

THE *BRACERO* PROGRAM (1942-1964) A CRITICAL APPRAISAL



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ABSTRACT. Because of its dimension and duration, the *Bracero* Program (1942-1964) has been perhaps the most relevant example worldwide of a Temporary Workers Program. However, it has been widely criticized and not thoroughly studied. This article uses documents from the time to reappraise the pros and cons of the *Bracero* Program and reformulates the possibility of a future program of temporary workers for Mexico and the United States.

KEYWORDS: Bracero Program, Migration, Temporary Workers, Mexico, United States.



INTRODUCTION

The discussion about the relevance of a bilateral agreement to develop a new program for migrant workers makes it essential to look back on the *Bracero* Program. Although it is an old topic, it still contains rectifiable mistakes and wise examples. The *Bracero* Program has ultimately been the largest and most far-reaching and consistent effort to think and reflect on this topic and the problem of temporary contracts for migrant workers.

The immediate background of the *Bracero* Program was the labor-recruiting system known as *enganche* (“hooking”) and the mass deportations from the 1920s and 1930s. Both modes of recruiting and managing migrant labor were dreadful. The *enganche* system, a private business of the recruiting agencies, was a model of extreme exploitation that left recruitment, transportation, salaries, internal management of labor camps and work loads in private hands. The consequences of this system were unfair contracts, eternal indebtedness, miserable life conditions, child labor, private police and recruitment agencies (Durand, 1993, 1994).

Mass deportations (1921, 1929-1933 and 1939) were a selective response to times of crisis and labor market contraction in the United States. Out of dozens of other immigrant groups, Mexican workers were the only ones who were repeatedly mass deported. No other community of immigrants was subject to such policies. Furthermore, a program of selective deportation at a regional level was developed which tried to deport Mexicans working in the industry, particularly in the Northern states, with the purpose of redirecting migratory flow to agricultural activities in the Southwest (Taylor, 1930; McBride, 1963; Carreras, 1974). Mass deportation made evident, on one hand, that it is demand that imposes migratory flow and, on the other, that when there is no work, the stock and flow decrease drastically through official deportation, voluntary return or difficulties to cross the border. In view of the background history of mass deportation and the preponderance of the *enganche* system, the *Bracero* Program represented a significant change.

THE FIRST *BRACERO* AGREEMENTS

An appraisal of the *Bracero* Program compels us to go back to the earliest history. The first known bilateral agreement is almost a century old. In 1909, President Porfirio Díaz, in the last year of his term, and William H. Taft, President of the United States in the first year of his term, signed an agreement for the exportation of 1000 workers for the sugar beet fields, an industry considered a priority for the United States’ government, given the lack of adequate weather for sugar cane production. According to Vargas y Campos (1964), these first *braceros* left to the South of California, while Daniel Casarrubias (1956) states that they were



hired to work in the sugar beet fields in Colorado and Nebraska, and that workers were recruited from Northern Mexican communities.

A year later, instead of advocating *bracero* recruitment as Díaz did, Francisco Indalecio Madero, in his book, *La sucesión presidencial* (1911), called attention to the dreadful living and work conditions of migrants: “The situation of Mexican workers is so precarious that, notwithstanding the humiliation they endure beyond the Rio Bravo, every year thousands of our compatriots emigrate to the neighboring Republic-- the truth being that their fate there is less miserable than in their homeland”.

During the revolutionary period, no *bracero* agreements were necessary; there was nobody to sign them and, furthermore, they were not required. Dozens of people crossed the Rio Bravo every day: some remained a few days in Fort Bliss as refugees and then looked for the way to be “hooked” to get work in the railways, mines, foundries or crops (Durand and Arias, 2005). Nonetheless, in 1917 the political, economic and labor scenario in the United States underwent a complete change. Mexico’s neighboring country entered World War I and hundred thousand of males of working age abandoned their jobs to fight in the front lines.

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The Cosmopolitan, Kansas City Weekly, 1917.

