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Title: The Bracero Program: The Bi-National Migrant Labor Agreement 1942-1964

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Abstract: This article explores the complex and fragile agreement between Mexico and the United States on migrant farm workers in the middle of the twentieth century.

The Bracero Program was an attempt by both Mexico and the United States to create a labor program for Mexican farm workers. The Bracero program was a guest worker program that began in 1942 and ended around 1964. The transnational agreement was supposed to benefit both countries economically during times of war. This paper explores the complex and fragile agreement between Mexico and the United States when it came to migrant farm workers. It will focus on how the United States worked on protecting its corporations and how Mexico tried to protect its people. The complicated relationship between the two countries, the mistreatment of braceros, and racist rhetoric ultimately ended the Bracero Program in 1964.

After the Mexican revolution (1910 to 1920), there was a new sense of nationalism and pride in the nation. The revolution was a promise of jobs and land: an opportunity for equality. Unfortunately, Mexico's economic state could not support its citizens, and many Mexicans began looking for jobs in the United States. When the Great Depression hit the United States in 1929, many Americans blamed immigrants for their sorrows. Mexicans were a common target, especially because of their complex racial mixture. Xenophobia, a fear of foreigners, spread like wildfire and Mexicans were the ones who were burned. Private companies, local governments, individuals, and even churches, worked to persuade Mexicans to return to their country. Mexicans, both native and non-native, were given one-way tickets to Mexico and only a few days to pack their belongings. After the repatriations, the Mexican population had negative views of the United States.

The United States began preparing for war around 1940 just a few years after the end of the Great Depression. The mass mobilization created jobs in industrial fields. Industrial and defense jobs paid more than agricultural jobs, and many domestic farm laborers left their jobs (Kirstein 1977, 3). The agricultural industry demanded that Congress bring in Mexican labor, but they refused. Once Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the United States officially joined the war, Congress realized that Mexican labor was necessary for a successful war. The diplomatic relationship between the United States and Mexico had been especially tense after the repatriation during the Great Depression. Mexico also feared its economic development would suffer as a consequence of labor shortage in Mexico (Craig 1971, 41). Yet the United States continued pressuring Mexico for an agreement. The U.S. was in desperate need of manual labor, which provided Mexico with the opportunity to create a program that would help their economy and began negotiating a deal with the United States in spring of 1942. Migrant labor was not a new phenomenon between the two countries, but this was Mexico's opportunity to regulate migration and the treatment of Mexicans in the United States.

Mexico had a long list of demands before signing off on the Migrant Farm Labor Agreement. The wounds from the repatriations in the 1930s had still not healed and the Mexican president was wary of the United States' intentions. Mexico knew that if the program were to harm Mexicans in the United States, its people would blame Mexico for its inability to protect its them. First and foremost, the braceros were prohibited from joining the Armed Forces under the agreement. This concern arose from World War I and the use of forced undocumented Mexican laborers in the war. Another provision Mexico required was harder to fulfill. Mexico urged the United States to prohibit discrimination towards the braceros. This came from centuries of racial discrimination between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans (Kirstein 1977, 2). Lynching and other forms of violence towards Mexicans were common in the American Southwest. Mexico not only

feared this extreme form of discrimination, but also racial slurs, and economic discrimination from the farm growers. Mexico went as far as blacklisting areas with high rates of discrimination and making them ineligible to benefit from the program (Creagan 1965, 546).

Mexico wanted reassurances that the braceros would receive transportation, medical treatment and living expenses as articulated under Article 29 of the Mexican Federal Law (Craig 1971, 43). Mexican Constitution was rewritten in 1917 and gave laborers several rights, to ensure that the wealthy would not exploit them. Mexico wanted the same policies that applied to Mexican laborers in Mexico to apply to them in the United States. The use of Mexican law upset American growers, who wanted to continue to benefit from cheap labor. In the end, the United States government signed the agreement in order to pull up labor conditions in the agriculture industry (Creagan 1965, 549).

Almost immediately after signing the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement on August 4th, 1942, Mexico began accepting applications for the Bracero Program. Mexico's first recruitment center opened up in Estadio Azteca in Mexico City. There, the Department of Foreign Affairs vetted Mexican laborers, ensuring they were qualified to work in the United States. Many Mexican men undertook long and expensive journeys to apply. Immediately after the commencement of the Bracero Program, thousands of young men applied, eager to finally make a living wage. Mexico made sure that the braceros showed an economic need, so the people living in poverty were a priority. Once a bracero was approved by the Mexican government, the United States ensured that they were healthy. The braceros faced humiliating health inspections once they reached the border (Galarza 1964, 61). The application process was not an easy one. Neither country made it easy for these men to work. The entire application process could take months, but the young men who would apply were determined to get out of poverty and were willing to endure anything for it.

