

Farmworkers and Immigration

Not all immigrants are farmworkers, and not all farmworkers are immigrants. Yet as the following facts show, our agricultural system has always relied on the labor of displaced people that do not have the benefit of full citizenship in this country—whether indentured servants, slaves, sharecroppers, or undocumented immigrants.

Timeline of Farm Labor and Immigration

1600s–1800s: COLONIAL AMERICA & SLAVERY

White laborers brought from England as indentured servants were guaranteed passage to the colonies in exchange for years of hard labor, usually in the fields. Because they did not provide enough labor to support growing agricultural production for the export market, Africans were brought to the colonies in slave ships where millions died. Forced into slave labor in the fields, they formed the backbone of the US agricultural industry.

LATE 1860s–1870s: RECONSTRUCTION

The Thirteenth Amendment prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude, but many were forced back into low-wage sharecropping and segregation under Jim Crow Laws from the 1870s well into the 1900s.⁴

1860s–1930s: IMMIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA

During the 1860s, large-scale farming brought Asian workers to supplement local and Mexican laborers. By 1886, seven out of every eight farmworkers in California were Chinese. When Chinese laborers began to organize, they were replaced by Japanese workers. Filipinos replaced Japanese workers when they in turn began to organize.⁴

1880s: EAST COAST MIGRATION

Due to changes in agriculture, the end of slavery, immigration policy and fluctuations in employment opportunities, migrant labor became an important part of East Coast agriculture. French Canadians & Italian immigrants worked in the Northeast, and African Americans from the South began to migrate along the East Coast.⁵



Why do people immigrate to do farm work in the United States?

Pull Factors

Because agriculture is one of the most dangerous and lowest-paying occupations in the United States,¹ the US agricultural industry cannot recruit citizens to fill much-needed jobs. Rather than improve wages and conditions in the fields, the industry recruits workers abroad where there are more laborers, fewer jobs, and much lower wages. Workers are also lured to labor on United States farms by the promise of a better life for themselves or their children: the “American Dream.”

Push Factors

Many people in developing countries face extreme poverty, lack of jobs, natural disasters, armed conflict, and civil unrest. As economic refugees, many immigrant farmworkers have made the difficult decision to leave their homes and families in search of new possibilities in the United States.

Globalization

Economies are developing in increasingly interconnected ways and international trade is occurring at unprecedented levels. This process of overlapping markets and free trade is called globalization.

International agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have increased imports to developing countries, but have not eliminated government subsidies for those products; this allows wealthy countries like the United States to sell some products below what they cost to produce.

Under NAFTA, the United States increased corn exports to Mexico by 240%,² and during certain years was able to sell corn 30% below its cost of production.³ Unable to compete with subsidized imports, over two million Mexican farmers have lost their jobs since 1994.⁴ Many have sought employment in the United States as a means of survival.

“Before the free trade agreement the harvest was well paid, especially for corn and beans. But then, free trade arrived and prices went down from there. A kilo of corn now costs a peso, and what’s a peso worth? Nothing... less than a quarter.”

—Craven County Farmworker, North Carolina⁷

1930s: GREAT DEPRESSION, DUST BOWL YEARS

Over 300,000 Oklahomans, Texans, Arkansans, and Missourians settled in California during the 1930s.⁶ Hundreds of thousands of farmworkers went on strike for higher wages in California, South Florida, and New Jersey.⁵ Also in the 1930s, national labor laws were passed which excluded farmworkers and domestic workers from child labor protections, overtime pay, minimum wage, and the right to organize.

1941–1964: IMPORTATION OF GUEST WORKERS

Over 100,000 European prisoners of war labored on farms in the Southeast.^{4,5} Laborers from the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Barbados worked in sugarcane, citrus and vegetable production in Florida and on the East Coast.² Italian farmworkers were replaced by Puerto Ricans in the Northeast.⁴ Under the Bracero “Strong Arm” Program, Mexican farmworkers were imported by the federal government for work on farms and railroads to supplement wartime labor shortages. The Bracero Program was terminated under controversy in 1964, but the H2A Guestworker Program continues today, currently recruiting over 20,000 workers each year for employment in agriculture.¹¹

1970s-1990s: NEW IMMIGRANTS

As African Americans moved into other industries, immigrants migrated towards jobs in agriculture. Haitians began arriving in Florida during the 1970s, to be replaced in the 1980s by workers from Mexico and Central America.⁴ The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) granted residency to over three million undocumented immigrants, about half of them farmworkers.⁴ Many left farm work and were replaced by a new wave of undocumented workers. H2A workers were denied permanent residency under IRCA¹² though many had been coming to the United States legally for as many as twenty years.

1994: NAFTA YEARS

NAFTA was signed, and two million Mexican agricultural jobs were lost due to heavily subsidized United States farm products imported to Mexico.³ This constituted a new factor pushing Mexican immigrants to the United States.

TODAY

Over 50% of immigrant farmworkers nationwide are not protected by legal documents.⁸ Close to 90% of farmworkers are Spanish-speakers, the vast majority born in Mexico.⁸ More indigenous workers from rural Mexico and Central America are arriving, as well as guestworkers from Asia.

Myths about Farmworkers and Immigration

Myth: Immigrant farmworkers come to the United States to get welfare.

Fact: Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, and most other public benefits.⁴ Even though farmworker families in the United States only earn around \$16,000 per year and over 30% live in poverty, less than ten percent use food stamps and under one percent use general assistance welfare.⁸

Myth: Immigrant farmworkers do not pay taxes.

Fact: Immigrant farmworkers pay the same sales, real estate, and consumer taxes as all United States residents. The US Social Security Administration has estimated that three out of four undocumented immigrants pay payroll taxes, and that they contribute six to seven billion dollars in Social Security funds that they are not able to claim.⁹ During their lifetime, immigrants will pay an average of \$80,000 more per capita in taxes than they will use in government services.¹⁰

A Call to Reform

Many farmworkers, immigrant workers, and advocates have called for the following:

A path to citizenship for immigrant workers,

Reunification for families separated by international borders, and

The right to advocate for improved wages and working conditions.

From slavery to the present day, our agricultural system has consistently relied upon the labor of displaced people who lack political power, labor protections, voting rights, and the full benefits of citizenship. In addition, they have been separated from loved ones by an increasingly militarized US-Mexico border. Farmworkers still confront these hurdles today.

Get Involved!

Visit www.ncfarmworkers.org to learn more and to take action in support of farmworkers.

The Farmworker Institute is a project of the NC Council of Churches' Farmworker Ministry Committee, whose members include the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Farmworker Unit of Legal Aid of North Carolina, National Farm Worker Ministry, North Carolina Farmworker Health Program, Student Action with Farmworkers, and Triangle Friends of the United Farm Workers.



Sources: 1 McCurdy, S. et al, American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 2003; 2 US Dept. of Agriculture, 2004; 3 Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2003; 4 Rothenberg, D. 1998; 5 Hahamovitch, C. 1997; 6 Mink, G. & O'Connor, A. eds., 2004; 7 National Farm Worker Ministry, 2006; 8 US Dept. of Labor National Agricultural Workers Survey, 2005; 9 Porter, E. New York Times, 2005; 10 National Council of La Raza, 2006; 11 Porter, E. New York Times, 2006; 12 US Dept. of Labor. Full citations available at www.ncfarmworkers.org.