On February 5, 1917 the migratory law known as the Burnett law was enacted in the United States, making immigrant entrance conditional to the payment of 8 dollars and to being literate in the case of those over 16 years of age. This law, as others of a general nature, solved some problems but created others. The basic idea was an attempt to stop the flow of illiterate immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, fleeing from World War I. However, this affected Mexican mi-



grant workers, who usually could not fulfill the literacy requirement and much less pay the 8-dollar fee. The result was the systematic deportation of Mexican workers and more difficulties to cross the border legally (Cardoso, 1980; Alanís, 1999). This law was passed at a terrible critical moment, just before the entry of the United States into World War I on April 2, 1917 and when a lack of manpower was evidenced, as well as a greater demand for it.

Three months after the enactment of the law and a month after war was declared, an exception was passed on May 1917 for those who had been temporary workers and had worked exclusively in the agricultural sector—in other word, Mexicans. This is how laws, regulations and exceptions constructed a flow of Mexican immigrants—a flow of temporary labor mainly in the agricultural sector. This model was later improved and readjusted with the *Bracero* Program.

In any case, it took months to implement legal amendments. In the meantime, mass importation of labor became more difficult, not only in agriculture, but in mining, railways and industries as well. The War displaced hundred thousands of people who had to join the different branches of the armed forces but who, at the same time, required more food, minerals, products and weapons. This is why American employers pressured the government to develop programs for the recruitment of Mexican laborers. Needs were so urgent that those in charge of hooking preferred migrants with families to integrate the whole family into field labor. Employers were not the only ones interested in Mexican migration, but also army recruiters who urged and, when necessary, demanded that workers become naturalized American citizens. In 1918 approximately 60,000 Mexicans had been enlisted and sent to the front lines. They were Mexican by birth or ancestry and represented the largest group of foreigners living in the United States which participated in the War (Alanís, 1999).

Mandatory or voluntary recruiting by the armed forces and pressures for Mexicans to become naturalized citizens in exchange for work were such that a mass exodus back to Mexico was generated. Mexicans were experienced at this: they had fled the Revolution, had become immigrants, and now they returned to Mexico to escape recruitment in World War I. At the time, naturalization amounted to becoming cannon fodder. According to Alanís (1999), approximately 70,000 Mexicans returned between 1917 and 1918. Some fled in fear of recruitment, while others returned to their hometowns once the armed conflict in Mexico was over.

As was to be expected, recruitment of Mexican workers in the border led to a series of contrary reactions by the new Mexican political class in its attempt to discourage the process. As a matter of fact, this is when the migratory policy of the time was born, with a clearly dissuasive nature that would last until the end of the 1930s (Durand, 2005). Since preventing the exit flow was not very practical, if not impossible, federal authorities “did all they could so their compatriots would suffer the least possible during their stay abroad” (Alanís, 1999:73).



During those years, consuls, border governors and majors from neighboring cities from both countries met several times to negotiate. But they did not often agree with each other nor with the federal government. Governors discouraged migration, since Mexico required manpower for its reconstruction after the Revolution, while consuls felt the pressure of different agents and officials of the United States' Government who demanded favorable conditions for *bracero* immigration.

Alanís (1999) carried out an in-depth study of the era and states that the *Bracero* Program did not actually require an agreement between the executive powers from both countries as, in practical terms, a temporary migration program had been established by consuls and border officials. Nonetheless, the figures given by this author are doubtful. According to him, around 70,000 Mexicans came back between 1917 and 1918, and approximately 72,000 *braceros* were hired those years. If we consider these figures to be accurate, the only thing that seems to have happened is that the quota of people who returned to the United States was the same as the one of those who had fled the country.

