

Keep the Union at Bay

The Racial Dimensions of Anti-Union Practices in US Agriculture and the Long Fight for Migrant Farm-Labor Representation

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The idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism...They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available in most cases at lower cost.

John Block, US Secretary of Agriculture, 1986

4.1 NAFTA and the Disruption of Food Sovereignty

In 1982, the sovereign debt crisis induced the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the US Treasury Department to draft a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) with the Mexican government that demanded the introduction of neoliberal reforms to its economy. Suárez Carrera (2002, 185) gives us an insightful reconstruction of the main points of such an agreement, which demanded the application of the principle of comparative advantage to Mexican agriculture. Since the Mexican grain and oilseed sector is “not competitive”, it demanded that Mexico reconverted its agricultural production towards those sectors in which Mexico does have a “comparative advantage”, namely niche products such as “winter vegetables, fruits, and tropical flowers” (SAP, quoted in Suárez Carrera 2002, 185). It stimulated the introduction of the “necessary constitutional and legal reform” to facilitate the development of a private land market (Suárez Carrera 2002, 185) and required that the government would privatise *ejido* and communal lands. It demanded a reduction in public investment in the agricultural sector and an increase in private investment, since public investment “distorts the functioning of the free market” (185). Moreover, given the small size of peasant farms and “their attachment to the land, their technological backwardness, and their non-market oriented culture” (185), it demanded that “surplus non competitive peasants” be given “the opportunity to find employment in either the

modern agricultural sector or the industrial and service sectors” (185). Last but not least, Suárez Carrera points out that food security had to become a function of the market both in terms of supply and quality. In fact, “in terms of access to food for Mexicans, those that can pay for it will not have a problem. Those that cannot pay for it will perhaps be assisted with welfare programs. In terms of quality, quality has a price, and those who desire quality will have to pay for it” (185).

Between 1986 and 1994, the Mexican government introduced a number of reforms intended to liberalize the economic structure. In this context, national protections to industry and agriculture were gradually liberalized, thus integrating the country into the international free market. Candice Shaw reconstructs the way in which the liberalization of trade had a strong impact on the Mexican economy. In those years, Carlos Salinas de Gortari eliminated certain government subsidies for small-scale/peasant farming. In July 1992 Salinas made constitutional amendments to Article 27 of the *Agrarian Law* and allowed for a large portion of the *ejido* land to be consolidated and made available for sale (Shaw 2011). In 1994, President Ernesto Zedillo encouraged Mexico’s participation in the *North American Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA) and lifted tariffs in order to attract foreign investment. By 1996, the national agricultural trade deficit had risen by 43 percent; one and a half million peasants were unemployed; consumption had decreased by 29 percent; and Mexico was forced to import more expensive corn from the US (Suárez Carrera 2002, 185). In this context, the price for tortillas rapidly increased by more than ten times the increase in the minimum wage. Ochoa argues that: “in some states a kilogram of tortillas accounts for as much as one-third of the daily minimum wage” (Ochoa 2007). As the Mexican trade deficit with the US escalated, millions of Mexicans did not have enough resources to satisfy their minimum food requirements. In general, the liberalization of Mexico’s economy proceeded parallel to the liberation of a new army of producers and consumers who could no longer rely on the land for self-subsistence but were forced to become dependent on the market.

The *overarching* result of the “re-conversion” of the Mexican economy into a market economy was the “interruption” of the Mexican re-production chain and a massive process of urbanization. Until 1976, Mexican farmers had used a “family oriented” vertical integration to produce, transport, and sell their products in the market (Schwentesi, Gómez 2002). Small producers grew corn for their own subsistence and then sold it in the closest market. According to Schwentesius and Gómez (2002), the connections between small city markets and the small farm accounted for both production and consumption, thus transforming the family farm into a relatively self-sufficient unit of production. In 1994, NAFTA dismantled the existing human and commercial bonds between the countryside and the closest towns by inducing Mexico to import foodstuffs from foreign



Figure 12. Fruits. Tampico, Mexico. *Frutas. Tampico, México*



Figure 13. Son of a juice vendor, Mexico. *Hijo de un vendedor de jugo, México*



Figure 14. Fruit vendor. Monterrey, Mexico. *Vendedor de fruta, Monterrey, México*

markets. At that point, not only were millions of “non competitive farmers” forced to seek employment in the city, but the entire traditional economic structure of Mexico was largely undermined. In 2002, a US Department of Agriculture study on Mexico’s economy, edited by Debra Tropp, David Skully, and John Link (Tropp et al. 2002), explained that Mexico had become an unprecedented opportunity for foreign investment. The report shows that the process of urbanization that typically follows the reconversion of an agricultural country into a market economy had produced a new set of needs for the new urban dwellers. In fact, the new urban population Moreno no longer had access to daily perishable items. The rapid process of urbanization reduced access to “small, specialized shops and corner stores or street stalls” (Tropp et al. 2002, VI) and induced urban dwellers to become dependent on foreign capital for both production and consumption.

