flow of migration into the United States, he has left out the most important form of this collusion. The most significant cause of migration of Mexicans to the United States is not the “pull” factor of the lure of relatively well-paying jobs in this country. A far more significant cause is the “push” factor: the devastation of the Mexican economy that has made it nearly impossible for many Mexican families to secure their livelihood within the borders of their home country. The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in effect since 1994, has been a main contributing factor to the devastation of the Mexican economy, and the collusion between big business and both the U.S. and the Mexican governments in realizing NAFTA is undeniable.

Prior to its entrance into NAFTA, and as a condition for entering into the terms of the free trade pact, the Mexican government came under pressure to reform certain laws and even constitutional provisions that had supported key sectors of the Mexican economy, especially an agricultural sector that was bolstered by policies designed to meet the food needs of the domestic population. In the wake of these reforms, Mexican agriculture has been hit by a wave of privatizations, cutbacks in credit to small farmers, the removal of tariffs and price supports that had encouraged the production of staple crops, and the deterioration of the *ejido* sector, small farms whose land had been held collectively by communities. As a result, there has been a growing wave of campesinos who have lost access to land that had provided for their subsistence, to wage-labor

opportunities in the agricultural sector—a sector that provided a full one-quarter of all employment as of 1990—or both. The NAFTA and pre-NAFTA neoliberal reforms have also brought a wave of privatizations in the industrial sector as well, and even in parts of the service sector. Therefore, while a popular image of the effects of NAFTA upon the United States is that it has sent jobs south of the border in quantity, as factories from the U.S. relocate and set up production in the northern Mexican border region as maquiladoras, it is also important to understand the dynamics of job loss happening from the other direction at the same time. Most of these maquiladoras are in fact the vortex of job losses in the industrial sector to the north, in the United States, and job losses to the south, in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the interior of Mexico. And yet, the maquiladoras pay far from living wages. These are the factors that have spurred the recent increase in the migration to the United States of undocumented Mexicans. According to the June 2005 report by the Pew Hispanic Center entitled “Background Briefing Prepared for Task Force on Immigration and America’s Future,” the number of Mexicans who had migrated to the United States grew from approximately 4.2 million in 1990—increasing dramatically starting in 1997-98—to today’s current number of approximately 10.6 million. We know that NAFTA has not benefited most workers in the United States (except in providing cheaper consumer goods, which does benefit those who have been laid off and could otherwise not afford to buy many of these products at all); these numbers demonstrate that NAFTA is not working for the Mexican working class either.

Returning to the Minutemen, the problem they identified is the unmitigated flow of migration. They identified the cause of this problem as the “pull” factor—the lure of jobs in the U.S. Thus, the solution they proposed was simple: stand between the people and the lure that drives them, beef up the control of the U.S. border and make it impossible to cross. Because they completely excluded the “push” factors and thus incorrectly identified the root cause of the problem, the solution they propose is not pragmatic in the least. I think it is fair to say, however, that one point upon which both the Minutemen and progressives working toward social justice can agree is the identification of the problem. It is wrong that people should be forced to leave their home communities and live for extended periods of time far from loved ones solely because they are in search of some means of securing a livelihood. And it is unethical that the people of the United States implicitly support economic policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement either without knowing the human costs of such policies or worse, knowing them and looking the other way. As this is being written, this same collusion of business interests and government officials is preparing to extend the provisions of NAFTA to Central America (in CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement) and eventually to the entire Western Hemisphere (in the FTAA, Free Trade Area of the Americas).

The Minutemen took the inspiration for their name from a group who felt called to resist a government that no longer represented the interests of its people, and it is in this sense that I urge all of us to heed their call. Progressives should stop dismissing out of hand the efforts—however misguided—by groups such as the Minutemen, for the sense of disenfranchisement that spurs such efforts is genuine and is not going away. Groups like the Minutemen, meanwhile, should extend their analysis and uncover the ways that they share common interests with migrants. All of us are called to participate

in re-designing economic structures and their governing rules, so that the economy serves to meet the needs of all, rather than just the desires of a relative few.

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