When talking about those years, Casarrubias (1956) remarks that: "We do not have the figure of compatriots that left to work as *braceros*, since no formal agreement was involved nor were there statistics of any kind". Vargas y Campos (1964) points out in turn that: "[...] the United States had to pass legislative measures to facilitate the entrance of Mexican workers, because their fields had been abandoned with the increase in the quantity of United States troops. Our workers had a favorable response to the call to work in their fields and did so in great numbers". The same author indicates that, according to American registries, 17,689 legal and 812 illegal migrants left to the United States in 1917, and that the figure of legal immigrants increased to 18,524 in 1918, surpassed by the number of illegal immigrants, which totaled 25,515.

From our perspective, three fundamental elements are lacking for a proper discussion of the *Bracero* Program. Firstly, the existence of a bilateral "agreement" or "deal" between the governments of both countries. Secondly, the "program" should have had a certain degree of continuity, and not just be a situational response. In any case, the accord between Díaz and Taft in 1909 very well could have been the "first" *bracero* agreement. Thirdly, there should have been certain conditions for there to be a bilateral agreement, a very unlike situation in 1917 when the Constituent Congress was precisely legislating basic labor principles and was pointing to a series of limitations for contracts drawn by foreigners and concerning departure of Mexicans. On the other hand, Carranza's government had numerous internal problems to solve and faced a quite unstable political situation.

Consuls, municipal presidents and governors had a different way of responding to the pressure exerted by the Americans in relation to applications for labor. The study by Alanís shows precisely these contradictions and how each local official established conditions according to his whim. There were meetings and agreements between consuls, but never a bilateral negotiation between both govern-



ments and much less a signed deal. During this period and for different reasons, the Mexican Revolution and World War I were the driving force behind migration between Mexico and the United States. The expulsion and attraction factors acted jointly during those years to give Mexican migration a definite thrust.

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE *BRACERO* PROGRAM

There are many studies, comment, evaluations, critiques and judgments about the *Bracero* Program. Some were done during the Program itself, such as the book by Ernesto Galarza (1964) and those included in an anthology by Durand (2007). According to Carey McWilliams (1954), a large part of the benefits obtained by Mexicans throughout the first state of negotiations of the Program was due precisely to the intervention and counseling of two academicians from the time: Manuel Gamio and Ernesto Galarza. Later works would delve deeply into parallel topics, such as those by Julián Samora (1971), who studied wetbacks; Richard Craig (1971), who studied the link between economic power groups and migratory policies, or Kity Calavita, who studied the legal aspects of the topic.

Be it as it may, any appraisal requires formulating and discussing a topic objectively, even at the expense of certain risks and simplification of arguments. For many authors, including critics such as Carey McWilliams and Galarza, the *Bracero* Program had remarkable advantages, particularly when compared to the previous *enganche* situation and the distressing scenario of the wetbacks, who enjoyed no protection, not even on paper. As a matter of fact, this would be the first distinguishing attribute of the *Bracero* program: its disassociation from the previous model.

1. *A radical change in the migratory pattern.* The first asset of the *Bracero* Program was doing away with the *enganche* system. Recruitment stopped being a private business and went on to depend on official programs of a bilateral nature. Unilateral recruitment was chosen a pair of times, but even then it was officially controlled by the United States' Government (García Téllez, 1995; de Alba, 1954; Casarrubias, 1956). The *Bracero* Program inaugurated a period in the history of migration between Mexico and the United States, radically transforming the migratory pattern which turned from a long-standing known process of dubious legality into a legal, male process of rural origin, oriented to agricultural work.

2. *The bilateral agreement acknowledged the existence of a binational labor market.* The second virtue of the agreement was the explicit acknowledgement by the United States that there was a binational labor market. It was not necessary to look for workers in other countries or continents, as flow of workers between Mexico and the United States had been there for decades. Unlike the majority of American migratory laws which are of general application, the *Bracero* Program was a bilateral agreement, originally promoted by the United States and supported by the mutual interests of both parties. The Program developed during a war, but



it was so successful and beneficial that it was extended twenty years more for American farmers.

Mexico has always advocated a situation of exception with regards to American migratory policies, which tend to be of general application. Little has been achieved bilaterally since the end of the *Bracero* Program, in spite of historic and neighboring arguments. However, Mexican nationals and the community of Mexican origin in the United States have *de facto* been making a place of their own in economics, politics and culture.

