Dignity First: A Policy Platform for the Americas

For nearly 40 years, the St. Louis Inter-Faith Committee on Latin America (IFCLA) has worked to accompany the people of Latin America in their struggles for human rights and social justice. Over the years, our work has evolved to respond to changing global realities, and our programming has shifted to meet the needs of the communities we seek to serve. This document compliments our Strategic Framework, and outlines the policy principles that we believe will bring about a world in line with our organization’s vision and in honor of our values of integrity, dignity, solidarity, diversity and commitment. This statement outlines the core tenets or beliefs of our organization and community followed by concrete, legislative demands, interspersed with historical examples.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We believe all of our neighbors have sacred dignity and worth, and that as people of faith and good will, we are called to act when our shared values are threatened. We envision a world in which partners reach across economic, political and social borders to build a sustainable future for the planet and its people. All human beings deserve a safe and welcoming space to live. We demand humane policies that value family unity and human dignity throughout the Americas. We support legislation that keeps dignity first and demonstrates an understanding of the root causes and intricacies of the global phenomena that have shaped our current reality.

The five core principles of our policy platform are as follows:
1. We acknowledge and accept co-responsibility for the current state of affairs in Latin America.
2. We advocate for the dignity of migrants, the right to stay home and the fundamental right to migrate.
3. We promote the demilitarization of Latin American countries and the U.S.-Mexico border.
4. We seek the liberation of marginalized individuals and communities.
5. We promote fair trade, labor and food practices at home and abroad.
**CO-RESPONSIBILITY**

*We acknowledge and accept co-responsibility for the current state of affairs in Latin American countries.*

The United States historically and consistently practices intervention in Latin American countries. Intervention, or the act of a foreign power wielding influence over the policies and interests of another country, has taken many forms, including covert operations, military intervention, arms sales, political endorsement, and financial support to governments and corporations. U.S. financial intervention, military training, and corporate exploitation have led to the international overthrow of elected governments, reinforced repression, and fueled civil wars. While these interventions have led to some positive outcomes, they have also contributed to conditions of instability, poverty and inequality.

Many of the families and individuals who have arrived at our borders seeking asylum or pursuing a better life have made difficult decisions to leave dangerous places. We must not forget that these conditions – pervasive violence, rampant poverty, and, often, the threat of death – are the direct results of decades of dangerous U.S. policy and intervention in Latin America. Generations later, we now see the spread of gang violence, increasing levels of militarization and the promotion of neoliberal trade relations as a direct result of these actions. Pointing fingers or assigning blame are inconsequential and counterproductive in solving these problems. There is power in taking responsibility for our actions and working towards a values-first solution. We must acknowledge that our actions have contributed to and maintained structures that resulted in resource exploitation and societal ills, accept current realities and stop blaming each other in order to make decisions for the future rooted in our values of dignity, integrity, diversity, and solidarity.

**Historical Example**

In pursuit of neocolonial and neoliberal policies and doctrine, the U.S. aided the overthrow of democratically-elected Chilean president Salvador Allende in 1973, which ushered in the reign of General Augusto Pinochet, a ruthless dictator who eliminated political opponents and was responsible for the torture and death of thousands of people. Over 23,000 documents concerning Chile were declassified during the Clinton administration and these records reveal that the U.S. attempted to block the ratification of Allende’s government and gave weapons to members of the Chilean military for a coup to prevent Allende from becoming president in 1970.

