

LEPOCO Statement on the Protection of the Rights of Immigrants and the Links to U.S. Economic and Military Policy: May 2008

Whereas, LEPOCO (the Lehigh-Pocono Committee of Concern) is a peace and justice organization that has been in existence in the Lehigh Valley for over 40 years, working on many of the issues that impact the current crisis for immigrants – human rights, U.S. policy toward Latin America, international economic policy and the impact of war on society; and

Whereas, LEPOCO recognizes that most citizens of our country either emigrated here or have ancestors who were immigrants, and, also recognizes that the Lehigh Valley has an especially varied and rich heritage because of the Irish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Jewish, Lebanese, Syrian, Mexican, and other immigrants, who have settled here; and

Whereas, there are now 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States who have been systematically denied the opportunity enjoyed by past generations of immigrants to become legal permanent residents of this country; and

Whereas, the vast majority of these 12 million undocumented immigrants have emigrated from Mexico, Central America and South America, often out of economic necessity; and

Whereas, there is a large and growing Latino and Hispanic population in the Lehigh Valley that has come to our community to live, work and contribute, and we have used their labor to harvest our crops, build our houses, and work in our factories; and

Whereas, these workers have earned millions of dollars locally (and billions have been earned by immigrants nationally) and have sent much of that back to their families in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the other nations of South and Central America and the Caribbean; and

Whereas, LEPOCO became more aware of the plight of immigrants as we supported the organizing efforts of the United Farm Workers of America in the 1970s, as we learned more about U.S. participation in the Central American wars in the 1980s, and as we have supported the efforts for peace and social justice in the Americas including numerous LEPOCO members visiting Central and South America on human rights delegations, information delegations and in humanitarian assistance efforts; and

Whereas, from the “model villages” in Vietnam to the 2 million external refugees from the Iraq war, we have seen how war disrupts societies and forces the disruptive movement of people across borders, and we witnessed that flow of refugees from Central America during the wars of the 1980s leading to the humanitarian response of the sanctuary movement locally and nationally; and

Whereas, we believe the immigration policies of the United States have, unfortunately, resulted in further militarization of our society, especially on our southern border where a multibillion dollar wall and security fence is under construction, dividing communities and causing severe environmental damage, and troops and police patrols are treating those trying to enter the United States from the South as the enemy, and

Whereas, we recognize that the influx of immigrants from the nations of Central and South America is all too often the result of the economic policies of the United States, and those policies have had an increasingly negative impact following the implementation of free trade agreements starting with NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994, and

Whereas, the race-to-the-bottom search for cheap labor, whether by exporting jobs to *maquiladoras* in Central America or by importing immigrant labor to work for less than a living wage, must be reversed, and

Whereas, corporate agriculture, union busting businesses, and less than scrupulous developers may profit from the suppressed wages that result from an insecure environment for immigrants and workers, only our efforts to protect the rights of all workers, immigrant or not, here and abroad, with a “lift all boats” policy, will improve the lives of all workers in the U.S. and in Latin America, encourage people to build fruitful and secure lives in their home communities and protect the environment against the ravages of the free trade model, and

Whereas, we recognize that the current policies of the federal government and some local law enforcement agencies have criminalized undocumented immigrants and are destructive to families, our community and our economy, therefore

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO recognizes the basic human rights and dignity of every human being regardless of their documentation status, and supports government, organization and personal efforts to avoid reference to any person as "illegal" or "alien," and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO believes all government communications and forms should be available in Spanish or whatever language a resident may require to conduct personal or corporate business, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will advocate for a clearly defined and reasonably achievable route to permanent status for all immigrants, and for immigration laws that fairly allow applicants the opportunity to obtain permanent status, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO recommends that local government agencies not inquire about immigration status to provide resident services, and not unilaterally attempt to enforce federal immigration law, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO encourages Lehigh Valley municipalities to join the cities in the United States that have declared themselves "sanctuary cities," and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will continue to work for a de-militarization of U.S. policy toward immigrants and our neighbors to the south, whether that be by closing the U.S. Army School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation or WHINSEC), or by ending military aid to the government of Colombia that has been used to repress advocates for human rights, or by ending the militarization of our southern border, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO supports the rights of immigrants to claim citizenship without paying the bribe of military service, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will continue to support economic policies that look for a bottom line, not just of profits for corporations, but also of benefits for workers, small farmers, and the environment on both sides of our border, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will stand in solidarity with peace and justice organizations in Latin America when we are able, and will, as we are able, collaborate with U.S. groups focusing on the rights of immigrants and the root causes of immigration like Witness for Peace and the May 1st Coalition, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation as they work to resist xenophobic, racist, scapegoating reactions to immigrants, and

Be it resolved, that because no one should be faced with armed raids by government agents in their homes or their workplaces simply due to their lack of documents, LEPOCO will seek creative ways to respond with compassion and alarm when local immigrant families suffer the injustices of such raids, often followed by imprisonment and deportation, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO believes that every human being has the protection afforded by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (unanimously adopted December 10, 1948) such that "everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him (her)" (Article 10), and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will continue its educational work on the roots of migration and immigrant rights through educational programs, study groups, solidarity delegations, and

Be it resolved, that this statement will be published in the LEPOCO Newsletter, will be delivered in person (along with resolutions adopted by municipalities that have declared themselves to be sanctuary cities) to the governing bodies of the Lehigh Valley's three cities and two counties, and will be mailed to other local, state and federal officials, local immigrant rights groups, and community groups like CUNA and CACLV, and

Be it resolved, that LEPOCO will approach the issue of immigration in the spirit of our statement of purpose, as follows, "LEPOCO members share a vision that we can build a sane and more just world. Gathering strength from our diversity, we work together and as individuals for nonviolent change, starting in our own community."

Approved by the LEPOCO Action Meeting of May 12, 2008.