

Exploitation or Fair Treatment: Migrant Agricultural Workers in North America

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One View of Migration

Migration can be understood as a process balancing the need for income among families living in regions with an insufficient supply of jobs, with the need for a labour force in regions with a scarcity of workers. In this view, easy circulation of mobile labouring men and women benefits both workers and employers. In some economic sectors and family economies, seasonal labour is preferred, in others, long-term employment. Agriculture, in particular, has seasonal peaks of labour demand and elsewhere family members are seasonally un- or underemployed.

The North American Migrants and the Search for Employment

In North America, the Mexican economy – i.e. both the state and the elites that may invest in the economy or fail to do so – has not succeeded in developing jobs adequate to the (growing) population. In contrast, both the United States and Canada need additional workers, whether seasonally, multi-annually, or permanently. In recent decades, the lack of income-providing opportunities as well as oppression from right-wing, U.S.-government-supported dictatorships beyond Mexico's southern border have also led to northward labour and refugee migrations. Thus Mexico, the emigration country, has become a transit country.

Since refugees, in general, have to earn their living, they often enter labour markets parallel to labour migrants. However, because their departure was unwilling, unplanned, and unprepared, they often come with less social capital than voluntary migrants, who consider departure in the frame of economic constraints, and who rely on established information flows, familial or friendship networks – usually gendered, and on remittances from earlier migrants to finance the trip.

For more than a century, migrants from Mexico and, recently, from other Latin American economies have sought seasonal agricultural or railroad, mining, and industrial labour in the United States and Canada. Less well known, Guatemalan migrants cross Mexico's southern border to find jobs in the southern states. Depending on legal frames, societal practices, and employer attitudes such migrants may be exploited may be protected by legislation and social security provisions or may move in a, at least partially, mutualist border economy. Options for choice and frames of exploitation also depend on traditional societal hierarchies. Drache, in *Borders Matter* notes that the inequality index of the three North American societies, i.e. the ratio of income of the top 10 % of population to bottom 10 % in 2000 stood at 8.5 for Canada, 16.6 for the United States of America, and 32.6 for the United States of Mexico. In other words, socio-economic-political structures in Mexico disadvantage large segments of the population and act as push factors.

A migration or immigration policy that does not content itself with pushing people out, as in Mexico, or with racist exclusion, as in the U.S. since the 1990s,

would need to assess both goals and needs of potential migrant workers as well as those of potential employers and might have to question socio-economic and political structures that support migrant-generating inequalities or that permit racialization and discrimination.

Canada's Immigration Paradigm

Canadian society, in the decades since the policy of multiculturalism, has developed a sense of fairness to migrants. Accordingly, the government has passed regulations protecting migrant workers. From the mid-1950s, female domestic and caregiver workers from the Caribbean have been admitted, some early racist opposition notwithstanding. Under the program women have to work in a household for one year and are then treated as immigrants: They can choose their employment, get citizenship, and – once citizens – sponsor relatives in the frame of the laws. Thus, what was intended by some to be a rotating "guestworker" group actually became part of Canadian citizenry.

Canada also began to admit seasonal agricultural workers from the Caribbean – then "British West Indies" (since 1966) and from Mexico (since 1974). Numbers are small: Some 20,000 workers in 2004 who stay on average for four months and have to depart after a maximum stay of 8 months. Employer-employee relationships lead to regular return of workers in each season. Since 1887 the program is administered, under some government supervision, by a private non-profit organization basically under control of the employers. But migrant workers must be guaranteed a minimum of six weeks of employment at or above prevailing wage rates. While labour relations are not free from conflict

and from abuse of workers, Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (CSAWP) with the backing of society has established a frame that prevents wholesale exploitation and discrimination. The regular return of many workers indicates that working conditions are acceptable to them and that the wage income transferred to the societies and communities of origin plays an important role in family economies.

The U.S. Immigration Paradigm

The U.S., with a history of Mexican northbound labour migration dating back to the 1880s, has a far more problem-laden policy regulating migration and immigration. When, after Asian exclusion in the 1880s, from 1917 East and South Europeans, considered "dark," "olive," or "swarthy," were nearly excluded from immigration into what was considered an Anglo White country, the U.S. state has kept the "backdoor," the land border to Mexico, ajar. 1920s and 1930s research by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, U.S. economist, Paul S. Taylor, and photography by Dorothea Lange documented that Mexico and the U.S. were one integrated migration region in the interest of both, migrants and employers. Then the border patrol was institutionalized from 1924, racist exclusion of "greasers" advocated, and massive deportations initiated. The politico-racist positions were countered by employers' continued need for (exploitable) mobile workers and working families. Thus, under wartime labour shortages, government intervention into the labour markets resulted in the "*bracero* program" – the hiring of "arms" rather than an admission of full human beings – which remained in operation to 1964. It provided a legal frame if not

satisfactory working conditions. The Mexican middle classes' failure to establish job-providing economic sectors made migration unavoidable for many despite the poor conditions in the receiving society.

Employers, who already before 1964 had attempted to avoid formal recruitment centers and legal frames, increasingly resorted to the hiring of undocumented or "illegal" individual and family labour. Under the conservative Republican Administration of Ronald Reagan, the Immigration Reform and Control Act which permitted regularization, was a step towards a more efficient policy. Thereafter, the political climate and public discourse deteriorated rapidly and by the late 1990s and early 2000s a racist "illegal immigrants"-campaign had been unleashed that targeted mainly Mexicans but also Latinos in general. To circumvent sanctions, employers no longer hired directly but through sub-contractors who would incur the fines if caught. The sub-contractors' cut came out of the workers wages and thus U.S. immigration non-policy resulted in an across-the-board wage reduction for native-born and immigrant workers in the sectors of strong migrant labour market participation.

Moving Forward: Political Solutions

Thus, in comparison, the political culture in Canada and governmental pro-action has resulted in a structured, in general for both sides acceptable, and beneficial program – if not without weaknesses. In the U.S., government, inaction and racist public discourse has led to a criminalization of a "brown" labour force that is needed in specific sectors of the economy, whose migration was partly forced by support of U.S. administrations for murderous regimes in Latin

America, and whose migration intensity is increased by NAFTA-framed exports of agricultural products from the U.S. to Mexico which undercut local peasant economies.

A post-Bush/Cheney solution has to be a political one. Open borders increase circulation. Seasonal workers want to return to families but closed borders raise costs of re-entry so that temporary return to families is no longer economically feasible. Undocumented workers in the U.S. and truncated families in the migrants' countries of origins are the result. An EU-style program for infrastructural and investment improvements in economically lagging regions might provide a solution to the intense pressure to depart but would, on the Mexican side, require an income equalization policy. Such policies are also debated in Europe and Australia. A post-Bush U.S. might become part of international human rights-framed migration policies.