Large retail stores reflect this transformation. They cut the average number of trips to the grocery from 11.5 in 1995 to 7.5 in 1998, a figure that is still high compared to US standards of 2.2 trips a week (USDA 2002, 22). This change largely reflected the restructuring of Mexico from a rural economy to a service economy. In fact, a 2002 USDA report emphasizes how the reconversion of Mexico’s economy towards more manufacturing and service jobs had led to a “scarcity of time” and a growing demand

for convenience in food shopping” (USDA 2002, V). In this context, the interruption of agricultural self-sustainability stimulated a new need for home appliances, refrigerators, microwaves and cars. In fact, the rural population is often characterized by insufficient cold storage availability, inadequate rural roads and strict gender roles in the family, which reduced its expenditure on household equipment or family-owned automobiles. Before NAFTA, the rate of automobile ownership in Mexico was one car per eleven people (USDA 2002, VIII).

In 1996, 25 out of the 30 industrial sectors classified under the new North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS) experienced a significant growth in their exports to Mexico. This growth involved, in particular, Chrysler, GM and Ford in the automotive sector; Texas Instruments in computers and telecommunications; Whirlpool in home appliances; and Kmart, J.C. Penney and Wal-Mart in retail. Ford, General Motors and Chrysler largely benefited from the reduction in Mexican tariffs on cars and light trucks, which went from 20 percent to 10 percent on January 1, 1994. “Before NAFTA, sales of Ford products accounted for less than one percent of the Mexican market. By 1996, sales of Ford products from the United States and Canada already accounted for almost 11 percent of the Mexican market” (Kengor, LaFaive, Summers 1999). Similarly, General Motors exports to Mexico were “virtually zero” before 1993 (Kengor, LaFaive, Summers 1999). In 1999, GM was the largest seller of vehicles in Mexico (Kengor, LaFaive, Summers 1999). As far as the Electronics industry is concerned, Lüthje, Hürtgen, Shenzhen and Sproll (1999, 87) emphasize how

exports more than doubled between 1996 and 2004, reaching US\$43 billion at the end of 2004 and surpassing exports of other industrial goods such as auto parts or garments. In computers and telecommunication equipment, along with TV, audio and video equipment, the proportion of exports reached almost 53%.

In this context, not only were foreign manufacturers able to increase their exports to Mexico and, in some instances, decentralize their production in the Mexican *maquilladoras*, but the interruption of the traditional structure of rural self-subsistence also allowed US retailers and corporations to benefit from the liberation of a new army of producers and consumers. It is in this context that Wal-Mart became the largest food retailer in Mexico. According to Schwentesius and Gómez (2002), in Mexico there are traditionally five main retail outlets, two of which go back thousands of years - the open air markets in citycenters and the mobile street markets. Since 1946, when the first supermarket was established in the country, the number of supermarkets has grown from 4 self-service stores per 100,000 people in 1960, to 63 self-service stores

in the 1980s, to hundreds during the 1990s (Schwentesi, Gómez 2002). The penetration of Wal-Mart into the Mexican economy was not only a reflection of the loss of sustainability in the rural countryside but was also a reflection of the ability of big retail chains to coordinate their outsourcing operations in the country through a new system of communication, transportation and distribution. In fact, “supermarket chains not only control distribution, but also shape decisively the production, processing and consumption of food as a result of their enormous buyer power”, emphasizes Corrado (2017, 8-9). Jan Douwe van der Ploeg has spoken of food empires, adding that “it is becoming difficult, if not often impossible, for farmers to sell food ingredients or for consumers to buy food outside of the circuits that they control” (Ploeg 2010, 101, quoted in Corrado 2017). In this context, big retailers such as Wal-Mart have slowly restructured the food-chain across the border.

