



Bracero Guestworkers, Unpaid

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Every Tuesday, 76-year-old Miguel Díaz spends the better part of the day outside the House of Representatives in Mexico City. Díaz went to the United States in 1960s as a bracero, a contracted guestworker. Upon returning to Mexico, he and millions of other braceros were never paid the 10 percent of their earnings that had been withheld and sent to the Mexican government in an attempt to ensure braceros' temporary status.

Each week, Díaz is joined outside the House of Representatives by around 100 other braceros, as well as widows and children of braceros. The vast majority are in their 70s or 80s. Some live in Mexico City, but others travel hours from other states to get there. Wearing sombreros to protect themselves from the sun, the braceros hang a large banner on the fence in front of the House that reads, "EPN [Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto] Pay Us or Kill Us!" According to their organization, the Binational Bracero Proa Alliance, an average of 14 braceros die each day. Their cause is urgent.

The braceros' struggle to recoup decades-old back pay sheds light on the unjust treatment

and unexpected consequences of guestworker programs.

On September 29, 1942, 71 years ago last month, the first braceros were contracted in Mexico City to work in the fields of Stockton, California. The Bracero Program, the largest and best-known guestworker program in U.S. history, brought 4.5 million Mexican laborers to the U.S. between 1942 and 1964. The program emerged in part due to wartime labor organizing among American farmworkers and economic need in Mexico. “I went to work [in the U.S.] in order to eat,” said 84-year-old Ezequiel Osorio.



Bracero Guest Workers

Like subsequent guestworker programs, the Bracero Program was designed by the U.S. and Mexico to create a steady, regulated flow of male laborers. Braceros labored mainly in agriculture, but some were hired to work on railroads.

While some braceros financially benefitted from working in the US, they did so at a cost. The U.S. and Mexican governments subjected them to physical scrutiny and humiliation. When crossing the border, immigration officials forced them to strip and fumigated their naked bodies from head to toe with DDT, a dangerous insecticide. Those who cleared the medical and immigration screenings worked long hours doing strenuous labor, often living in poor, cramped conditions on the employer’s property. Those who faced abuses could not quit without facing deportation.

Despite all of this, many braceros simply want the money they are due – the 10 percent of their earnings the Mexican government never paid them.

On May 15, 1998, in Puruándiro, a town in the central Mexican state of Michoacán, a small group of braceros and Ventura Gutiérrez, the son of a bracero, formed the Binational Bracero Proa Alliance. Gutiérrez was born in Puruándiro but moved to the U.S. with his family as year or two later. He grew up in Coachella, California, eventually earned a college degree, and worked in education and labor organizing before moving back to Mexico in the late 1980s. For the last 15 years Gutiérrez has dedicated nearly every waking hour to the bracero movement, traveling by bus or plane around Mexico and to the U.S. Several weeks ago, police in Michoacán detained him during a demonstration.

The Binational Bracero Proa Alliance's mission is to organize braceros and their families in hopes of pressuring the Mexican government to pay the men the money they earned. In recent years, personal differences among leaders have resulted in the formation of a number of splinter groups, but the Binational Bracero Proa Alliance remains the largest, with 8,000 members in California, Arizona, Texas, Chicago, and in almost every Mexican state.

The group's best-known action took place on February 7, 2004, when more than 2,000 braceros and their supporters descended upon the family ranch of then-president Vicente Fox in the State of Guanajuato. A smaller group managed to make it to Fox's door, where they demanded to be paid. Their protest received attention in the Mexican media and, in part, led Fox to approve a lump sum payment of 38,000 pesos (just under \$3,000) to each person who could prove that he had been contracted as a bracero decades ago.

Though this was a victory, coming up with the required documents has been difficult for most, and for many 38,000 pesos doesn't go very far. "Thirty-eight thousand pesos is nothing," said Adolfo Hernández, a man in his early 80s who lives in Mexico City. "Life is very hard." Hernández, like most braceros, can no longer find employment because of his age. Others are physically unable to work, struggling to pay for basic necessities like utilities and food.

So Hernández continues going to the House of Representatives each Tuesday. Many who have already received the 38,000 pesos also continue to go, to fight for their full 10 percent payment, and to support their fellow braceros - the majority - who have yet to be paid any of the owed 10 percent.

The braceros who protest each week at San Lázaro played a key role in shaping U.S. and Mexican history. The fact that they are still fighting to be paid decades later is a reminder of how difficult it is for guestworkers to win even promised compensation for their labor.

Not much has changed in the last 71 years. As historian Cindy Hahamovitch recently pointed out, today's guestworkers are "threatened with violence, housed in storage sheds, underpaid or not paid, and, most important, deported and blacklisted for doing something about it."

Although it is unclear whether Congress will reach an agreement on current immigration reform, both the Senate and House plans would increase the number of guestworkers. Guestworker programs are "an objective reality," in Gutiérrez's opinion. "For more than a century there has existed a guestworker or bracero program in one form or another, and it's going to continue existing until we recognize we're mistaken."

Based on the braceros' experience, let's hope that realization comes sooner rather than later.

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