3. *Temporary migration, the ideal migration.* The third advantage of the *Bracero* Program was that it was temporary. Workers went and came back. This is a fundamental aspect, because it is an element of full agreement between the governments of Mexico and the United States which still today agree that temporary legal migration is one of the best options. The old saying, “there is nothing more definite than a temporary worker” (Martin and Teitelbaum, 2002) is relevant to the European situation and not to the Mexican one, as stated by the cited authors. Nor is it the case of the agreement between Mexico and Canada for temporary workers, where coming back is a generalized fact. Furthermore, the joint experience of the migratory process between Mexico and the United States, concerning both legal and illegal workers, seems to point out to a clear preference for temporary migration. According to data from the Mexican Migration Project, more than 56% of the migrants from all times have left to work to the United States just once, while an additional 16% have just made two trips (Mexican Migration Project, 2006, 107 communities).

4. *A long-lasting project.* The *Bracero* Program lasted 22 years. It had its ups and downs, although it cannot be said that a bilateral agreement that worked for two decades and mobilized about 5 million workers was a failure. The duration of the Program is the best argument for appraisal. There were evidently countless problems, but this is normal in an agreement of this nature, with such duration and magnitude.

Those in charge of migratory policies at the time had resources and enough capacity to correct severe shortcomings and overcome obstacles that seemed practically insurmountable. The Program worked, in spite of the fact that Mexico applied an explicit veto to the state of Texas for many years because of its discriminatory practices. The veto was useless, however, because Texans continued to hire wetbacks, but there was remarkable progress concerning racism and discrimination. The negotiation capacity of the Mexican government of the time does not cease to be amazing. It was not in vain that it had just expropriated oil and deeply embarked on the Agrarian Reform, which affected American properties.

When neither of the parties was able to reach an agreement in 1954, and the Program was unilaterally cancelled, Mexico had to accept that the aim of preventing Mexicans from leaving by force was inadmissible and the United States had to accept that it was not convenient to continue a unilateral *bracero* program. This operation, known as “*secado de mojados*” (drying of wetbacks), was nothing



but a hasty amnesty and a situational means of pressure which did not last long. Even after Wetback Operation, when more than a million illegal Mexicans were deported, the Mexican government knew how to mend relations and renegotiate the Program. With all these pressures, Mexico and its workers evidently lost positions, even if the agreement was extended ten years more.

5. *A limited and flexible program.* It should be remembered that this was a limited program. It attempted to solve the shortage of manpower in a specific domain of the labor market: agriculture. At the same time, however, the Program had enough flexibility to implement the short-term Railway Program (1943-1945), because the time and needs of labor so required it. There was even a similar program to work in the mines (Driscoll, 1985; Jones, 1946). In other words, the *Bracero* Program was limited but, at the same time, it was used creatively, according to the needs of the moment. The Railway Program recruited 130,000 workers between 1943 and 1946. This flexibility was also temporarily evident because of the extension of the program for 22 years and not only during the War years.

The aforementioned limitation affected workers and their social origins, because it evidently implies virtues and defects. It must be acknowledged, however, that the “beneficiaries” of the programs were the field workers, who ultimately were the neediest in Mexico. With the Program, they had access to greater economic resources, resources which they would have never acquired working in Mexico.

6. *Improvement of labor and salary conditions.* The *Bracero* Program was a significant advance regarding the living and working conditions of migrant workers. Agreements were signed and provisions were made to guarantee minimal conditions of legality, recruitment, labor stability, social security, housing, transportation and minimum wage. The experience of the *Bracero* Program was later discussed in conferences and recalled in international agreements about rights of migrant workers.