In April 2014, former US agriculture secretary Dan Glickman defined Wal-Mart as “the most important force in agriculture today” (Gunther 2014). In that year, more than half of the company’s annual revenues came from groceries, and its market share was growing. According to the USDA’s Economic Research Service (2013), the twenty largest food retailers accounted for 64 percent of grocery store sales in America, up from 40 percent in 1993. At the same time, the increasing power of US capital in Mexico has affected the sustainability of the rural population, leading not only to the impoverishment of rural areas, but also to an increase in the rates of migration from the peripheral farm to the United States.

4.2 Emigration by Dispossession

In 1998, sociologist and economist Saskia Sassen asked why it is that “the major immigrant-sending countries are always the leading recipients of jobs and foreign-investments in labor-intensive manufacturing and service activities” (Sassen 1998a, 252). Sassen’s question was based on the observation that emigration often originates in those countries that are also the main recipients of foreign capital. According to Sassen, the reason for this process lies in the effect that foreign investments have on the economic structure of the developing countries. Foreign capital causes the “disruption of traditional work structures” and directly displaces “small farmers who are left without means of subsistence” (Sassen 1998a, 257). In this context, the pursuit of foreign market contributes to the impoverishment of farmers, initiating a process of “emigration by dispossession” – a process whereby peripheral farmers are driven to leave their lands to seek occupation in the service economy of the urban areas of Mexico or to migrate to the United States in search of work. Despite the fact that the workers had different personal stories, the experiences of migrant farm-workers in

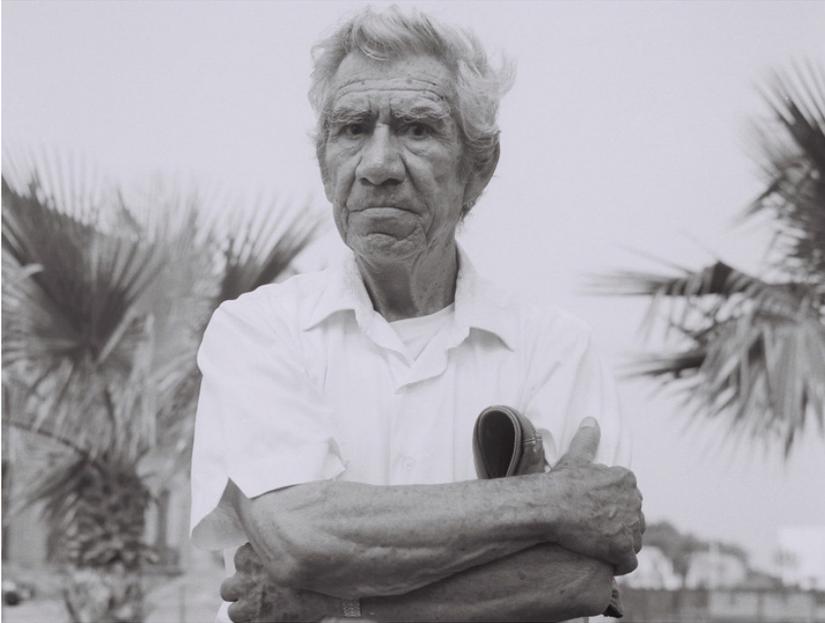


Figure 15. A man who lost his land, Mexico. *Un hombre que perdió su tierra, México*

Mexico were similarly characterized equally by poverty, low-educational attainment, and a lifetime spent on the farm. All of these workers had been farmers for generations. They were forced to migrate as working in agriculture became more and more difficult due to the ever-growing cost of farm inputs and the plummeting price of imported maize. Farm-Labor Organising Committee (FLOC) organizer A. describes the impact of NAFTA in the rural areas of Mexico with these words:

A couple of years after NAFTA, Baldemar visited two villages close to Michoacán in Southern Mexico. In these two villages, where there were hardly any men, Baldemar said that almost no adult men were there, only children. All the men had travelled to Mexico City or the US to find a job. In those same days Baldemar attended the annual convention of farm-workers and farm-workers' unions in Mexico. He was a speaker there and when he rose to the podium the first thing he asked was how many of the 1,500 people that were there had family members working in the US without documents. Every single one of them raised their hand, he said. More than any statistics I've ever read this says a lot about NAFTA and its consequences on farmers.

