In the wake of the political crisis in the United States last year, caused by the migration of large numbers of children from Central America to the US/Mexico border, the AFL-CIO in November sent a delegation to Honduras, the country that sent the greatest number of unaccompanied minors. ‘What we witnessed’, reported Tefere Gebre AFL-CIO Executive Vice President, ‘was the intersection of our corporate-dominated trade policies with our broken immigration system, contributing to a state that fails workers and their families and forces them to live in fear’.

The report, in fact, contains a frank assessment of the history of US foreign policy in Honduras, and draws out the disastrous consequences it has created in that country today. The fate of Honduras long has been tied to that of the United States’, it charges. ‘Throughout the 20th century, Honduras was key to maintaining US military and economic interests in the isthmus. The US military intervened in Honduran politics throughout the early 20th century to protect the foreign investments of large US corporations like the United Fruit Co. Later, Honduras served as a base of operations during the US-supported 1954 coup in Guatemala, as well as the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, and during the years of civil war and Cold War proxy wars in Central America in the 1970s and ’80s, the government provided support for the ‘Contra’ counter-revolutionary war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua’.

More recently the US raised only pro-forma objections to the 2009 coup that overthrew Honduras’ elected president Manuel Zelaya, and then quickly restarted military aid to the junta that seized power. ‘Under the left-leaning Zelaya administration, the minimum wage was raised by 80 percent, direct assistance was provided to the poorest Hondurans, and poverty and inequality declined’, the report says. After the coup, however, ‘numerous trade unionists and community activists who participated in resistance were killed, beaten, threatened and jailed’, it declares.

Based on extensive interviews with unionists, it details current abuses of labour and human rights. The government has built an apparatus to put down dissent, while the Secretariat of Labor and Social Security has passed laws to reduce permanent work, protections and freedom of association. Teachers face news laws limiting their right to strike. Farm worker unionists face an increase in violent attacks and threats against their lives in the sugar cane fields. Five union executive councils have been fired by the partnership of the Kyungshin Corp. of South Korea and the Lear Corp. of Michigan.

In the port of Puerto Cortez, the delegation reports deteriorating conditions due to the privatisation of docks, with over 1000 workers fired. Although the report doesn’t mention it, the head of the dockers’ union, Victor Crespo, was forced to flee Honduras after his father was killed and mother injured, and he himself received threats to his life. A support campaign by the US International Longshore and Warehouse Union helped save his life, and eventually won guarantees that allowed his safe return to Honduras.

The AFL-CIO report condemns a plan to ‘reduce the wage bill’ in the public sector by cutting jobs and privatising public services, especially in electricity. It points out that this reflects the policies of the International Monetary Fund, which called for cutting the public sector from 7.5 percent of GDP to 2 percent in four years. The resulting job loss has a clear impact on increasing poverty, forcing many Hondurans to migrate in search of survival.

The report makes the case that poverty in Honduras has been deepened by the impact of the Central American Free Trade Agreement: ‘today, Honduras is the most unequal country in Latin America’. Poverty rose from 60 to 64.5 percent from 2006 to 2013. By emphasising a policy that deregulated business and used low wages as an incentive to attract foreign investment, ‘CAFTA only exacerbated the desperation and instability in Honduras’, it charges. ‘Honduran workers identified the 2009 Honduran coup d’état and the subsequent militarisation of Honduran society, and the implementation of CAFTA and its impact on decent work and labour rights, as two essential elements to understanding the current crisis’.

Backing up the increasing militarisation of Honduran society is US military aid, which reached $27 million in 2012. The report notes that both Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield and Commander John Kelly of the United States Southern Command praised Honduran ‘advances in security’. In the US media, General Kelly has demonised migration from Central America, calling the movement of families and children a national security threat and a ‘crime-terror convergence’.

That migration, described in the AFL-CIO report, has grown sharply. More than 18,000 unaccompanied Honduran children arrived in the United States in 2014 alone. ‘In 1990, there were approximately 109,000 Honduran migrants in the world. In 2010, that number grew close to 523,000, with the vast majority living in the United States’, it says. ‘Today, migration is seen by many families as a means to escape violence or seek employment opportunity or reunite with family, while the government has embraced the remittances from migrants as a major economic resource’.

Three quarters of those migrants, arriving in the... Continued on page 28...
US after the immigration amnesty of 1986, have been undocumented. As a result, Hondurans, even children, have felt the impact of the US policy of mass deportations - about 400,000 per year for six years. In 2013 alone, the US deported 37,049 Hondurans.

The report, however, pointedly differs with the immigration reform policies proposed by the US administration and the Democratic Party in Congress, which call for vast expansions in temporary, guest worker programmes, in which workers labour for low wages and have few labour or civil rights. Temporary visa programmes are not a safe alternative to undocumented migration, it declares, noting the history of rights violations in the US, and abuses in recruitment, including extortion, fraud and the confiscation of documents.

The report ends with a series of recommendations for both the US and Honduran governments. It demands that the US extend refugee status to people, especially children, fleeing violence and persecution, and end the mass detention of migrants. Instead of CAFTA, it calls for 'trade policies that lead to the creation of decent work', and instead of support for repression, 'ending all aid to the military'.

The Honduran government must turn away from militarisation, it asserts. It recommends longer-term sustainable development policies and investment in public services. The report even urges the Honduran government to refuse to accept deportees from the US unless they are given due process before deportation.

Ultimately, the AFL-CIO concludes, the US government must move away from policies that 'criminalise migrant children and their families, while pursuing trade deals that simultaneously displace subsistence farmers and lower wages and standards across other sectors, and eliminate good jobs, intensifying the economic conditions that drive migration'.

Over 60 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. With the addition of new labour market entrants over the next five years, 280 million more jobs need to be created by 2019. Half the world’s workforce are employed in precarious work and one and three jobs pay less than $1.25 per day. To just maintain the status quo 1.8 billion jobs must be created by 2030.

We are seeing levels of inequality in income distribution back to the scale of the 1920s. We are living through a boom period but only for the one percent.

There is a word missing in the world of tomorrow debate – ‘solidarity’. UNI Global Union and its 20 million members stands for solidarity in action.