We know daily reality was no panacea. Migrant work is, by definition, the hardest, most exhausting and worst paid in the labor scale. Living conditions for *braceros* were quite pitiable and people at times had to live in tents. However, they did not have to pay rent, allowing them to save this amount of money, which always constitutes a high percentage of a salary. Nowadays, in San Diego County, there are Mexican workers living in caves and shacks in neighboring hills. Conditions have seemingly not changed or, more to the point, they seem to have worsened. At least during the *bracero* era, there was a possibility to reach an agreement, ask for changes, file a complaint and look for solutions.

7. *An efficient bureaucratic machine.* The Program repeatedly proved to be an efficient machine. Between 1954 and 1960 it mobilized an average of 350,000 workers a year. Moreover, in July 1954, employers from the state of Texas, used to recruiting wetbacks, surprisingly and with the purpose of boycotting the Program, asked for 60,000 *braceros* to be hired in 15 days. The bureaucracy from both counties was set in motion. The recruitment center in Monterrey got to the point



of hiring 4,000 *braceros* every day. This ultimately forced Texan employers to be part of the *Bracero* Program (Salinas, 1955:21).

This appraisal evidently has a counterpart. In any case, bureaucracy in both countries had been able to work jointly, with permanently open communication channels, specializing at the end in mobile population management.

8. *An affordable program.* The Program implied a series of expenses for both governments and for employers. However, in spite of complaints and a reluctance to grant certain benefits, no enterprise went bankrupt, nor was there a price escalation in agricultural products. Different reports from the time show that the Program eventually overcame problems and that employers began to appreciate its advantages, decidedly cooperating with the Program (Jones, 1946; Fernández del Campo, 1946; De Alba, 1954; Salinas, 1955; García Téllez, 1955). The economic, social and political costs involved in the lack of a bilateral program are ultimately much higher.

The *Bracero* Program also had various negative consequences, even if not all them can be credited to the Program itself.

1. *Larger supply than official demand of braceros.* A negative consequence was the parallel movement of illegal workers, which achieved similar numbers. It has been estimated that almost 5 million illegal workers entered the United States during the 22 years the *Bracero* Program lasted. The Program obviously did not fully satisfy the demand and the solution was not easy for either of the countries. In the case of Mexico, it was complicated in political terms to duplicate the number of *braceros*, and the United States experienced similar difficulties. Both governments were actually fully aware of the problem, but there was little they could do about it. The only exception to this was the mass deportation achieved with Operation Wetback, which led to a significant recruitment increase the following years.

Each of the parties blamed the other for this problem. It was said that Mexico needed to control the number of illegal workers leaving the country, while the United States had to punish those who recruited undocumented workers. According to Calavita (1982), migratory policy of the United States always encouraged illegal traffic both formally and informally. There 1949 agreement stated that undocumented workers in the United States were to have “precedence” and have their status legalized, according to the “wetback drying” system. The border patrol would drive illegal migrants to the border and, upon symbolically stepping on the Mexican side, the migrants would return to the United States, to be legally accepted (Galarza, 1864; Calavita, 1982). Later, in 1948, when Mexico refused to send *braceros* to Texas because the agreed conditions were not being respected, the border was opened five days in October, allowing entry to all those who wanted to work.

In 1952 the McCarran-Walter Act was passed, according to which it was illegal to “harbor, transport, or conceal illegal entrants, or directly or indirectly induce their entry into the US”. Nonetheless, the “Texas Proviso” amendment, a result of pres-



sure from farmers, excluded employers (Calavita, 1982). This amendment was still in force in 1986, when the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) made it illegal, on paper, for employers to hire undocumented immigrants. There has never been actually any political will by the United States to punish employers. This amounts to promoting and facilitating undocumented migration.

2. *Bilateral agreement or workers labor agreement.* We should also note the belligerency by both countries and the true disposition of the agreement, which was between employers and employees. Every year a type of “collective labor agreement” was negotiated and the interested parties, naturally, did not reach any agreement. Mexico threatened with a “strike”, that is, refusing to send workers under those conditions, while the United States would hire workers unilaterally or legalize undocumented migrants to use them as strikebreakers. These tensions are in contrast with the easiness with which an agreement was reached in 1942, when the Program began. The haggling on both parts and the absence of reasonable mid- and long-terms agreements were undoubtedly a recurring problem in yearly bilateral negotiations.

