

Exploitation Without Borders

by Eisha Mason

I am waiting to board the train in San Diego when I notice the Border Patrol agent making his way down our line. He stops by each person who looks “Latino” and asks them to present their legal documents. As the people standing next to me rummage for their identity papers, I stand by, angry, embarrassed, and ashamed. In that moment, I don’t know what to say or do to protest.

My mind suddenly travels back in time. I “remember” what it must have been like during

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slavery for Black people who made it to the North. If they had no papers, they were doomed to live each day in fear. If they were “legalized” by free papers, they still always needed these documents, no matter who they were or how old they were or how long they had lived in their community. These papers were all that stood between them and being “deported” and returned to their slave status.

My mind travels across the ocean to South Africa, to a time not so long ago when the lives of African people in South Africa were controlled by the dreaded Pass Laws that made it compulsory to carry papers at all times. Without a pass, they would be considered “illegal” and could be put in detention. Much like proposed guest worker programs for immigrants, South African Pass Laws Act specified where, when, and for how long an African could remain anywhere in his country.

My mind returns to the present. As the im-

migrant rights movement builds momentum nationwide, African Americans debate about where we should stand on immigration issues - shoulder to shoulder with immigrants, in direct opposition or on the sidelines. I believe that if we look just under the surface, we can see that our Black and Brown fates are deeply intertwined. . . .

As the Black-Brown debate continues, I see that we have both been sources of cheap labor. First, Africans were the slaves required to perpetuate the globalized economics of the 1700s known as the Triangle Trade (slaves, sugar and rum). Today, Latinos are the cheap labor required for maquiladoras south of the border, international agribusiness, and jobs at the lowest rungs of the U.S. economy. Proposals for guest worker programs only perpetuate this model of workers without rights or protection. Black and Brown people have far more in common than we often realize. . . .

Both Black and Brown share common dreams of work with dignity, a better life for our families and our children. Isn’t that why slaves escaped to the North . . . ? Isn’t that why people from other countries risk their lives to reach the U.S. today? We all desire the opportunity to build a life and to be respected and accepted members of the communities and country where we live. . . .

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We must (1) protect the rights and dignity of individuals who have come to the U.S. to work, (2) raise the labor standards and wages on both sides of the Border through reform of interna-

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tional trade policy, (3) protect local economies everywhere, rather than allow them to be overwhelmed by trade agreements favoring international corporations, (4) guarantee that every U.S. worker has the right and the protection to organize, and (5) we must organize!

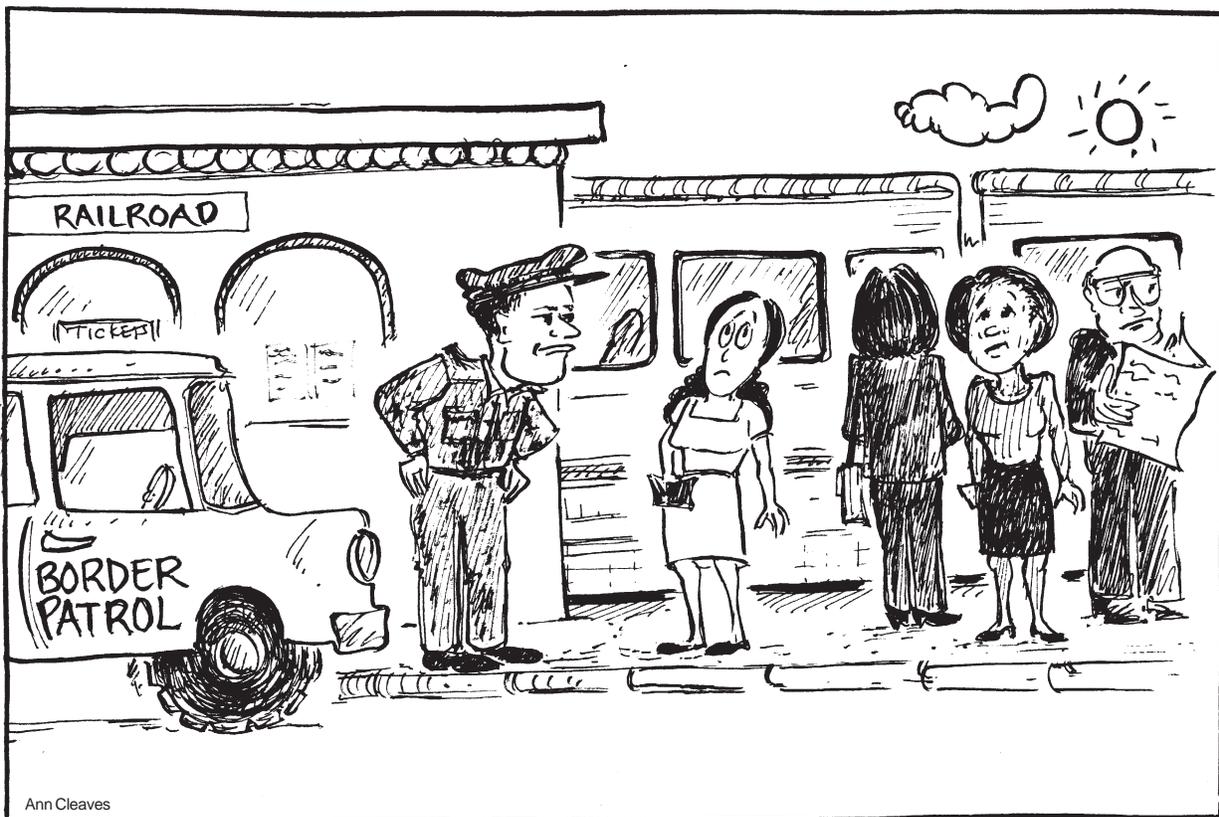
The border patrol officer is gone. Boarding the train in San Diego, I remember the words of

tional trade policy, (3) protect local economies everywhere, rather than allow them to be overwhelmed by trade agreements favoring international corporations,

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "We are caught in an escapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Black faces . . . brown faces . . . human faces. My heart feels what my mind already knows. The people from across the border are not the problem. A system of economic exploitation and racism is the problem. Rather than believing our interests are in conflict, Black and Brown people must stand in unity and work together to transform this system. There is ultimately one movement—the movement for human dignity and opportunity—and I am a part of it.

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