**Contemporary Example**

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), a gang notorious for their brutality and violence, has received widespread media attention in recent years. A small group of El Salvadoran immigrants who made up the initial MS-13 fled to the U.S., along with one-fifth of the population of El Salvador, to escape the violent Civil War (1979-1992). The Reagan and Carter Administrations provided military and monetary resources to the military government that massacred its people and instigated the mass exile that followed. Los Angeles gang culture in the 1980’s provided fertile conditions for MS-13 to expand and feed off of brutal tactics used by other gangs, such as the Bloods, Crips and Aryan Brotherhood. In the 1990’s, the U.S. deported thousands of MS-13 gang members back to El Salvador, turning this group into a horrifying transnational army with over 70,000 members throughout the U.S. and the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras.
In 2016, Santos Chirino Cruz, a husband and father of 2 had been requesting special permission to seek shelter in the U.S. after claiming that the MS-13 was going to kill him upon return to Honduras. Mr. Cruz was petrified back in Honduras, rarely leaving the house. On his 38th birthday, the MS-13 killed him at a soccer field. A year after his death, Mr. Cruz’s lawyer, Benjamin Osorio, took the cases of Mr. Cruz’s two children with no charge for representation, who also faced being deported. Unfortunately, facing fear of gangs upon return to someone’s native country is not an uncommon phenomenon. Currently 1 in 3 people crossing the border are seeking asylum.

Demands

1. Permanently protect the status of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiaries and “Dreamers”. Both of these programs should be utilized in order to halt the deportation of our neighbors back to unstable, dangerous situations and prevent possible exposure to human rights abuses. TPS and DACA-style legislation are temporary solutions that recognize the impacts of decades of U.S. intervention in Latin America and demonstrate our shared responsibility for the impacts of such interference. Both are short-term, interim policy measures that should remain until long-term, permanent solutions for status can be created for these populations.

2. Reject fraudulent results of 2017 Honduran presidential election. The defeat of Salvador Nasralla by incumbent Juan Orlando Hernandez has been widely contested. We join the Honduran people and the Organization of American States (OAS) in disputing these results and call for a new election.

Positions

1. We support the American Promise Act of 2017 (HR 4253) and look forward to its reintroduction in the current session. This bill provides individuals who currently receive TPS and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), which is not an immigration status but does protect the individual from deportation, and have resided in the U.S. under these programs for a minimum period of three years the ability to apply for lawful permanent residence

2. Pass the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act (HR 1299), pending reintroduction in the current session. This legislation calls for the suspension of U.S. military and police aid to Honduras until the human rights violations committed by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice.
DIGNITY OF MIGRANTS
We advocate for the dignity of migrants, the right to stay home and the fundamental right to migrate.

The current outdated immigration system and the harmful political rhetoric surrounding immigrants has presented us with serious challenges in living out our common values. Building a physical barrier will do nothing to address the root causes of extreme violence, poverty and instability driving people from their homes in the first place. U.S. foreign policy and military intervention in Latin American countries laid the foundation for migration trends and directly resulted in the phenomenon of undocumented migration. We support laws and policies that keep dignity first, demonstrate an understanding of the root causes of migration, and seek to end the criminalization of communities of color.

It is immoral to criminalize immigrants and separate families. Individuals have a fundamental right to flee their country in order to seek protection and escape persecution. We must show empathy for individuals and families who make the difficult choice to leave unsafe places. Detention and deportation of immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees have devastating human consequences, and has resulted in 185 deaths since 2003. Everyone, regardless of national origin, shares a common human dignity that must be respected. We recognize migration as a global phenomenon and believe that immigration policies should treat all individuals with dignity and respect, and protect human life, tribal sovereignty, sacred sites, and public lands. We believe that every person has the right to move and live freely, in community and with their family, without fear of being separated from their loved ones or displaced from their home. We demand clean legislation that honors the dignity of all and stands up for civil rights as well as immigration reform that keeps families together and provides a path to legalization for the millions of immigrants that are already part of this nation.

Historical Example
Since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, over one million Cubans have migrated to the U.S. seeking asylum. Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) in 1966, enabling Cubans to become Legal Permanent Residents (LPR’s) after living in the U.S. for one year. During the Clinton administration, the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy was established which gave Cubans the ability to relocate to the U.S. without a visa. Those caught on the water were returned to Cuba, while those who safely made the voyage to the U.S. on land were granted asylum. The “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy allowed thousands of Cubans to safely flee political oppression.

