

HARVEST OF LONELINESS: THE BRACERO PROGRAM

A Teachers Guide

(It is suggested that instructors and facilitators review this guide before viewing the film. There are questions after each section useful for reviewing the key points in the film. At the end of the guide are general questions that can also provoke discussion.)

Introduction

In 1942 the U.S. and Mexico finalized an agreement, known as the Bracero Program, to transport contracted temporary workers from Mexico to labor in agriculture and for the duration of the war on railroads. The Bracero Program formed a major chapter in the relationship between Mexico and the United States, and although a number of published studies have carefully examined the key aspects of the Program, no film documentary has thoroughly examined the historically significant program. It is this important breach that prompted Gilbert G. Gonzalez to produce and co-direct the documentary with Vivian Price and Adrian Salinas.

Our interest in the project originates from several interrelated points. In our estimation there is no labor policy more pivotal to understanding the nature of migration from Mexico to the United States than the Bracero Program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964 and brought an estimated 5,000,000 men to labor in the US. This documentary built upon the extensive scholarship on this subject as well as our own research, to explore previously ignored aspects of the Program, utilizing archival and privately held film and photographs; interviews with former braceros and their wives and families; interviews with academics who studied the program and former managers and workers involved in the bracero program in both the U. S. and Mexico. Finally, the film focuses on several aspects that connect this labor program to the controversies surrounding contemporary discussions over guest worker proposals that continue to be critical areas of political debate.

The film explores how the Bracero Program affected the lives of Mexican male laborers, their wives, families and communities, the economy of Mexico, as well as the fortunes of U. S. agribusiness, revolving around the question of who were the chief beneficiaries of the program. Clearly, the film's key objective is to illuminate the experiences of the men who as contracted indentured workers lived and worked strictly under state and employer control within a *gendered* temporary labor program designed by the largest agribusiness corporations in the world and administered by the state.

The film dispels the convention that the Bracero Program was primarily organized and carried out on the U. S. side of the border, a perspective that constructs bracero labor as spontaneously appearing and transported northward then disappearing southward. Rather, the film balances out the popular analysis of the Bracero Program to show how recruitment, processing and selection began in Mexico. The entire transnational process was strategically organized and state managed to import Mexican male laborers of peasant background skilled in farm work. From the poor, rural agricultural regions of central to northern Mexico, peasants were brought into the migratory paths leading to the U. S. and ultimately into the confines of the agricultural powers. It proved to be one of the largest population movements of its time, in this case, a migration of labor numbering in the millions.

The film will also delve into other relatively unknown issues such as bribery and official corruption practiced on both sides of the border that were systematic and integral to the program. By the terms of the Agreement, braceros could be employed only if there were no local workers willing to take the job. Nonetheless, domestic workers were generally moved out, growers simply preferred braceros whether or not domestic workers were available. In Mexico, it was common for men to pay local officials a bribe to gain a permission document to proceed to the recruiting station. Perhaps the most egregious violation of the

bracero contract was the withholding of 10% of the men's wages placed into individual savings accounts in state-run Mexican banks, where it disappeared.

Among the several objectives, the film demonstrates that guest worker programs relating to Mexico, particularly the Bracero Program, is a critical paradigm for the manner in which Mexican labor has been integrated into the heart of the U.S. economy over the 20th and now the 21st century. The film shows that proposals for new guest worker programs that have surfaced from time to time since the early twentieth century are examples of a standard convention to import Mexican labor via state management. We realize that other guest worker programs preceded the Bracero Program and that a smaller version known as H2A followed its termination in 1964. However there is no better example of what we can expect from a large-scale guest worker program, which is currently under discussion, than the Bracero Program.

Story Line

Why did agribusiness lobby for a contract labor program in 1942?

Agribusiness which long ago became the central player in agriculture rather than the hallowed family farm, and has been aptly described by Carey McWilliams as Factories in the Fields. In the 1930's, a flurry of labor organizing and strikes in California's factory fields was violently resisted by growers who sought to engineer and maintain a supple labor supply, low wages and commensurate working conditions. The labor supply, once deemed cheap, dependable, efficient and unorganized no longer appeared to be the case in the face of growing labor militancy. In California alone, over 170 strikes impacted agriculture during the 1930s involving thousands of workers. However, the outbreak of World War II posed both a potential threat to the existing labor supply as well as an opportunity to seek alternative ways to restore a secure labor supply.