The personal experience of the workers largely reflects this macro-dynamic. Most had been *campesinos* for much of their lives and most decided to migrate to the United States after growing maize became impossible due to the high costs of farming and its plummeting profits. This is Alejandro's experience:

I have been a *campesino* all my life. Until a few years ago my wife and I had our own land, but then everything became more and more expensive. Over recent years there is a lot of competition if you grow maize. Here in Tampico there is a big seaport where many ships come from the United States. Many times they ship maize from North America. They buy maize here for cheap prices and then they sell tortillas for high prices. Everyone in Mexico eats tortillas, you know? We are at the point that we buy tortillas from abroad. So for many *campesinos* it's not worth growing maize anymore. One kilo of tortillas is worth 10 pesos. One kilo of maize is worth 1 peso. So I buy maize and then sell tortillas. That's the only thing I can do. That's the problem that we have in this country now in Mexico. Many times the government gives you a piece of land. Having ten hectares of land is like a small company, but the problem is that we don't have any banks to give us the money to work the land, so we can't buy the machinery. And then we can't buy the fertilizers; we can't pay for water: in the end even those that do have the land can't farm it. So my wife and I had to sell our little piece of land and now we work for other people. My wife works at the hospital and I work in the US every summer. Usually I leave in May and come back in November. During the winter I work here: I build houses, I grow tomatoes, chilly, watermelon... Many people need daily workers: there are several companies that hire you to harvest here. You work for as long as the harvest lasts. It can be 15 days, one month or one week. It is only temporary labor and it's not paid well.

Alfonso was a skinny man in his mid-forties, born in Tamaulipas from a family of farmers. As his family was very poor, he left home when he was only ten years old to find a job that would help him support his brothers. A poor farm-worker all his life, Alfonso was working to pay for the medical expenses of his daughter who was sick. Alfonso had the marks of hunger on his face. Throughout his life he spent many days without anything to eat, he said. After picking crops all day, many times he had to drink a beer "so I don't feel the hunger".

I have been a *campesino* since I was ten. I didn't have any childhood because my father was very poor. He was struggling to give us food. I could see that. We didn't have enough food to eat. At that time my older brothers worked in the house, but we needed extra money. So when I

was ten I left to go to work. My mom and dad were crying when I left. They didn't want me to leave. They said "don't go, son, you're going to end up badly, you're going to end up with bad people, doing drugs". Thank God that never happened to me. One beer is all I have sometimes, and most of the times I drink because I am hungry. I drink so I don't feel the hunger.

That day when I left the house alone I cried... I cried and I cried because I had no food and I was scared. I was looking for a job but no one would give me one. They kept saying that I was a kid and they didn't need me. They needed my dad, my older brothers, but not me. There were a few growers that kept me for one or two days. They kept me for two or three days so that I could have some money to eat. But that was it. It took me some time to finally find a man that helped me. He was rich and had many fields. He helped me. When I was 12 he taught me how to drive the tractor, so that I could gain a little more money. Back then he used to pay me 70 pesos a week. But what can you do with seven dollars a week? Still, I sent the money home. I have sent money to my family for many years. I had 13 brothers. At that point there were 15 of us in the house, so I worked for a week and then I sent the money home. Sometimes I couldn't send any money for one entire week because my salary was too little. Other times the grower fed me and I sent my money home. I used to tell him: "this week I need to send money to my family". So he said ok, send it this week and for this week I feed you. He helped me.

I worked for him for about ten years. He was generous. I am very grateful. I am sorry that he is not here anymore. His daughters still talk to me and invite me over. When I am there they ask me to stay for a few days and help them with their work. They tell me to help them and they'll cook me dinner. We're like brothers now. Like brothers.

Geraldo had been a farm-worker since he was fifteen years old. Now a man in his late forties, Geraldo spent many years working as a *campesino* and integrating his salary by working in the *maquilla* industry, as a carpenter or electrician. Geraldo had two sons who were both studying. He was working hard to give them a better future.

Here in Mexico I work as a carpenter: I make furniture, but it is not a stable job. I usually work as a daily laborer. When I am lucky I find a job for six months. Other times I just work for one day. One day is the minimum and six months the maximum. It depends. Most of the time I work for an electronic plant; when I don't work there I work as a carpenter or a driver. Whatever I can find. But it's not a stable job, you know, it's temporary labor. I've been working temporary jobs for years now, ever since I started working in agriculture when I was 15. Actually I was twelve when I started working. Where I am from the people are very