Contemporary Example
No matter race, sexual orientation, age, or gender, we believe all are welcome in the U.S. Roxsana Hernandez Rodriguez did not get the opportunity to experience this welcome. Instead, she was killed in a New Mexico detention center a few short weeks after arriving from Honduras. An independent autopsy report showed bruising and contusions, evidence of kicks or strikes, but the correctional facility claimed that Hernandez died of cardiac arrest from untreated HIV. Her family stated that the death was unjust, and she was hoping to live a full and beautiful life in the U.S., which was not possible for a transgender person in Honduras. As a result, many reports have come out regarding violations in detention centers such as lack of dental care, lack of care for disabled people, and even nooses hanging from vents.
Demands

1. **Legalize status of all individuals currently undocumented in the U.S.** We must provide a pathway to citizenship and access to LPR status to honor the full dignity of all members of our community, regardless of status or country of origin.

2. **End visa caps.** Caps on the number of visas issued are arbitrary and do not reflect the dynamic circumstances and crises occurring around the world.

3. **Reduce wait and processing times for legal admission to the U.S.**

4. **End the “permanent” and 10-year bars for re-entry.** These arbitrary, punitive bars are unnecessary and result in harmful family separation that fail to recognize root causes of migration. Instead, we should provide an opportunity for temporary lawful presence and ample opportunities for adjustment.

5. **Reform asylum criteria.** People can currently seek asylum in the U.S. if they fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group or political opinions. These criteria were established during World War II and may not provide protection for those fleeing domestic- or gang-related violence.

Positions

1. **We support S.175- Agricultural Worker Program Act of 2019.** This bill grants job security over the span of three to five years, while setting a path to citizenship. This bill would cover the employee and any immediate family living in the US.

2. **We oppose the visa caps for refugees and asylum seekers.** The refugee admissions goals for FY 2019 has been set at 30,000, the lowest admissions goal in the history of the resettlement program. The U.S. government should end caps for total the number of refugees and asylum seekers that enter the U.S.

3. **We oppose H.R. 586 Fix the Immigration Loopholes Act.** While this bill purports to keep families together that are waiting for final decisions on pending cases, it increases penalties for certain asylum claims deemed to be unworthy under current law.

4. **We support waivers or pardons for the 10-year bar for re-entry.** We oppose proposals that prevent minor children from certain countries from seeking asylum upon arrival to the US and force them to remain in unsafe conditions outside of the U.S. while their asylum claim is processed.
DEMILITARIZATION

We promote the demilitarization of Latin American countries and the U.S.-Mexico border.

We oppose militarization taking place along the U.S. border and in Latin American countries. We support the people of Latin America as they fight against repression and the destruction of their land, territories, and rights. We must harness our collective power to confront the oppression of rampant militarization. We acknowledge that the rapidly increasing militarization of border security, immigration policy, and within agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has contributed to a lower quality of life for many individuals, notably indigenous people, communities of color, and other marginalized populations.

Since the early 1990’s, the U.S. government has implemented a variety of prevention through deterrence policies along the Southern border which were designed to stop unauthorized immigration by making it more difficult to enter the country. In framing migration as a threat, the U.S. government was able to gain popular support for implementing increased boundary enforcement measures. These policies have failed to significantly impact migrant flows and led to the exponential increase of death and disappearance among immigrants as well as violence and immeasurable trauma. They have also increased profits for the corporations and individuals that benefit from this extensive militarization and the criminalization and mass incarceration of our families.

Historical Example

The School of the Americas (SOA) was created in 1946 as an institution to be run by the U.S. Army and offer education to Latin American military and police officers, while creating relationships with Latin American militaries. Training manuals had included recommendations for kidnapping, assassination, blackmail, and use of “professional” criminals as military techniques. Some of the “accomplishments” of the graduates of the school include involvement in the assassination of Saint Archbishop Oscar Romero, the El Mozote massacre (the murder of approximately 900 people), and other heinous murders and crimes. Some graduates even went on and became violent dictators of other countries. In 2000, the school was forced to close due to years of criticism from human rights groups. One month later, it was reopened as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). Many believe that only the name change occurred, and no internal policies of what is being taught were reformed.