California growers led the effort to restore the unfettered primacy of growers in dictating wages and working conditions. The labor shortage allegedly caused by World War II was put forward as the main argument for requiring such a Program, but other reasons stood at the core of the request for importing labor. At no time was any evidence produced to demonstrate an existing labor shortage, which agribusiness declared to be the main reason for a contract labor program. But, unionization and strikes among agricultural workers rose to significant heights in the 1930s, particularly in California. During the Bracero Program no successful strikes were carried out by domestic workers and braceros were denied unionization, the right to negotiate over wages or to strike. It appears that the Program was a most effective means to control labor and avoid unionization and strikes. All of which indicates that the war, alleged by growers to be at the root of a severe labor shortage, may have been more of a window of opportunity for constructing an international agreement for maintaining and controlling a surplus, low wage labor pool. The fact that the state-sponsored contract labor Agreement lasted well beyond 1945 indicates that more than a wartime labor shortage prompted the lobbying effort. Yearly extensions after 1945 finalizing in Public Law 78 in 1951 guaranteed the Program's operation till 1964.

Questions: Why did agribusiness lobby for the Bracero Program?

1. Who were the architects of the Bracero Program and what was the official line for instituting the Bracero Program?
2. What was overall objective for implementing the Bracero Program?
3. Who lobbied for the Bracero Program and who administered the Program?
4. What consequences did the Program have upon the rights of workers, domestic and bracero, to organize unions?

Becoming a Bracero Applicant

The process of becoming a bracero began at the village level. Rather than viewing the Program as one that begins and ends on the U. S. side of the border, we need to begin our examination in the Mexican interior where the recruiting and processing of braceros commences previous to their placement with an employer in the US. By the terms of the Agreement the responsibility of the Mexican government included distributing announcements advertising the benefits from the Program; the recruitment of the numbers of men with particular skills requested by US growers; setting quotas for selected regions and states (most frequently in central and northern Mexico) with an emphasis on poor, rural peasant populations. With rampant unemployment and poverty in the villages, the public announcements attracted widespread attention. Bracero candidates were required to obtain legal documents from local authorities attesting residence and then to travel to the nearest recruiting center. But, before they could be placed on the list the vast majority was forced to pay a substantial “fee”, a “mordida.” of from 200 to 1000 pesos to have their name placed on the list. In collaboration with U. S. authorities, the examination, evaluation and selection of potential workers was carried out specified recruitment centers in Mexico. Men left their small farming villages in large numbers; many traveled hundreds of miles in trains, buses and some even walked to the recruiting stations.

Questions: Becoming a Bracero Applicant

1. Why did Mexican men join the Bracero Program?
2. What were the first requirements in order for men to become a potential bracero?
3. What regions of Mexico was the recruitment of braceros emphasized?

Wives and Villages Left Behind

Across Mexico, villages emptied of men as they left for the emigrant worker stations. But not only were the men deeply affected, the film also

examines the Program's effects on the wives, families and communities that were left behind. When the time came for the men to go to the Emigrant Worker Station, the whole village would gather to send the men off; those left behind recall that the village drifted into loneliness, the women felt a deep sense of sadness. Only the young, the old and women, most of them wives with children, stayed behind to fend as best they could. Departing men never knew where they would be sent to work, if selected, nor when the contract was to expire. Families left behind experienced the anguish of not knowing where, how long or whether he was going to return. Children of braceros recall seeing their mother visiting the church every day to pray for her husband's return. Women became the head of families, taking care of children and not infrequently giving birth to children while the husbands were off as braceros. While waiting and hoping for a check to arrive, women tended the fields, cared for the children until their husbands returned, all alone. For the women of the villages, the bracero program proved to be a time of anguish.