poor so when I was 15 I had to drop out of school. But where I am from in the State of Puebla there is no agriculture, so soon I had to move to Tamaulipas, where I was able to work in the fields. A few years later I left San Luis Tamaulipas and I started working for General Electrics (GE) and Electrolux for 12 years until 1993. I had to leave because the company was sold to another company and we were all fired. GE started us with a low wage, but they recognized our seniority. The pay was low, but I used to do a lot of overtime work, and at that time it was paid twice or three times as much. This means that I earned enough each week: compared to the regular wage the double wage was decent. Normally we worked for 45 hours a week. However on top of those I worked for about 25 hours overtime each week, which means that I worked for 70 hours a week more or less, seven days a week. I made about 350 pesos a week, which is the minimum wage in Mexico. I stopped working for GE in 1993. From 1993 to 1997 I worked in agriculture as a middleman. I would go to the store and buy 50 kilograms of oranges, and then sell them by the kilo. The difficulty was that I needed to have a truck and a refrigerator. Now there are specialized companies that do this. My wife didn't like it because she said that it was dishonest: when you work as a middleman you make money by charging people more. So she thought that was not an honest job to do, but it was the only job I had. Finally in 1997 I had the opportunity to go to North Carolina.

Like Alfonso and Geraldo, most of the workers told me the same story: a story that began in the poor states of Tamaulipas, Saint Louis Potosi or Santiago de Nayarit, where these workers had many brothers and sisters, a small piece of land, and no money. This is Demetrio's experience.

I am 22 years old. I am the youngest of 12 brothers. We are all *campesinos*. My entire family is a family of *campesinos*. We grow maize. We all worked in the fields. I went to school for four years. I wasn't able to finish my fifth year when I was in primary school because my father didn't have money and I needed to work. At that time we lived in the *ejido*. Primary and secondary schools were there, but none of us made it to the secondary school. Very few people in my *ejido* had the opportunity to study because we needed to work. Since I stopped studying I have been working in the fields. One day one guy came to the *ejido*. He was working for some growers in Tennessee and he was looking for workers. He had an employment list and I asked how I could be recruited. He put my name on the list. It was 2003. Then I went to NC in 2003, 2004, and 2005.

I had to go to NC because there is no work here. No one buys maize anymore. The only thing you can do with maize is eat it, but it's not worth it. In the past 10 years everything has changed. There are not the same people buying maize. They don't pay us good money anymore.

Now it's mostly private companies. Growing maize is not worth it. It's too expensive and they don't give you money for it.

Demetrio and his brothers never made it to secondary school. Usually most *ejidos* only had a primary school. While Demetrio's *ejido* did have a secondary school, he could not attend it because he needed to work. Similarly, Enrique could never go to school. Enrique could not read nor write. He could not find better jobs. He spent his entire life in the fields: sleeping in friends' homes, and saving on water, food and electricity to survive. Life was very hard for him: "It's a struggle", he said, "you have to fight to make it through".

I have lived all my life in the fields. I have never been to school and I never had the opportunity to study, so I can't read or write. From the beginning everything was hard for me. I had to work hard for a living. Somehow I got by. People lent me their homes. They lent me their homes for one or two years. I did that for about nine or ten years, and then I went to the States. At that point I had three daughters, and all of them were grown women. What could I do? My salary was about 600 pesos a week. This means 60 dollars. It's very little. Then you have the rent, the water, the electricity. Here in Monterrey the rent for a month is around 600-800 pesos. Electricity is about 100 pesos, gas is 300, water is 100 pesos. And then you need to eat. You have to buy food, clothes... There's no other choice, you have to cross to eat. Life is very hard in Mexico. For us, life is very hard. Migrating is a necessity: a necessity, not something that I like or want to do. Not a diversion: a necessity. There was nothing else I could do. I had to migrate. Here poverty is a war. It's a war. It's a real war. There is no national war in Mexico, but here we have a daily war: poverty. It's a war against all of us, and we are struggling. We are all struggling. Everyday we need to struggle. We struggle to bring food to our table. We struggle to work. The first thing you have to do if you want to work is get the paperwork, and this paperwork is not free, you need money. You can't even work if you don't have money. You have to have money because they charge you to work: they charge you for transportation, which is 12 pesos, 24 pesos a day. Then they charge you for the paperwork. You have to have the *acta de nacimiento* [birth certificate], and a social security number. They ask you for these things before they hire you, and they cost money. So if you don't have money life is very hard. It's a struggle. You have to fight to make it through.

Fernando was a young man and a fast worker. When he was younger he wanted to be a mechanic. But he needed to help his family, so he dropped out of school when he was fifteen. Since then, he has been working the land.

