

UUC Racial Justice Series: *The Bracero Program 1942-1964*

In 1942, “dryland” farmers in the West predicted upcoming shortages of field workers due to WWII conscription, and wanted the US and Mexican governments to allow Mexicans to work seasonally on US farms. US labor reformers protested that the only shortage was of decent wages and fair working conditions. The U.S. government aligned with the farmers, and thus began the Bracero Program. From 1942-1964, some 4.6 million Mexicans came to America for contracted farm work in half of the American states, mostly in California and Texas.

- ❖ “...(Braceros are) a necessary evil...an unavoidable adjunct to harvest season...a species of farm implement...that requires no upkeep.” [Pauline Kibbe, writer. 1948]
- ❖ “They treated them as nothing more than what the name –braceros– means: sets of arms.” [Charles Collins Farm, Greeley CO, 1953]
- ❖ “We used to own slaves. Now we just rent them.” [Farmer/grower on the Edward R. Murrow radio program, 1960]

Mexican field workers contracted with regional Grower Associations in each US state, but their bosses were individual local growers. The US-Mexico Bracero Program in 1942 had detailed agreements to “protect” workers, but abuse was widespread: liberal DDT spraying of workers’ unmasked naked bodies; 200 men sleeping in one room; no indoor bathing facilities; outhouses; inadequate food (lots of bologna sandwiches). Men who complained were called “agitators” and immediately sent back to Mexico.

The contracts had detailed provisions that were widely ignored, without any legal consequence: Spanish language agreements; wages equal to local pay; free available medical care; paid transportation from Mexico to US and back home. Ten percent of their pay was deducted for “later compensation at home”, (but not paid). Many workers believed the promises, and returned harvest after harvest, because Bracero was better than conditions in Mexico.

Discrimination was prohibited in the “agreements”, but workers paid high prices for food or provisions at “company stores”. A restaurant sign in one Texas farm town read, “NO dogs, Negroes, Mexicans.” Farms in Texas were banned from the program for several years due to workplace neglect

and abuses, which included food poisoning, farm worker injuries, deaths, and several lynchings at the Texas border.

“Bracero Program 1942-1964”

Much of the farm work was “stoop labor”, with 10-12 hour days, often reaching 110 degrees. Growers insisted on hoes with handles less than 24 inches, called El Cordito, known by workers as El Brazo del Diablo. Workers had to stoop down to work, and thus developed painful back conditions. The stated reason was that long hoes “damaged the delicate plants”. But the more likely reason was that oppressive field foremen thought their workers “rested” too much on long handled hoes.

Abuses like these with the documented Braceros (“immigrant labor subsidy”) and other undocumented farm workers (“illegal aliens”) set the stage for subsequent migrant worker abuse which persists to this day in many US farm regions.

After the war, the Bracero Program remained, with US government support, continuing the profitable arrangements that benefitted growers. Farm workers entering the U.S. illegally often equaled the Braceros in numbers, and were even more vulnerable to cruelty and deportation. In the late 1950’s, blatant abuses were uncovered and widely published. President Kennedy demanded enforcement of regulations long ignored by the Labor Department, and the Braceros Program was abolished in 1964. The very next year, Caesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers. They increased fair labor practices and more just conditions, changing much of what the Braceros endured.

The Food Justice Movement today advocates for further support and protection of vulnerable farm workers often exploited in sugar cane agribusiness, fruit groves, grain corporations, and America’s Salad Basket.

This is the sixth article for the Unitarian Universalist of Clearwater series:
“What we didn’t learn in school about racism”

Christina Bellamy cbbellamy4@gmail.com October 2020
(List of references available upon request)