Questions: The Women and Families Left Behind

1. What kinds of experiences did the women undergo while their husbands were away?
2. How did the women manage their lives and their children while the men were gone?
3. Were the emotions experienced by the men while working and the women who stayed in the village similar, perhaps identical?
4. As men left to become a bracero, what effect did leaving have on the wives, on their children and on the villages as a whole

The Emigrant Worker Station

U.S authorities representing the Department of Labor and the INS together with Mexican officials managed the station's operation. However, Americans dominated the process; for example, at the Empalme, Sonora,

contracting station an American served as the center's chief administrator. At times as many as ten thousand recruits assembled for the opportunity to enter and be judged as to whether they would make good laborers and secure a coveted labor contract. Recruits might have to wait in long lines one to three weeks or more, and seek lodging as best they could. Reports appeared regularly of men who left home with limited funds reduced to starving and begging when funds ran out. During the selection process it was not uncommon for men to faint, become seriously ill, and even face death from starvation during the wait. When his name or number was called he excitedly scrambled into a long line outside of the main hall and entered the next stage of the recruiting process.

Once in the evaluation room, anyone with a physical problem, missing fingers or a noticeable limp, for example, was immediately rejected as were the old, the too young and those who were considered too educated or too well dressed indicating an urban type. Critical signs of a potentially good worker included a good attitude, i.e., he appeared submissive, and rough, calloused hands. Those rejected had begun their odyssey with limited funds and great anticipation but then faced the expense of paying their way back to their village, often hundreds of miles; not a few returned in ill health, depressed both psychologically and financially for having failed to secure a contract.

Questions: Emigrant Worker Station

1. How did the men reach the Emigrant Worker Stations in Mexico?
2. What were the conditions of the men at the stations? How long did they have to wait?
3. After their name was called to enter the Station how were the men evaluated? What was the purpose of this evaluation? What were the principle criteria for selection?

4. What were the feelings of the men as they went through the evaluation process?

The Border Inspection Station

Upon selection at the initial center Mexican authorities then transported the men at U. S. expense to a border “Reception Center” for final processing. Selection meant that the potential bracero earned the right to travel at public expense to the border inspection station where he would undergo a second examination; no contract was promised until he passed the second examination at the border.

Often numbering more than a thousand a day, the men were transported to the Mexican side of the border on crowded boxcars used for transporting livestock and walked to the inspection station on the U. S. side. Before reaching the station, the men were placed in a large room, unclothed and doused with the pesticide DDT, an experience that men never forgot. Once inside the station he assumed a place in a long line of men waiting to be checked by U. S. Department of Labor officials and growers’ managers for size, muscular physique and outward signs that the was a common laborer. The men underwent further health evaluation and physical inspection that included vaccinations, tuberculosis x-rays, and then a mass health examination while nude. Genitals, mouth, tonsils, legs, arms, eyes and ears were quickly examined for signs of disease or disability. Flexibility and use of arms and legs was most important and men were forced to demonstrate arm and leg movement. Braceros were selected on the basis of the type of worker requested by growers. Tall workers were generally channeled into citrus and date picking; shorter workers were considered ideal for lettuce, tomatoes, asparagus or cotton.

Questions: The Border Reception Station

1. Once selected how were they transported to the US? What were the conditions they experienced as they left the Station for the US?

2. At the Border Reception Station, what was their first experience? What was the purpose of this treatment?
3. What were principle objectives in employing the evaluation procedures? What were employers looking for in a bracero?
4. What evaluation procedures were employed at the Border Reception Station procedure? How did they feel about the procedures?

The Contract

The negotiated agreement included guarantees that domestic labor did not enjoy. Wages were to be set at the going rate in the area; standard housing, board, health care, life insurance, transportation, and working conditions were to be guaranteed and Mexican consuls were charged with oversight and enforcement of the contract. However, the record demonstrates that employers were given a free hand to enforce the contract and that the stipulations were largely ignored.