There were four stages in this process. During the first and second years (1942-1943), the Farm Security Administration was in charge, having in previous years stood out for its unconditional support to farm workers and for advocating a series of improvements for *braceros*, particularly concerning housing and camps. However, in July 1943 management was handed over to the War Food Administration (McWilliams, 1949) and afterward to the Labor Office (Jones, 1946). Finally, in 1954, with the renegotiation of the agreement, the government of the United States stopped recruiting and delegated this activity to private recruiters who, by means of associations, would ask for groups of *braceros*. According to Casarrubias (1956), the last change proved to be radical and left the workers in a worse situation, as they now had to negotiate directly with the employers, with the government merely acting as supervisor.

3. *Excessive expenses, paperwork and bureaucracy.* For the Program to work, excessive bureaucracy was required on both sides of the border. Employers complained of excessive expenses and paperwork when previously labor hands had reached their destiny at no cost for employers, with the only problem being that workers were undocumented (de Alba, 1954). When the program started out in 1945, 2,400 people were required in the United States to carry out activities related to the Program, with an expense of several tens of millions dollars (Jones, 1946).

In Mexico, management of the Program generated expenses plus corruption and traffic of influences (Madrado, 1945; Salinas, 1954; Martínez, 1948). This problem was never solved and is still today the main threat to any program that may be implemented in the future. Corruption costs were obviously paid by migrants as bribes, donations or favors.

An additional problem was the patronizing regulation the Mexican government imposed on *braceros*, which consisted in forcing them to save 10% of their



salaries in Wells Fargo and the Union Trust Company in San Francisco, so this money would be in turn transferred to the National Bank of Agricultural Credit of Mexico. This agreement was in effect from 1943 to 1949. According to Jones, in 1943, 11.6 million dollars were collected and 2.6 million were given back. In 1944, 18.4 million dollars had been collected in 112,800 personal accounts, and only 10.7 millions had been paid back (Jones, 1946:22). As is widely known, the total savings amount was never given back, the debt persists and there are nowadays actions by former *braceros* demanding their savings back, after fifty years.

On the other hand, the bureaucracy involved had its own conflicts, discrepancies, affiliations and phobias. In Mexico, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted negotiations bilaterally, the Ministry of the Interior conducted negotiations domestically with entities and governors, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security was in charge of the recruitment and the process itself. Other agencies participated too. National Railways transported *braceros*, the Ministry of Health was in charge of health checkups, and the army made sure the recruited workers had their military ID's in order. In the United States, conflicts arose among several government agencies. In alliance with the unions, the Department of Labor sabotaged the *Bracero* Program in different ways, whereas the Immigration and Naturalization Service paradoxically became a staunch defender of the Program, as did the Department of Agriculture, which supported farmers who required workers (Calavita, 1992). The differences and schemes to trip others among government agencies in both countries added to a series of problems in the management of the Program.

4. *Problems in recruitment centers.* Recruitment centers constituted another source of bilateral differences and local problems. For Mexico, the best option for recruitment was within the country, in areas where the migrant population concentrated and not in the border, as the Americans proposed and employers insisted on to save on transportation costs. Mexico had already had a disastrous experience with border recruitment in the *enganche* houses. On the other hand, border recruitment encouraged undocumented migration and promoted the migration of the scanty population who lived in the border. Recruitment was changed from Mexico City to Irapuato and Tlaquepaque, followed by Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Tampico and Aguascalientes, although workers were also recruited in Hermosillo, Monterrey and finally Empalme, in the state of Sonora. In later years, an agreement was reached to establish a recruitment center in Mexico, although it was afterwards cancelled. The Mexican government lost control in time over this situation and gradually gave in to the pressure exerted by the United States (Madrado, 1945; Jones, 1946; Salinas, 1954; Vargas and Campos, 1964).