I am 27 years old and I live in Santiago de Nayarit. I went to school until I was 15 years old, and I had to drop out then because I needed to work. When I was in school I wanted to be a mechanic, but the economy in Mexico is so difficult that it's hard to have money to do anything. My family did not have the money. We have always been farmers but in 1994 things were going really badly, so in 1994 we all moved to Tijuana. In Tijuana we worked at a local plant, all of us. Only my mother was working in the house. My brothers, my father and I worked at the plant. I worked there for four years, then I started working in the tobacco fields in Santiago de Nayarit. In Nayarit they paid us more or less five pesos for each bucket. I did about 120 buckets a day, which meant more or less 600 pesos a week. We all worked in the same *rancho* then, but the economy in Santiago was also bad. We didn't have our own land, we worked for the *ejidatarios*, but they didn't have the money to pay us. I worked there for six years, and then I left for the United States. Originally I didn't want to leave Mexico, but I really had no other option. The thing is that you can earn better money there. In those four years I helped all of my family, and that made a difference. But other than the money, it's not a great experience. It still depends on the grower, but usually the grower is very demanding. If you give all you can, in the best way you can, it's fine. But if you don't, you have problems.

Alejandro was the only worker I met who had been able to afford an education. He had studied for four years in college and had worked for many years as a teacher. I had spoken to Alejandro many times before, because not only was he a *campesino* and an H-2A worker, but for a short time he had also been a FLOC organizer. He had three younger brothers who needed to be fed. That is why when he was only twelve years old he started working in agriculture.

I am 28 years old, I have five brothers and one one-year-old child. I am from Santa Fe in the state of Nayarit. I finished primary school in my home town when I was ten and then I moved to the city to go to secondary high school. I studied for seven years in high school and for four years in college. My mother was a nurse; she worked at the local clinic. Until I was 23 I studied and worked. I have always worked, since I was twelve. First I worked in the fields and then as a mechanic. Then when I graduated I became a teacher for three years. My grandparents had a small piece of land. We used to grow maize, beans and chilli. Now we don't sell our products, so we only use them for our own consumption. We have six acres of land. We used to have another six acres of land but we had to sell it. It was 1968, and that year I had to find a better job to support my family and earn money to feed my brothers. Back then my brothers were studying. It was my responsibility to feed the family.

The story that José told me is very similar. I met José at his home. He lived close to Ciudad Victoria. When he came to pick me up at the bus station he was driving a truck that he had bought with the money he earned in the United States. José was a 32-year-old man who had been working in the fields all his life. I spent a few hours alone with him, as he showed me his house and told me about his experience as a farm-worker. José lived in a small apartment close to Ciudad Victoria. His wife was not there. He showed me the room where his children lived. He was proud to show me that his children had a room to themselves.

I am originally from Saint Louis Potosi. Before I went to the States I used to do everything, every job: I have worked in a grocery store; built furniture; worked as a driver; worked in the kitchen... every job. I've done many different jobs but I have always been a *campesino*. Always. All of us have always been *campesinos*. You can be a carpenter or work in a shop but then when it's time for harvesting you go back to the land. The thing is that you cannot survive only by working the land: it's very hard. Very hard, especially now that everything is so expensive. So I had to find other jobs, but whatever I did I always went back to the land, always. Here a *campesino* earns 100 pesos a day, which is ten boxes a day. But then it depends on the season and the weather. So you must have another job on the side.

Maurice lived in an *ejido* with his family. He was a 32-year-old man with four children and nine brothers. His wife had eight brothers. I visited Maurice and his family on their land. I probably met thirty or forty members of their family that day. There were smiling women and man, and a dozen children. They all had a little house and a small piece of land. On the *ejido* there were also a small *tienda* and an elementary school. The land was visibly poor, but the warmth of each family member was touching. Maurice told me about his life as a *campesino*.

I have always worked in the fields. I went to primary school when I was a child and since then I have always worked in the fields. Mostly oranges, beans, and maize. That's the only work I've done in my life. All of my family has been working in the fields, we lived in an *ejido*. We also met in the *ejido* [pointing at his wife]. We were young, we were eight years old when we met. We were both born here. We have never done anything other than this. The problem is that these days it's difficult to do this job. The corn we grow is not worth anything. Its price becomes cheaper and cheaper every year. Whatever we grow, they give us less and less money for. So many families are leaving the *ejido*. So many, they sell their land and move to the city. The thing is that we can't sell our produce and we don't have the machinery to work the land. Here we live in a commu-



Figure 16-17. The communal land, Mexico. *El ejido, México*

nity, but we work the land individually. Our schools are in common, but we don't work together. We all work our own piece of land. And none of us has the money for the machinery. Even if we worked together, we couldn't afford the machinery. No one has money here.