Assembled in a large room they were explained the kind of work they would be employed at and upon accepting the contract, which few neither read nor understood, was then handed over to an employer's manager for transportation to the work site. Their anticipated and long sought employment was realized. The men were then transported in overcrowded trucks, trains or buses to the work site to become the charge of an employer under contract for a specified time, generally 45 days or six weeks. Often men renewed for longer periods sometimes reaching a year and a half or more. The short contract period served as a protection for the growers who preferred the renewable shorter contract in order to weed out 'incompetents' and re-contract the efficient workers.

Questions: The Labor Contract

1. Upon being selected, the men were given a labor contract to sign. What guarantees were incorporated into the contract?
2. Did the men know what they were signing?

3. Were the contract guarantees observed by the employers? Was the contract enforced by the entity responsible for administering the Program?

At The Work Site

Braceros labored in the most arduous tasks across the spectrum of agricultural labor, work known as 'stoop labor', and the vast majority worked for the largest agricultural corporations in the world who formed associations for the expressed purpose of utilizing braceros. Often men were required to work fifty-hour work weeks bent over digging with the notorious short handle hoe. There was no set eight-hour day and forty-hour week and so they labored according to the grower's requirements, which could fluctuate from day to day, and week-to-week depending on daily warehouse orders or the maturity of the product harvested.

In addition, the general practice was for growers to hire braceros and arbitrarily limit the hiring of available domestic labor and then set local wages upon the bracero scale. Wages were supposedly to be set at the 'local scale' but growers reserved their traditional prerogative to set their own pay scales free from oversight. Wages often fell below that required for the maintenance of the workers since the contract did not call for a 40-hour workweek. At times braceros attempted to organize strikes, and often managed to stop work, but the power held over them prevented any successful actions. And when domestic workers attempted to strike, their cause was immediately lost as growers simply brought in braceros. During the Bracero program, braceros, undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants along with citizen labor worked as if interchangeable parts within the agricultural industry. However, bracero labor, the dominant labor supply in key areas of agriculture, set the wage scale and work conditions for all farm labor, which insured poverty across the board. In California, which depended heavily on bracero labor, farm wages did not rise between 1950 and 1960.

Questions: At the Work Site

1. What kinds of work were the men assigned?
2. How were they treated at the work site? What kinds of working conditions did the men experience?
3. Were the contract protections honored?
4. Were braceros paid well? What level of wages did they receive?
5. What kinds of controls were placed on the men? Were they allowed to strike, protest or negotiate wages? What were the possible consequences for attempting to organize a protest?
6. Did the remittances sent by braceros to their wives have a significant effect on the living conditions of families in the villages? Did the remittances amount to very much?

Camp Housing and Board

Braceros generally lived in large camps, sometimes housing more than a thousand men at a time. Housing inspections occurred infrequently and for the most part the men lived in sub-standard often squalid quarters. Housing often resembled army barracks while small huts or tents resembling squatter quarters housed others. All camps were generally out of sight and segregated from the general population, most of whom barely knew of the Program. Sanitary facilities left much to be desired and air conditioning was non-existent, which caused great discomfort to the men forced to endure the heat of the summer harvest season. Housing was free but board cost the men an average of \$1.75 a day and health care insurance also came out of the men's paycheck. But the cost for board was in effect a type of gouging in that studies had shown that the per diem board at southern California colleges was less than half that paid by the men. Moreover, health insurance was noticeable for its absence in the daily affairs of the men. Growers or their managers returned men to Mexico who were deemed inept at a specific task, or who complained too

loudly about wage cheating, poor work conditions, or even became too sick and threatened financial risk. Braceros were hesitant to report illnesses or wage improprieties to avoid the threat of being repatriated. Meanwhile, agriculture became a hugely successful sector of the American economy reaping in billions in profits.

Questions: Camp Housing and Board

1. When men reached the work site, what kinds of housing was provided? Were braceros provided comfortable housing?
2. How were the housing quarters described?
3. Were the men charged for meals? Describe how the men spoke about the food supply?
4. How did the men describe the medical treatment offered to them? Did they freely access the medical centers provided for them?
5. What kinds of emotions affected the men while in the U.S. as a bracero?