In any case, regardless of where recruitment took place, the confluence of thousands of people who were waiting to be hired resulted in multiple logistic problems, not adequately solved by the Mexican government. According to Pedro de Alba, recruitment centers were "one of the most heartbreaking performances" he had ever witnessed (1954). It has been said that something likewise happened



in Empalme, Sonora, with the mass recruitment of *braceros* and the chronic shortage of basic services.

5. *Impact on the labor market in both countries.* Mass recruitment of temporary workers necessarily affected the labor market in both countries. In Mexico, some governors, as the one from Guanajuato, complained of lack of labor force in the state's entities, putting the blame on the *Bracero* Program (Durand, 1994). In the United States it was the opposite: unions repeatedly complained that excess of cheap labor displaced domestic workers, decreased wages and, to top it off, workers were used in some cases as strikebreakers (Driscoll, 1983; Calavita, 1992).

Nonetheless, there were serious long-term consequences. Farm work was definitely disassociated from industrial work in the United States. According to McWilliams (1949), the *Bracero* Program allegedly would not have a negative impact on wages, although it did so in practical terms, given the lack of competence and reference between industrial and farm work. Once a task became an essential part of the migrant labor market, the process was difficult to revert, leading to the permanent dependence of the American agricultural sector on Mexican labor (Galarza, 1956; Durand and Massey, 2005).

Mexico, in turn, witnessed labor fiction. *Braceros* were to be a temporary relief for unemployment. However, in practice, "The immediate consequence [...] of *braceros* further aggravated existing underoccupation by having disguised it...". Indeed, throughout the 20th century, Mexico depended on the *bracero* process for unemployment and underemployment relief, although, as Vargas y Campos (1964) has aptly put it, this only "masked" the phenomenon and made it worse by not looking for effective solutions.

6. *Subordination of the worker to the contract.* The *Bracero* Program has been recurrently criticized because of the inexorable connection there was between workers and employers. The *bracero* was recruited to work in a certain place or farm, and once there, he could not move elsewhere, even if there was not enough work or if he considered living condition were inadequate. It has been said that this gave the Program a touch of semi-slavery. The worker was subjected to conditions established by the employer and, because of temporary jobs and labor distribution, it was practically impossible for Mexican and American officials to gain control of the situation.

Contract subordination was a restriction undocumented workers paradoxically did not have, nor were they bound to a specific place. Although employers used other means of subordination and exploitation, the worker was ultimately free to sell his labor skills elsewhere. This topic is still under theoretical discussion today in the case of temporary workers in Canada (Basok, 2003). Recruited migrant workers are not part of the process of liberation of labor that is characteristic of capitalism. By being bound to an employer, conditions are similar to those of feudalism. The relation of dependence and submission worsens when the



employer is “kind enough” to legalize that status of temporary workers through recommendation.

7. *Recurring violations to the contract.* Another recurring topic was the breach of contracts by employers and the problems this implied in bilateral negotiations. The most serious infringements were seen in the sugar beet fields, as well as in the state of Texas. Sugar beet growing gave *braceros* free time to look for other jobs. On the other hand, because of bureaucratic reasons, companies left the last weeks’ pending in payment, when workers had to leave before winter. In Texas, besides discrimination problems, minimum wages were adjusted urgently with pressure from the American government to rates agreed on in the Program and to those paid elsewhere.

Another number of recurring problems were related to discounts applied by employers to housing, food, tools, loans, etc. Ernesto Galarza (1964) demonstrates irrefutably how workers were systematically cheated out of their money. This problem worsened with piecework jobs, which sometimes did not cover the minimum established in the agreement, even if the migrant worked intensely for eight hours.

Arbitrary acts of this nature reached incredible limits. In 1953, one of the articles in the agreement established: “It is hereby declared that the employer has no right to pay on the worker’s account the value of wire used to tie carrots and other agricultural products, as is customary in some areas of California” (Casarrubias, 1956).