Contemporary Example

The 2009 military coup d’état in Honduras ushered in the presidency of Juan Orlando Hernández, which oversaw political assassinations, arbitrary arrests, torture, suspension of due process, criminalization of peaceful protest, death threats, intimidation and political corruption. Honduras began 2018 amidst a growing human rights crisis, generated by the illegal and fraudulent presidential elections that took place on November 26, 2017. The Honduran social movements that organized to reject this U.S.-backed dictator installment were met with “iron fist” repression, violence and abuse. Honduran police are widely known to be deeply corrupt and commit human rights abuses, including rape, torture, illegal detention and murder. The deployment of military tanks and security forces led to the arrest of over 1,000 individuals, the incarceration of 30 political prisoners and murder of over 30 individuals.
Demands

1. **End prevention through deterrence policies.** The underlying principle of these policies is to create a border so ugly, dangerous and degrading that it will deter people from attempting to immigrate. These kinds of strict policies and border militarization do not recognize the root causes of migration and fail to honor the dignity of the human person.

2. **End the funnel effect.** Prevention through deterrence policies have forced unauthorized migrants to cross the deadly terrain of Arizona, resulting in an exponential increase of death and disappearance among migrants. It is unacceptable to use human life as a tool for immigration enforcement. This practice must end immediately. Recovered remains must be identified, families notified, and dignity must be preserved in the pursuit of justice for the lives lost and missing in our borderlands.

3. **Close the School of the Americas.** Now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), this U.S.-led institution has provided instruction in the use of torture and produced graduates who have inflicted human rights’ violations and genocide upon innocent people.

4. **End the criminalization of all immigrants.** Undocumented immigration has been built into the U.S. immigration system since its creation. Migrants, immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and all travelers have inherent human dignity, are not criminals, and deserve respect, mercy, and compassion. Asylum-seekers should not be jailed, detained, or placed on intrusive monitoring programs. Asylum is an internationally-protected right, and those fleeing conditions that force them to seek asylum should not be treated as criminals.

Positions

1. **We oppose Operation Gatekeeper and all prevention through deterrence policies.** In the early 1990s, prevention through deterrence strategies including Operation Gatekeeper drastically shaped the U.S. border with Mexico, through the construction of hundreds of miles of fences and physical barriers as well as intense militarization of the border. Over 10,000 people have died and disappearing trying to cross the border under these hyper-militarized and violent conditions.

2. **We support H.R. 2989 Latin America Military Training Review Act,** which aims to suspend WHINSEC.

3. **We oppose H.R. 523,** which seeks to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to render overstaying a visa a criminal offense, and for other purposes.

4. **We oppose H.R.147- Visa Overstay Enforcement Act of 2019.** This bill penalizes those who overstay their visa such as not being eligible to renew their visa, not be readmitted to the US, or being sent to jail for six months to two years. Rather than spend time and resources enforcing outdated immigration laws and increasing disproportionate penalties for violations of unjust laws, we should reform existing laws to espouse our nation’s values of welcoming, hospitality and compassion.
LIBERATION

We seek the liberation of marginalized individuals and communities.

We envision a world in which our civic institutions govern with justice and mercy and reject the criminalization of people of color. We believe that aggressive policing practices contribute to the deterioration of physical and mental health, especially among communities of color and marginalized populations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the overall cost of fatal and non-fatal injuries by law enforcement in 2010 was $1.8 billion and 76,440 non-fatal injuries occurred due to legal intervention as of 2016. At least 1,091 individuals were killed by law enforcement officers in the U.S. as of 2016 (End Police Violence). We know that detention and deportation have deleterious emotional, physical and behavioral consequences on children and adolescents.

The modern-day penitentiary system is rooted in the institution of slavery, a system that profits off of the captivity of marginalized communities. Mass incarceration fills prisons and detention centers and lines the pockets of the corporations and individuals in control. We must defund and dismantle the massive, unaccountable, and deadly immigrant detention and deportation system that is rapidly expanding and put a stop to harmful police-ICE collaborations. We must work together with and learn from the struggles of the black community who have suffered the same oppression in the American justice system for centuries. When the rights of some in America are threatened, all of our rights are threatened.