The End of the Contract: Who Benefited

Upon the termination of the contract, the harvest or harvests completed and the grower or an association of growers having no more use for the men, they were returned to the border and handed a travel ticket to the recruiting station in the interior where he first entered into the evaluation process. From there the men were to find their own way home at their own expense. Most men returned with little more to show for their endeavor other than a sewing machine for their wife, a radio perhaps and gifts of new clothes. The men who returned to their villages (and did not skip their contracts as many did to become undocumented) experienced life in the United States and hard labor in modern agriculture with little else to show for their work. 10% of the braceros salaries were deducted and placed in a personal savings account in Mexico to be paid upon their return to Mexico. However, very few even knew of the deductions and

fewer received those wages. When they returned to their villages, they picked up where they had left off and re-entered the same self-subsistence economy. Not a few returned numerous times to be re-contracted and thousands remained in the U. S. as undocumented to become part of the Chicano community.

Despite the anticipated outcomes promised made by the Program's advocates when the Agreement was negotiated (and re-negotiated several times), the Program did little to change the economic condition of the villages which provided the men and reports of men returning to Mexico with little to show for their stint in the U. S. were common. Moreover, the enforcement of the work contract, which the men sought with such great expectation, was left to the officials administering the Program who leaned heavily towards protecting the growers. However, the 10% taken from their paychecks and never returned has not been forgotten. Certainly, the organization of former braceros to recover the 10% deducted from their paychecks and to carry out demonstrations and marches is a clear sign that the massive exploitation has not been forgotten and has been brought into the public consciousness. Unfortunately, only a few have received the court ordered remuneration.

Questions: The End of the Contract: Who Benefited?

1. Who were the primary beneficiaries of the Bracero Program?
2. What made it possible to insure that benefits would be channeled to specific targets?
3. What benefits accrued to the braceros? Their families?
4. Did the Mexican rural farmlands undergo any substantial change over the course of the Bracero Program? How did the women describe their experiences while the men were laboring as braceros?
5. Why was the Bracero Program described as the worst violation of human rights since slavery (and the genocide of American Indians)?
6. How are braceros attempting to recover the 10% stolen from them?

The Termination of the Program

After 22 years and hundreds of thousands of workers imported for temporary stints to perform “stoop labor” for some of the worlds’ agricultural superpowers, the bracero program was terminated. Organized labor and vocal critics such as Ernesto Galarza, Henry Anderson and others successfully lobbied to bring the Program to an end. Braceros more than fulfilled what agribusiness expected from a contract labor program. The men were cheap, dependable, hard working, efficient, easily controlled, effortlessly acquired and dismissed, which made the Program the ideal means for maintaining profitable agricultural production. Despite agribusiness’ dire warnings that agricultural production would come to a halt if the Program were ended, that economic branch successfully maintained production via former braceros who continued migrating as undocumented. Upon the termination, former braceros continued to cross into the U.S. to work for the same corporations that depended on their labor while the Bracero Program was in full swing. The bracero migration did not stop; rather it was transformed into undocumented migration. Undocumented Mexican migrant labor continued into the 70s and 80s and rose to dramatic heights under NAFTA, the free trade agreement signed by President Clinton and President Fox in 1994. Peasant farmers, unable to compete with American imports, have been uprooted on a massive scale, pushing families from rural villages onto a migratory trail, ultimately leading into the US. Studies have shown that in 2006, six hundred families were uprooted every day.

Questions: Undocumented Migration and the Bracero Program

1. After the Bracero Program ended how did the former braceros respond?
2. What effects did the end of the Program have on the villages?

3. How did NAFTA affect Mexican peasant farmlands? What were the social consequences of NAFTA?
4. How long did the undocumented migration continue?

From Bush to Obama: Discussions for a Guest Worker Agreement for Mexico

In 2001 Presidents Fox and Bush met at the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas, and at the Fox hacienda and presented widely disseminated images of a strong friendship and solid partnership as they initiated discussions for a new guest worker agreement. Simultaneously, senate and congressional committees sped to Mexico for discussions with Mexican counterparts and Foreign Secretary Castaneda to work out what Foreign Secretary Castaneda referred to as the “whole enchilada.”

