

Exploitation or fair treatment: Migrant agricultural workers in North America

ONE VIEW OF MIGRATION

Migration can be understood as a process that balances two needs: the need for income among families living in regions with an insufficient supply of jobs, and 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 is preferred. Agriculture, in particular, has seasonal peaks of labour demand and family members are seasonally un- or under-employed.

NORTH AMERICAN MIGRANTS AND THE SEARCH FOR EMPLOYMENT

In North America, the Mexican economy—that is, 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, US-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. Because refugees, in general, have to earn a 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 remit-

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tances 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 enjoy freedom of movement in, at least partially, a mutualist border economy. Options for choice and frames of exploitation also depend on traditional societal hierarchies. Daniel Drache, in *Borders Matter: Homeland*

Security and the Search for North America (2004), notes that in 2000 the inequality index of the three North American societies—that is, the ratio of income of the top 10 percent of the population to the bottom 10 percent—stood at 8.5 for Canada, 16.6 for the United States, and 32.6 for Mexico. In other words, socioeconomic and 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 United States since the 1990s, would need to assess both the goals and needs of potential migrant workers as well as those of potential employers and might have to question socioeconomic 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 was introduced, 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, notwithstanding some early racist opposition. 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 “guest-worker” group actually became part of Canadian citizenry.

Canada also began to admit seasonal agricultural workers from the Caribbean (then “British West Indies”) in 1966 and

from Mexico in 1974. The numbers are small: some 20,000 were admitted in 2004. These workers stay on average for four months and have to depart after a maximum stay of eight months. Employer–employee relationships lead to the regular return of workers in each season. Since 1987 the program has been administered, under some government supervision, by a private non-profit organization basically under the control of the employers. The migrant workers must be guaranteed a minimum of six weeks of employment at or above prevailing wage rates. Although labour relations are not free from conflict and from abuse of workers, Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, 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 their societies and communities of origin plays an important role in family economies.

THE US IMMIGRATION PARADIGM

The United States, with a history of Mexican northbound labour migration dating back to the 1880s, has a far more problem-laden policy regulating migration and immigration. After the Asian exclusion in the 1880s, from 1917 eastern and southern Europeans, considered “dark,” “olive,” or “swarthy,” were nearly excluded from immigration into what was considered an Anglo, white country. From 1917 to 1924, the US state kept the “back door”—the land border to Mexico—ajar. Research done in the 1920s and 1930s by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio and US economist Paul S. Taylor, and photography by Dorothea Lange documented that Mexico and the United States 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” was advocated, and massive deportations were initiated. The politico-racist positions

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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 until 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 centres 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 toward 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 subcontractors who would incur the fines if caught. The subcontractors' cut came out of the workers' wages. Thus, US 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

In comparison, the political culture in Canada and proactive governmental measures have resulted in a structured, beneficial program that is in general acceptable to both sides—although it is not without weaknesses. In the United States, government inaction and racist public discourse have 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 US administrations for murderous regimes in Latin America. The migration intensity of this labour force has been increased by NAFTA-framed exports of agricultural products from the United States to Mexico, which undercut local peasant economies.

A post-George Bush/Dick Cheney solution has to be a political one. Open borders increase circulation, allowing seasonal workers to return to their families. Closed borders raise the costs of re-entry so that temporary return to families is no longer economically feasible. Undocumented workers in the United States and truncated families in the migrants' countries of origin 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 United States might become part of international human rights–framed migration policies. 