Pull Factors

Because agriculture is one of the most dangerous and lowest-paying occupations in the United States, 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.

Under NAFTA, the United States increased corn exports to Mexico by 240%, and during certain years was able to sell corn 30% below its cost of production. Unable to compete with subsidized imports, over two million Mexican farmers have lost their jobs since 1994. 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
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.

1930s: Great Depression, Dust Bowl Years
Over 300,000 Oklahomans, Texans, Arkansans, and Missourians settled in California during the 1930s. Hundreds of thousands of farmworkers went on strike for higher wages in California, South Florida, and New Jersey. 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. Laborers from the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Barbados worked in sugarcane, citrus, and vegetable production in Florida and on the East Coast. Italian farmworkers were replaced by Puerto Ricans in the Northeast. 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.

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. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) granted residency to over three million undocumented immigrants, about half of them farmworkers. Many left farm work and were replaced by a new wave of undocumented workers. H2A workers were denied permanent residency under IRCA though many had been coming to the United States legally for as many as 20 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. 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. Close to 90% of farmworkers are Spanish-speakers, the vast majority born in Mexico. More indigenous workers from rural Mexico and Central America are arriving, as well as guestworkers from Asia.


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