Carlos had also been a *campesino* all his life. He lived in a small house in Tampico. Carlos had two sons, one was eight and the other was ten years old. The eldest was born with a birth defect and both Carlos and his wife had to do several jobs to pay off his medical expenses. Carlos had been in North Carolina for three years. Given his ability to speak a little English, he was the camp representative for his fellow workers. I met Carlos, his wife, and their two children at their home. The house was very small, there was only a little bedroom and the kitchen. I spent one night with them. We all slept in the same tiny bedroom, close together in two big, soft beds, while the television was on all night. This is what he said.

I have always worked in the fields, with animals and cows. My family had five or six cows and a little bit of land. There were eight of us in the family: I had two brothers and three sisters. The youngest one was 17 years old, while my two brothers are now 28 and 26. We used to grow maize and beans. We also have nopal now and different fruits. Maize has always been the main produce, but today its price is very low. They pay little money for it. They practically don't pay anything for it, so now we use it mostly for our own consumption. Today if you don't have animals or other produce, maize is not enough. The people are selling their land real cheap now, because they don't have the money to farm it. Things are changing quickly. When I was young there were about 70 families in the *ejido*. It was a big community; a lot of people lived there. Right now a lot of people have left. Most of us went to the US. There are lots of people that have migrated to the US because they can't work here anymore now, everything has become too expensive. So they look for another grower to work for either here or in the States.

4.3 Debts and Recruiters

I asked Alfonso why he decided to migrate. Alfonso told me that his daughter was ill. His daughter had just had brain surgery, and he needed money to pay for her medicines. For that reason he continued to work in the US, but he was getting older and working in North Carolina was very demanding.

I have a daughter who is sick. She has a disease in her brain. It's a tumor. She had surgery. Now apparently she's safe and she will survive. But they told me that we won't know for years if she's really out of danger.

The tumor was in her brain and she was very sick for two years. My grower helped me and gave me the money for the surgery. He is a religious man and he goes to the church. He gave me 2,000 dollars, which is a lot of help for me. But giving her medicines is still a problem. That is expensive. So now I have no money. I had to buy insurance for the operation, and the insurance was 3,500 dollars. That was something that I had not planned on. It was so expensive. Good doctors and good medicines are so expensive. I had to buy medicines for 200, 300, 400, 500 pesos, and I earned 600 pesos a week. Her medicines lasted 15 days. Then the problem was that if I bought the medicines for her I had no money for my family to eat. It was so hard. Then I called them and asked how she is and they said she is sick. And now I have insurance but I have to pay the insurance for ten years. And deal with all of these doctors. That's expensive. That's why I go back to the US.

Maurice's wife told me that it was difficult for her to let her husband leave for the United States. She said that they needed the money, but when he was away it was difficult to take care of everything without him. The demarcation in gender roles in Mexico is very strong in rural areas. Like Maurice's wife, women still carry out most domestic tasks while men work in the fields. The process of migration has revolutionized family structure. When the men migrated, women had to take on the men's responsibilities, both inside and outside the house. Maurice's wife said that every year she hoped that it would be the last time, but every year he had to go again.

For most workers, the opportunity to migrate to the United States came with a visit of the recruiter to the *ejido*. The North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA) handles the recruitment process by means of a sub-contracting agency called Manpower of America (MOA). MOA is an employment services company specializing in permanent, temporary and contract recruitment services. Every year, MOA handles thousands of temporary visas from Mexico, sending workers not only to North Carolina, but also to Georgia, Indiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Ohio. The recruiting procedure begins in dozens of Mexican towns, where MOA recruiters seek to hire impoverished farm-workers (Cano, Najjar 2004; Cuezueca, Pederzini 2012). In order to be hired, the workers must meet certain requirements: each potential recruit must have a passport and enough money to pay for their visa and transportation to the United States in advance. According to Cano and Najjar (2004), every year each recruiter has a long list of farmers waiting and hoping to be contracted. The *contratista* reviews the farm-workers' credentials and if they are lucky enough to be hired, they are sent to the American consulate in Monterrey for an interview.

