The Bracero Program

The Bracero Program was a series of agreements between the United States and Mexican Governments that brought millions of Mexican men to work in the U.S. through short-term labor contracts, primarily for agricultural work.

"In Spanish, the term *bracero* derives from the word for arm; the workers were perceived by others as disembodied arms meant to work and do nothing else" -- Mario Jimenez Sifuentez, *History, Public Memory, and Creating the Bracero Archive*

Mexican Workers Wanted in October

Farmers and orchardists in Washington state have placed orders for approximately 6000 imported Mexican workers for the month of October, according to reports sent to

Figure 14. A description of the demand for Mexican laborers (Source: Northwest Farm News, September 9, 1943).

- Officially called the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, or the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program. Known universally as the Bracero Program.
- Began in August of 1942 with the first of a series of bilateral agreements, when many U.S. growers argued that World War II would bring labor shortages to low-paying agricultural jobs. However, the Bracero Program continued long after the war was over, which demonstrates the U.S. dependence on cheap, exploitable labor.
- An early version of this program also existed during WWI on a smaller scale, from 1917-1921
- 4.6 million contracts were signed from 1942 to 1964.
- Infamous for its terrible conditions. Workers were tied to a single employer who had full control over living and working conditions. Even before arriving at work sites, workers reported being treated like livestock through dehumanizing check points, where people were subjected to intrusive physical examinations, surveyed by contractors as if buying an animal, and even sprayed with gasoline to "disinfect".
- Abuses were built into the program-- including a 10% "wage trust" theft scheme in which 10% of wages were withheld until workers returned to their country of origin. Many workers went on to live in the United States-- but even most of those who returned to Mexico never saw those wages. Some people are still challenging this wage theft.

The H-2A Program

Modeled after the Bracero program, The H-2A program is a federal guestworker program that allows U.S. growers to traffic workers from Mexico and Central America to fill seasonal agricultural jobs. Growers typically use a third party contractor, such as Wafla, to hire workers. Just like the Bracero program, workers are tied to a single employer, who has complete control over their living and working conditions.

- The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act revised the H-2 program, splitting it into H-2A for agricultural workers, and H-2B for non-agricultural workers.
- 213,394 H-2A visas were issued in the U.S. in 2020. The number of H-2A workers at a national level has more than quadrupled since 2007. In Washington, the number of H-2A workers has increased by 1000% since 2009.
- Washington is the third highest user of the H-2A program, issuing 29,080 H-2A visas in 2021. Over 10% of H-2A visas were in Washington state in 2019.
- The H-2A program is characterized by terrible conditions: insufficient food, crowded housing, lack of shade and adequate water, lack of breaks and long hours in dangerous conditions, sexual violence, and direct exposure to pesticides.
- Because workers are tied to a single employer, they risk being fired, evicted, and even deported if they protest conditions.
- To obtain a temporary labor certification for the Department of Labor and bring workers in, employers allegedly must prove that they have tried and failed to hire local workers-- as H-2A is premised on a labor shortage in agriculture. Activists have proved time and again that this is false.

"Farmworkers in our community are ready to work and need these jobs. We believe that there is not a shortage of farmworkers in the state, and if there ever is a shortage, the union is ready to work with the growers to find needed labor" -- Ramon Torres, President of Familias Unidas por la Justicia.