Historical Example

Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, born in rural El Salvador in 1917, is a beloved figure whose fame reaches far beyond his home country. Romero fought for the Salvadoran campesinos, or farmers, and his weekly radio sermons were heralded as trustworthy news wherein he vehemently criticized the Salvadoran war, atrocities committed by right-wing military groups and the ruling class of Salvadoran families who owned the majority of the land and exploited the working class. Romero refused to obey or uphold unjust laws that were not consistent with his values of dignity, compassion and respect. On March 24, 1980, Romero was assassinated as he celebrated mass in a hospital chapel. The night before his death, Romero made the following statement on the radio: “I would like to appeal in a special way to the men of the army, and in particular to the troops of the National Guard, the police, and the garrisons. Brothers, you belong to our own people. You kill your own brother peasants; and in the face of an order to kill that is given by a man, the law of God that says ‘Do not kill!’ should prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order counter to the law of God. No one has to comply with an immoral law.” To this day, his killers have not been charged despite the fact that a United Nations-backed Truth Commission in 1993 identified the orchestrator of the assassination as Roberto d’Aubuisson, a former National Guard major. On October 18, 2018, Romero was canonized, believed by many to be a civic and religious leader.

Contemporary Example

Within the U.S., there are currently more than 200 detention centers that imprison more than 44,000 immigrants. Not only are unprecedented numbers of people now regularly detained, but conditions in detention have worsened. Studies show that access to adequate medical care is routinely denied, access to basic human necessities are often delayed or denied, and the instances of violence, abuse, and now death have become commonplace. From 2003 to 2018, ICE has reported 185 deaths in immigration detention. Nearly half of the individuals removed by ICE from FY 2009 to FY 2017 had no criminal convictions, despite rhetoric commonly
used to suggest otherwise. Liberation does not exist when governments make profit off the separation of families, whether at the border, in for profit private detention centers, or in the devastating process of deportation. Family separation and deportation impact children in immeasurable ways: 33% of children under 10 years of age who have a deported parent experience difficulty in school. These systems were created to oppress, to create a lower class, a “less than”, and rather than facilitate the liberation of marginalized communities, serve to enslave them.

Demands

1. Abolish ICE.
2. Stop racial profiling and the criminalization of people of color.
3. End the practice of honoring ICE detainers. Enforcing ICE detainers requires that local law enforcement voluntarily hold a person until ICE detains them. Local law should not be concerned with federal law, and should not be doing the work of an unjust and inhumane agency.
4. End the 287(g) program. This program deputizes local law enforcement officials to enforce federal immigration laws. Local police should focus on building trusting relationships with communities to ensure safety and protect the rights of all; 287(g) programs deny this opportunity.
5. Close existing and prevent new construction of detention centers. Many detention centers lack oversight, transparency and accountability; therefore, those in custody may be subjected to inhumane living conditions and lack access to nutritious food, adequate medical care and legal representation.
6. End interior enforcement practices. We demand an end to devastating ISAP (intensive supervision appearance programs) programs including: the abusive use of ankle monitors, the practice of confiscating passports, and burdensome home visits which restrict mobility, invade privacy and foster a sense of insecurity and fear.
7. Provide residency with a path to citizenship for immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children and their parents. We demand equal opportunity for children who were brought to the U.S. to be eligible for legal permanent residency and federal financial aid for higher education. We recognize that families are impacted by status and we support an opportunity for undocumented parents to also be eligible for residency with a path to citizenship.

