

## *Central American Immigrant Leaders Meet to Explore Common Interests*

From February 20-23, more than 30 Central American immigrant leaders from throughout the U.S. gathered in Ledbetter, TX for a meeting sponsored by the Salvadoran American National Network (SANN), the National Guatemalan Congress (CONGUATE), and Enlaces América. Meeting organizers aimed to create a space through which Central American immigrant leaders could get to know one another and begin to develop common objectives and strategies for their work.

The meeting opened with an exercise in which participants shared their personal stories and visions for the future of their communities in the U.S. and in their countries of origin. The themes of dignity, opportunity and organization echoed again and again throughout the discussion. With respect to the future of their communities in the U.S., participants emphasized the importance of legal stability, equal rights, and high levels of community organization with corresponding political power. In relationship to communities in their countries of origin, participants expressed above all the hope that people would someday have dignified work opportunities so that they would not have to emigrate.

Understanding the current political, social, and economic context is a critical first step for defining common objectives. Unfortunately, the current political environment is dominated by discussion of war and the tendency of the United States toward unilateral action. This may have profound repercussions in terms of undermining the authority of international policy forums – particularly the United Nations. The current national security strategy has profound domestic impacts as well; administrative decisions and new legislation continue to erode civil rights. The threat of another terrorist attack is very real, and the Bush administration has harnessed public fear to justify further attacks on immigrants' rights. Opportunities for meaningful, positive immigration policy reform are very limited right now. Because both Democrat and Republican presidential election campaign strategies will include a targeted effort to reach Latino voters, 2004 will be an important year for the Latino immigrant community to press for real changes in immigration policy.

Meanwhile, the domestic and regional economic situation continues to worsen. While the U.S. government takes steps to deal with the deteriorating economic situation at the federal level, it is not supporting state and local governments in their efforts to address the deepening fiscal crises that threaten education and social safety nets around the country. The economic collapse of the countryside in Mexico and Central America continues to provoke mass migration from rural areas to cities and to the U.S. The U.S. will continue to push free trade agreements at a regional level (ie, the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement) and at a hemispheric level (the Free Trade Area of the Americas), though it may have to alter its approach to the FTAA negotiations because of new governments in South America. These agreements will likely result in increased displacement and migration throughout Latin America, as has occurred in Mexico since the 1994 implementation of NAFTA.

After developing this analysis of the current context, participants broke into small groups to define common goals for the group over the next 2-4 years. They focused in particular on state policies, national policies, and policies towards countries of origin. The group defined the following common objectives:

- *Move toward obtaining new levels of immigration protection for the Central American immigrant population;*
- *Increase the number of Latino immigrants, especially Central American immigrants, in higher education (without regard to migration status);*
- *Improve and increase the coverage major media outlets give our communities and our issues of interest;*
- *Formulate a model of civic participation that improves the quality of life in our Central American communities;*
- *Develop a Central American movement that embraces diversity, but is capable of making common cause;*
- *Reverse the trend toward deteriorating civil rights for all immigrants;*
- *Increase Central American immigrant communities' capacity to participate in the formulation and implementation of public policies that benefit the majority of citizens in our countries of origin;*
- *Develop both the institutional capacity and the political space to participate in the decision-making forums regarding international economic policies so that these policies become more just. In the short-term, develop an advocacy agenda around the Central America-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).*
- *Create more opportunities for integration for recently arrived Central American immigrants, which respect and preserve their cultural values.*
- *Contribute to stopping the militaristic tendencies of the current U.S. administration.*

After defining these common objectives, participants turned to a discussion of how to advance them as a group. They agreed that the process initiated at this meeting is not a substitute for any other, nor is it aimed at producing a whole new network with its own agenda. Instead, it should constitute a flexible space through which various Central American organizations maintain communication and seek ways to collaborate around a set of common goals which complement their ongoing local work. Participants in the Ledbetter meeting agreed to create an ad-hoc “steering committee” for the process, which will be composed of three representatives from SANN, three from CONGUATE, and two technical advisors – one from Enlaces América and one from the Center for Community Change.

The meeting represented an important step forward in the development of a national community of Central American immigrants committed to working with one another to advance their common interests. The group has already created an internal electronic communication mechanism, and is exploring the notion of convening again in early spring to bring the perspectives of Central American immigrant communities to bear on the government negotiators working on the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), as well as other trade agreement negotiations impacting the region.