Initially, Bush proposed a guest worker program tailored to the undocumented, the social consequence of the North American Free Trade Agreement which forced nearly two million peasants off their farmlands. The first Bush proposal offered a three-year contract renewable for one three-year extension and possible legalization if the person performed adequately. On the other hand, President Fox proposed a program for sending 250,000 Mexican workers annually under the existing H2A Program while the U.S. offered no firm numbers for its proposal. Employers of Mexican labor, legal and undocumented, in agribusiness, hotel industry among others expressed strong support for a new guest worker program. Three dozen trade associations organized as the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition campaigned intensely for a guest worker program.

In the euphoria of the moment, various proposals were put forward from both Democrats as well as Republicans. Then came 9/11 and the discussions were virtually tabled. The matter is raised from time to time, but with the rising tide of anti-undocumented immigrant politics any guest worker proposal must gain the support of the strong conservative

base that Bush leaned upon for other initiatives. Conservatives staunchly oppose any amnesty provision (or what may appear to be amnesty) while liberals consider the possibility of limited amnesty. However, both parties generally favor a new guest worker program to channel peasants uprooted by NAFTA into the labor force, but the details have yet to be worked out.

Despite a virtual standstill in negotiations the guest worker program remains on the nation's economic agenda expressed most recently in President Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address. However, that any mention of the Bracero Program has been largely left out of current and past guest worker negotiations, the media and the public mind, offers not just an opportunity but also a need to critically reexamine that Program. One way of assessing what a future guest worker program would look like is to examine the last large scale guest worker program, the bracero program, which brought hundreds of thousands of men to labor on railroads (during the war) and agriculture, where the vast majority labored over the 22 years of the Program. Critically addressing the bracero program offers a window to examine what we may expect from a new guest worker program.

Questions: Discussions for a Guest Worker Agreement with Mexico

1. What were the consequences of NAFTA for Mexico? For the US?
 2. What political responses appeared across the U.S. due to undocumented migration?
 3. What were the key points justifying a new guest worker program?
- What problem was the proposed guest worker program proposed by President Bush supposed to resolve?

Braceros and their wives response to a new Bracero Program

Former braceros, their wives and students of a new program cannot help to consider whether a new guest worker program is justified. They ask

themselves, based on their experiences, whether a new guest worker program is a plausible and worthwhile policy. The reactions of those interviewed to the Bracero Program and a new Guest Worker Program were not at all positive. The two guest worker programs, one past and one proposed were tied together. The remembrances of their experiences led them to judge whether a new guest worker program is a worthwhile policy. Former braceros and their families looked upon a new guest worker program as a rebirth of the old Bracero Program and thus to be opposed.

Questions: Responses to a new Bracero Program

1. How did former braceros respond to the question of a new bracero program?
2. What were the responses of the children of braceros? The wives of braceros?
3. What were the negative aspects regarding a new guest worker program?

Themes for a General Discussion

1. Were braceros free wage workers, a condition considered fundamental in a democratic society?
2. The Bracero Program has been defined as a phase of Mexican migration to the United States. Does this message come through in the film?
3. What were the justifications for creating this state managed migration and who were the principal players lobbying for this migration?
4. What position did the U.S. state assume in the administration of the Bracero Program? Was the state a neutral body overseeing the Program? Whose interests did the state serve?
5. Why did the U.S. Congress, growers and the Mexican government renew the Program annually?
6. Undocumented migration rose sharply after the signing of NAFTA. What factors or conditions led to this migration?

7. How has political debate responded to undocumented migration? Is undocumented migration related to the Bracero Program? If so, how?
8. What major resolution has been proposed to resolve undocumented migration? Should the U.S. engage guest worker programs to solve undocumented migration? Are such labor programs beneficial to all involved? Is there such a thing as a just guest worker program?
9. What best describes the economic and social relations between Mexico and the U.S? Does Mexico demonstrate that it is an economically sovereign nation, self-subsistent and able to employ its people? If not, why?
10. Can Mexico be described as a third world country dominated by the economic power the US? Has this power over Mexico led to its people migrating as labor to the U.S. for the past century?

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