This has been a crucial issue in any program for temporary workers. The Mexican Government, were it to reach an agreement, would have to attain decent conditions for its workers, due to pressure from the *braceros* themselves, political parties, congress and society. The American government in turn would attempt to obtain the best conditions possible for employers, paying as little as possible and transferring all possible costs to workers (transportation, housing, paperwork).

In any case, there are two very difficult issues to solve which are part of the national idiosyncrasy of each country. In Mexico, corruption is a cancer wasting away the political system and the social framework. *Bracero* contracts were always stained with high-, middle- and low-level corruption, such as seen today with the H2A and H2B visas for temporary workers. And the problem worsens because, in addition to corruption, impunity reigns. In the United States, the marked tendency of labor overexploitation has unavoidably been part of the way of being of employers. The protestant spirit of United States capitalism is expressed in the imposition of an intense working rhythm, control of times and movements, transference of all possible costs to the worker (transportation, housing, insurance) and establishing the lowest wage level possible, as low as the *bracero* will tolerate it.

THE *BRACERO* PROGRAM 50 YEARS LATER

History of migration from Mexico to the United States has taught us that in the binational labor market, agreements not formally made become *de facto* agreements. In other words, employers will recruit the undocumented workers they need and the government will take charge of banishing surplus labor. An effective economy justifies the impunity enjoyed by employers and the work done by politicians explains persecution of “illegal” workers to the public opinion, the media and voters.

The *de facto* way has proved to be the most feasible one, since all parties remain paradoxically content, although no one can say it aloud. This *de facto* situation emerged when there were no agreements. Save for a relatively small number of *braceros* whose situation was legalized, Mexican workers continued to cross the border surreptitiously and employers continued hiring them. For 22 years, a period which included the undocumented stage, the Mexican government washed its hands and applied what it called “the policy of no policies” (Durand, 2005). The United States government in turn claimed that it had the border under control. It indeed let through those who were necessary to pick crops, collect the garbage, dirty dishes, dirty bed sheets, while deporting surplus labor every day.

Employers did not care in the least if their workers were undocumented or “papered”. What they were interested in was whether they were cheap, efficient and disposable. As long as they were so, everything was well, even for Mexican migrant workers who at the time were able to cross the border for 200 dollars or by night incursions to earn a few dollars, which comparatively amounted to much.

Any program for temporary workers will imply countless complications and expenses. It will also confront thousands of detractors from different factions and generate expenses, corruption, trouble and disagreements. If we consider, however, that it is an issue between employers and employees, conflicts become a daily element in the class struggle and we should get used to the idea that they will be considered normal in a globalized world. Poor countries, with an excess of labor, are constituted by immigrants while rich countries represent the interests of their entrepreneurs.

Any agreement to be signed in the future must take into account rights and wrongs from the past: specifically from the *Bracero* Program. The country of origin must start with its achievements, such as bilateral negotiation, legality, work contracts, worker selection and involved communities. The recipient country must consider selection of activities and places of destination, establish minimum wages, agreements between areas and similar pay to those that native workers receive for equivalent jobs, along with medical insurance, unemployment insurance during the recruitment period, refund of transportation expenses, decent housing, and the right to organize and be represented. Finally, both governments should include supervision and official control.

A program of this nature is necessary because existing chaos leads to overexploitation of migrant labor, encouraging people-smuggling. Furthermore, the



surreptitious crossing of the border has become a nightmare for migrants who risk their lives and all their saving. In addition, the border is no longer a manageable problem and has become a national security issue. The situation has polarized and led both countries to extreme positions in their perspective and stances. It is unacceptable to take the death of hundred and thousand of migrants for granted when attempts are made to cross the border. It is likewise unacceptable to have the border of the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world violated with utmost easiness.

In response to this extremely urgent situation, it is necessary to negotiate a bilateral agreement, like during World Wars I and II, because the majority of those who have entered the United States have historically been Mexicans and because ultimately no other country has the special historic and neighboring characteristics that Mexico has had.

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