

Migration is Not a Crime

Last Issue, Alice Cutler reported from Bolivia on the people's alternative to the Copenhagen climate conference. Here Alice and Yasmine Brien report back from the working group on forced displacement and climate change.



'Enough of Racism' image by Yasmine Brien

One of the exciting things about the World People's Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth Rights, that took place in Bolivia earlier this year (see EC 125) was that it considered climate change as a social and political issue. Participating in the Climate Migrants working group was one of our main motivations for attending the conference. The issue of migration induced by climate change again reveals a chasm between the governments of the global North, who see this displacement as a risk to be managed and respond by reinforcing border controls, and southern perspectives which focus on free movement and defence of the environment.

The task of each of the 17 working groups was to create a four page document that would feed into the final People's Accord. Over three days around a hundred people from all around the world discussed and debated, sharing experiences and understandings of climate displacement. This displacement is being caused by three major factors: firstly, rising sea levels, which particularly affect small islands and delta regions, which are often heavily populated; secondly by rapid changes such as mudslides and floods; and lastly, by factors such as drought, desertification, or failing crops. All three are already being felt throughout Latin America.

As a country with a high level of outward migration, as well as internal migration from rural to urban areas, the Bolivian perspective in the working group was very important. People explained how this is not a new phenomenon. During the early 1980s droughts forced many Quechua people from the Potosí region, putting additional pressure on already under-resourced cities.

We talked extensively about what was the appropriate terminology – 'forced migrant', 'climate refugee', 'climate displaced'? Such terminology categorises human beings and has real effects, such as determining which demands or frameworks may be appropriate. 'Climate refugee' is problematic as it privileges one 'type' of migrant – 'ecological' – over other 'economic migrants'. It is also very hard to prove that any person or community has been displaced directly as a result of climate change. Who could say definitively what role local deforestation, poverty, or a free-trade agreement has played? Would those displaced by mining or false climate change 'solutions' such as biofuels be offered protection? All migration involves a complex web of political, ecological and economic factors. In the context of immigration debates in Europe, currently dominated by right-wing views, many fear that opening up

the category of 'refugee' to include those displaced by environmental factors could undermine the limited protection offered to refugees under international law.



Despite these difficulties we all agreed that relocation, both internally and across borders, will be a key way in which people respond to environmental destruction. The final declaration of the conference, the People's Accord, urged countries in the global North to eliminate their restrictive immigration policies, welcome those forced to migrate due to climate change and recognise their fundamental rights.

Having worked, and been friends with, asylum seekers and migrants for many years we have seen close up how degrading and dehumanising the UK's immigration system is. Indefinite detention, forced deportations and massive cuts to legal advice is a pattern being repeated throughout Europe and the global North in general.

It is no coincidence that international migration policies are so similar, coming from a broader policy of global managed migration which is promoted and administered by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Their involvement within the working group was controversial, because of their anti-migrant practices and policies, but their presence instigated vital discussions.

During the conference we also distributed a text we had written, 'Freedom of Movement in an Age of Climate Chaos', ran a workshop, and spoke on a panel arguing that freedom to stay and freedom of movement for all are a crucial part of climate justice. Workshop participants shared our belief that we are one human race made up of many cultures, and that borders are imposed on us primarily for the benefit of the economy. While capital and corporations enjoy free movement, with resources extracted and traded for the benefit of a tiny minority, people are prevented from following these resources and are displaced by these industrial practices. As one of the panel speakers, Raul Delgado Wise, said, "As workers migrate from south to north, new models of unequal exchange are created in which migration acts as another transfer to the north."

The working group was a rich opportunity to exchange ideas and to begin to understand how climate change is already wreaking havoc on people's lives. This is not just an environmental issue, but one that goes to the heart of our social, political and economic systems. Working to build solidarity between all of humanity and opposing the borders that divide us will be a fundamental part of the struggle for climate justice.

To read more, including the article mentioned above, see ayya2cochabamba.wordpress.com.

See also the new booklet 'Space for Movement? Reflections from Bolivia on climate justice, social movements and the state' <http://spaceformovement.wordpress.com>.



Climate Migrants Working Group image by Yasmine Brien