During the harvesting season, the consulate in Monterrey grants thousands of interviews daily and rejects between five and fifteen percent of the applicants. Eight thousand of these workers travel from Monterrey to North

Carolina (Cano, Najar 2004). According to the report published by Cano and Najar in the Mexican journal *La Jornada* (2004), when they reach North Carolina after a 40 hour journey, they are met by an NCGA representative who gives the farm-workers strict warnings of their obligations: they must fulfill their labor contract or they will be declared ineligible to return to the US the following year; and they must not communicate with Legal Services or the union, because communication with such bodies has already “killed the H-2A program in New York, Maryland and Florida” (Cano, Najar 2004).

This is Thomas’ experience of the recruitment process:

When living at the *ejido* became difficult, I left for Ciudad Victoria, where I worked for ten years in a hotel. I was 17, and I worked there from 17 to 27. At the hotel I had one day of rest a week. There they used to pay me 300 pesos a week, sometimes 400. Then I went to Monterrey to work in a plant. The wage was a little better, about 450 pesos a week, but the problem was the rent, because it was higher. So I moved again, and worked a few days in construction, as an apprentice. I worked as an electrician, a plumber, and a painter. But still, it was not secure labor. Only temporary labor. Temporary labor in agriculture, construction, and the *maquiladoras* were the only options. I wanted to go to the United States. A lot of people cross the border with a coyote. They pay and go without documents. A lot of people go like this but it’s very dangerous: many people die crossing the river. It’s easy to die in the river or in the desert. The coyote takes some ten people with him each time, but there are so many tragedies that happen there. They cross the desert and they walk for days. When the water ends they are in trouble. So others cross the river, but there is no air to breathe in the river. Here in the *rancho* everyone knows the coyote. He tells us that there is someone in another *rancho* that takes people to the other side. He demands around 15,000 pesos for each person. Sometimes the coyote has fake papers to allow the people to cross. Other times they cross the river. It’s very dangerous.

When I decided to cross, my dad did not want me to go. He thought it would be very dangerous. But I didn’t go as an undocumented, I had my visa. I went as an H-2A. I paid the *contratista* 3,800 pesos. It is about 100 dollars for the visa but on the top of that figure there were 3,800 to the *contratista* only. Then you pay for transportation on top of that money. So you pay 3,800 to the *contratista* only to send you to the other side, for no particular reason. Brandon said that we are supposed to receive a receipt otherwise we are not to pay. Overall I pay 6-7,000 pesos each time to go to the US That’s a lot of money.

In general, a MOA recruiter would travel to the *ejido* in search of new young laborers. Soon enough, their name would be on his employment list and the worker would pay about 7,000 pesos. This is Fernando’s experience.

For me to go to the US every year I have to pay 7,000 pesos. So I have to ask for a loan, and this is one month's salary of work. If they lend me 7,000 pesos and then I leave in August I only earn what is necessary to pay my debts. That is why I need to start working in May. The thing is that it's not worth it to come later in the season because every year you have to pay. Now with my seniority I have privileges because they know that I work fast and so they call me earlier in the season. From May to November it's good money.

Carlos also paid 7,000 pesos to his recruiter. In Carlos' case, he was the one to contact the agency:

I needed money. So I talked to MOA and paid almost 7,000 pesos. All together it was about 7,000 pesos for the recruitment process. On paper, you are paid eight dollars an hour and at least it's eight hours a day, 40 hours a week. But it really depends on the grower, sometimes you work ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day, and other times you don't work at all. It depends, it depends on the grower and it depends on the weather. Sometimes they tell us to work more today because it's going to rain tomorrow, and so that day we work for 16 hours. If you work they pay you and if you don't they don't pay you. It's that simple. By the end of the season if you're lucky you earn 6,000 dollars. It is 5,000 pesos each month on average. So that means that in a year we make 6,000 dollars. But you have to stay for a few months at least because you have to make up for the money you pay out. Now with that money we are building a house. A very simple house is 60,000 pesos.

Geraldo was the oldest worker I interviewed. Maybe for that reason he seemed to be the most sensitive to the difficulties of the H-2A program.

After so many years as a temporary worker finally in 1997 I had the opportunity to go to North Carolina. A friend told me about the NCGA and he introduced me to a *contratista* in San Luis Potosi. I met the *contratista* and filled in the documents and waited for almost one year until he said that I could go. The following year the grower in NC asked for me again so I went back. I had never been to the US before. I was afraid. My friend kept telling me that they treat people badly there, so I was afraid. However I needed to go, there was no other option. I needed the money to buy food.