The agreement between the two countries never passed through Congress but was approved through Public Law 45. Over the 22 years it was in place, both countries made amendments, on issues ranging from numbers, wages, and relevant job descriptions (Galarza 1964, 53). The ability to amend the agreement made it easy for different interest groups to take advantage of the braceros. Historians tend to agree that while the United States and Mexico believed they were the key actors in the agreement, the agricultural corporations were the true players throughout the course of the Bracero Program and their goal was solely profit. The braceros were not the only victims of the agricultural industry. Agricultural corporations worked together to ensure that the wages stayed low for all workers including the braceros. Companies would meet to agree on a fixed wage for farm laborers to ensure that competition did not affect their bottom line (Grove 1996, 305). In addition to low wages, braceros were vulnerable to the abuse of the terms of their contracts. The negligence of the Department of Labor, along with the illiteracy of many braceros, allowed employers to withhold wages, extend working periods, and change the wages from hourly to by piece. The manipulation of wages created a tense relationship between the United States and Mexico.

While the Bracero Program was scheduled to end as soon as the war was over, the agricultural industry pushed to extend it, insisting that foreign labor was still needed. The farming industry insisted their crops would die if they did not have Mexican labor to help harvest them. The State

Department, as well as the Department of Labor, only allowed farmers to request Mexican labor if there was a domestic labor shortage. Employers would lower their wages to the point where no domestic worker could sustain themselves in order to pressure the government to provide access to Mexican workers. The employers would then request foreign labor with evidence that there was a need for more employees. Mexico was also hesitant to withdraw from the program in spite of abuses as it had become dependent on it for employment and income, having seen \$200 in revenue in just five years (Guiler and Penyak 2009, 429). After the renewal of the Bracero Program was approved in 1947, abuse and exploitation became more prevalent.

Public Law 78, which included a revised Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, was created in 1951. While the law maintained provisions to protect workers while also reducing the number of undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, the implementation of PL 78 was a devastating blow for the Mexican government. The new policy was American-born, which allowed U.S. government agencies to take control of the program.²² The policies Mexico had established to protect Mexican laborers were replaced with policies that were convenient to the other two parties: the United States and the growers of America. PL 78 removed Mexico from the process all together. The Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner could pick up Mexican men from the border and enroll them into the Bracero Program. The safety mechanisms Mexico had worked so hard to establish suddenly disappeared.

Previously, the Mexican government had had the ability to deny, or blacklist, certain areas if they deemed them unsafe for braceros. The new guidelines allowed Texas to participate in the Bracero Program though they had previously been blacklisted from the Bracero Program due to their notorious history of discrimination towards Mexicans (Kirstein 1977, 4). Almost immediately after Texas began participating, complaints from braceros were being sent to the Mexican Consulate in Corpus Christi. Acts of discrimination were reported in a note from the consulate in Refugio, Texas. The report had complaints against local authorities and even against local restaurants. Two braceros, Martin Hernandez and Juan Padron, from Gregory, Texas, were arrested by the Sheriff in San Patricio with “no explanation about their arrest” (Letter from Mexican consul in Corpus Christi to Director of Employment, Dallas, 1953). Braceros were also prohibited from entering private restaurants in Texas. Border Patrol in Texas was harsh, and would detain and deport braceros, despite them being in the United States legally.

Mexico had broken its promise to both braceros and the Mexican population. The diligence and resistance that had been present during the meetings in 1942 diminished as soon as the money began pouring in. Mexico did not want to admit it, but their economy depended on the bracero program. On average, braceros would send \$26 million to \$100 million, annually (Calavita 1992, 63). The Bracero Program helped Mexico’s crippled economy. The mass population increase, and loss of resources had made unemployment rates go up significantly. Despite the complaints sent by braceros, Mexico continued to allow the extension of PL 78. Yet the Mexican government did continue to advocate for the braceros.

While the Bracero Program took in millions of Mexican laborers during its course, it was not enough to satisfy the job shortage in Mexico. There were a lot more men looking for jobs than the program could take in. The desperate, hungry men, took extreme measures to find labor. Every day, thousands of men would make the journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. They would

stand there, waiting, for days on end for employment. In 1948 in El Paso, Texas, thousands of men waited by the border. Both Mexico and the United States had allowed employers to contract men immediately due to a severe labor shortage. Thousands of men were hired and taken to cotton farms, without the need of going through paperwork. This is emblematic of the fact that the Bracero Program never represented the whole cross-border labor story between Mexico and America.

The Bracero Program came to an end in 1964. The 22 year long program had many advantages for both countries, but those advantages did not outweigh the disadvantages. Various factors were responsible for the termination of the program; not least were calculations regarding the good for the U.S. domestic market and the advent of the more conservative Eisenhower administration. The Mexican government resisted ending the program due to its economic dependency upon it. The end of the Bracero Program severely affected Mexico's economy; it took the country years to recover from the devastating blow. But the end of the program also restored national pride in the Mexican government. The media, as well as the government, portrayed the end of the program as a form of resistance against oppressive regimes.

The Bracero Program was a transnational attempt to end a labor shortage issue. Unfortunately, several factors ruined the potential for a beneficial program. The greed of the employers, Mexico's unemployed population's desperation for work, and the United States' fear of illegal entry all played a role in the destruction of the Bracero Program.

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