Positions

1. We support H.R. 6361 - Establish a Humane Immigration Enforcement System Act. This bill aims to terminate ICE within a year of enactment.
2. We support H.R. 1498 - End Racial Profiling Act of 2017. This bill prohibits tribal, federal, state and local law enforcement agents from profiling an individual based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.
3. We support the power of local governments to write their own policies and limit their voluntary participation and collaboration with federal law enforcement agencies. We support a ban on the use of voluntary immigration detainers.
4. We support the termination of 287(g) agreements.
5. We support the No Internment Camps Act (S 3567): This bill prohibits the use of funds for the operation or construction of immigration detention facilities
6. We support the removal of ankle monitors and the abuse of GPS tracking immigrants in legal proceedings.
7. **We support H.R. 6, the American Dream and Promise Act of 2019.** This bill creates the opportunity to apply for legal permanent residency to undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. before age 17, have no serious criminal history, obtained an American high school diploma or GED, have lived in the U.S. for at least 4 years prior to signing the bill into law, and passes a background check. They must also be on a path to a college degree, two years of other higher education/technical training, or 3+ years of U.S. military service.
FAIR TRADE

We promote fair trade, labor and food practices at home and abroad.

The ability to work is a fundamental, human right. No one should be prevented from access to jobs, fair wages or justice when confronted with unfair treatment. Every human being should have the freedom to earn a decent living, support themselves and their families, and afford basic necessities. Achieving social peace remains unattainable when the right to work is thwarted or routinely denied.

We oppose trade and labor policies that reduce food safety, result in lower pay and lost jobs, destroy small businesses, harm workers, threaten the environment and force people to leave their homeland. We oppose international trade agreements that prioritize corporate power and threaten the dignity of our brothers and sisters in Latin America. Every opportunity to take advantage of marginalized people are capitalized upon for profit. Our bodies, labor, and land have always been used for capitalistic gain in whatever manner the dominant system has seen fit. Large, multinational corporations have created global trade, labor and food policies at the expense of the rights and health of workers and the environment. We stand with workers in their fight for a living wage, safe working environment and denounce practices that create economic and social marginalization. The resources acquired from the fruits of human labor must always be used with the principles of justice, equity and respect of human rights.

Historical Example

Under the Clinton administration, the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established a deal between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. 28,000 Mexican small businesses were eliminated due to large U.S. corporations entering the Mexican market and 2 million Mexican farmers were forced out of agriculture. A 25% decrease in factory wages along the Mexican border occurred due to an over saturation of displaced workers. NAFTA expanded corporate power, resulting in lower pay and lost jobs, gutted “Buy American/Buy Local” policies, reduced food safety, devastated Mexico’s rural sector, destroyed tens of thousands of small businesses, harmed workers and forced many to leave their homeland while also threatening the environment.

Contemporary Example

Due to take effect in January 2020, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) is a rebranded version of NAFTA. Most of the gains touted by supporters of this trade agreement benefit the U.S. and Canada. There are clauses that open the Canadian dairy market to the U.S., amend country of origin rules and mandate a higher percentage of automobile parts must be made by workers in labor unions. However, USMCA restricts Mexico’s ability to expand its markets, increases Mexico’s dependence on the U.S. economy and does not close the loophole of Section 232, which imposes steel and aluminum tariffs on Mexico, Canada and the European Union. The supposed “wins” for Mexico in the form of laws and regulations requiring the right to collective bargaining and an end to discrimination of workers are toothless, extremely difficult to enforce and will likely not lead to substantial changes in the day-to-day lives of the Mexican people.

Demands

1. End human trafficking and the dependence on slave labor.
2. Reject harmful multinational trade agreements.

3. **Promote programs that protect workers**, enforce health and food safety regulations, acknowledge the harmful effects of climate change and commit to environmental protections.

**Positions**

1. **We support the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2017 (S 1312).** This bill authorizes the Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to award grants to local educational agencies: 1) to train school staff to recognize and respond to signs of labor and sex trafficking, and 2) to provide classroom curricula to students on how to avoid becoming victims of labor and sex trafficking.

2. **We reject the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and oppose the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).**

3. **We support the Fair Food Program (FFP) and Campaign for Fair Food (CFF).** The Fair Food Program, founded by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in 2011, hosts worker education sessions on labor standard updates, provides third-party monitoring and investigates worker complaints. CIW also launched the Campaign for Fair Food which create alliances between farmworkers and consumers and establishes partnerships among farmers, growers, and retail buyers. We will promote and duplicate these successful programs across the U.S. and boycott establishments that refuse to join.