Prospects of Return to El Salvador Pose Difficult Choice

The Trump administration’s decision to rescind Temporary Protected Status for people from El Salvador (as well as Nicaragua, Sudan and Haiti) is confronting migrants with a terrible choice, explained Ramon Cardona in an interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

On January 8, the Trump administration abruptly put an end to Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans now living and working in the US. Many have been in the country for 15 or 20 years, and have established jobs and families. Nearly 200,000 Salvadorans now living in the U.S. may be affected. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Salvadorans, who account for about 60% of TPS recipients, will have until Sept. 9, 2019 to either adjust their status if eligible, make plans to return to El Salvador, or face deportation.

According to many immigrant and human rights groups, those being sent back will face harsh economic conditions and will probably end up unemployed. Some will be physically brutalized and possibly murdered in what has become one of the most violent countries in the world.

The following interview with Ramon Cardona, a former U.S.-based government official of the FMLN in El Salvador, and director of Centro Latino Cuzcatlan in Northern California, is part of a series for Consortiumnews.com on the multiple issues surrounding the battle for truly fair and humane immigration reform. “It’s shocking,” Cardona said. “It’s news that we kind of expected, but now that it’s official, it hurts.”

I spoke to Cardona on January 9th, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: I think it would be good for you to tell us a little bit about your history, and how TPS came to pass and the impact of its sudden spiking by President Trump.

Ramon Cardona: I am an immigrant from El Salvador. I was brought to the United States as a teenager. Currently I run Centro Latino Cuzcatlan, a community-based agency providing immigration services mainly to the Latino community.

I have been involved with the Salvadoran solidarity movement since my university years back in the 1970s. I witnessed the first fight in Congress for protective
status, which we eventually won in 1990 when Congress was made aware that Salvadoran deportees were being systematically labeled as subversives and murdered by the National Guard. Later, in 1997, the Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act was passed which made these people legal permanent residents.

Today, the Salvadoran community receives shocking news when Homeland Security stated that TPS will no longer continue for Salvadorans, who are being given an 18-month reprieve to “put their things in order” and return home.

On average, these people have been living over twenty years in the United States. They have made their homes here, their children were born on U.S. territory. They contribute some $4.5 billion in remittances, which is nearly equal to the national budget of El Salvador last year. What they basically need is for their temporary status to be made permanent.

DB: How many people are affected and could you tell us about some of the people you know who will be directly impacted?

RC: 188,000 Salvadorans are TPS recipients and another 192,000 are U.S.-born children. By September 2019, many thousands of families have to make a horrendous decision, whether to revert back to undocumented status, lose their work permits and be vulnerable to deportation or return to a country rife with violence of every form, rampant unemployment and a dire lack of public services.

How will such a country be able to integrate tens of thousands of Salvadorans?

This decision by Homeland Security is based on the false claim that the conditions that prompted Temporary Protected Status back in 2001 have been overcome and the government is capable of integrating these people back into society. People are coming to us and asking us what they should do now, what is going to happen. Will they be able to obtain permanent legal residence? We are telling people to seek proper legal advice and find out what other immigration laws apply to their situation.

And we are advising them to join the struggle to pressure the U.S. Congress to once and for all recognize these people as productive members of society in the United States. A third of these people are paying on home mortgages. Many are business owners providing jobs in their communities. Every 18 months they have to pay a substantial amount of money to continue getting benefits and have to go through FBI background checks. Anyone who is found to have committed a crime loses all their benefits. It would be to everyone’s benefit for Congress to adopt a solution for permanent residency.

DB: Please take a moment to remind people of the conditions which forced this
massive migration to the United States from El Salvador and the role that the United States played.

RC: The first large migration from El Salvador took place in the late 1970’s when the US-backed military government carried out a program of terror and repression in answer to a revolutionary pro-democracy movement. Military death squads went after union people, university students, teachers, organized public employees. Many people took to the mountains and joined the FMLN and many sought refuge outside El Salvador’s borders. This was in the late seventies and throughout the 1980’s.

A settlement was reached with the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] to address the fact that Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees were soliciting political asylum and seeing only one or two percent approval rates, while others coming from Poland or claiming to be fleeing the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were seeing upwards of 70% approval rates.

DB: This was at a time when priests were being killed, when Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot through the throat while saying mass. We saw nuns beaten, raped and killed. The U.S. government didn’t want people coming to the US and telling this story.

RC: That time was a part of our collective history. Many, many families had members who were murdered or disappeared.

DB: While the U.S. government was perpetrating this violence, we saw the emergence of the sanctuary movement here. The number of people coming across the border was a direct barometer of the intensity of the wars that the U.S. was prosecuting in El Salvador and Guatemala. This is the dirty history that the United States is still trying to cover up.

RC: And then we have to ask how the high levels of generalized violence in El Salvador today got started. It began with mass deportations of youngsters who grew up in Los Angeles, went to jail there, joined gangs there, and then got deported to a hopeless existence in El Salvador. All they could do was join a gang.

Again, this last year, El Salvador was the most violent country in Central America and one of the most violent countries throughout the world. Anyone coming to El Salvador from the United States is an automatic target because it is assumed they have money.

DB: Are you getting any support from members of Congress or the administration who oppose what Homeland Security is doing?
RC: There are two legislative initiatives, one presented by New York Congresswoman Lydia Velazquez, which already has the support of nearly 100 representatives, most of them Democrats. There is also a bipartisan initiative that was started by Carlos Curbelo, a Republican representative from Florida.

But we know that both initiatives are up against very powerful anti-immigrant forces in Congress and we also have a president who ran for office calling Latin American immigrants rapists and criminals.

DB: As regards El Salvador, there is a lot of blood on the hands of U.S. politicians and they have a responsibility now to act. What do you think is the best way for people to get involved now? I imagine you want the support of as many people as possible.

RC: One of our challenges is to reach out to all TPS’s and make sure they get proper legal counsel. When a U.S.-born child becomes 21 years of age, they can seek access to permanent residency. We have to speak directly to people to make sure they understand that there are legal options, even if they have already been charged with deportation orders.

There is also a national campaign that people can link to at www.savetps.com. We are going to Washington, D.C. between the 4th and the 6th of February, not just Salvadorans, but Nicaraguans and Haitians, who also benefit from TPS. And of course we continue to lobby Congress to take responsibility for this situation.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.