

# Inequality according to mexican migrant workers

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An estimated 80 percent of farmworkers in America are Mexican, and almost half of those are undocumented immigrants; more than one million Mexican migrant workers are currently traveling around the United States, looking for work in various agricultural fields. Like the Joad family in *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, today's Mexican migrant worker population experiences extremely unfair labor practices, and face many obstacles that the regular working class does not encounter. In order to make a living and provide for their families, migrant workers face severe difficulties such as strenuous manual labor, dangerous conditions, unfair compensation, unbalanced power within their workplace, and no collective bargaining power with their employers. Though these issues are prevalent to today's migrant workers, migrant employers have subjected their temporary Mexican employees to unfair labor practices for more than seventy-three years. Mexican migrant workers were the solution during periods of labor shortages, dating as far back as World War I. Though *Grapes of Wrath* took place several years earlier, the Joad family faced similar problems to those of the Mexican migrant workers, and the laborer mistreatment seen in Steinbeck's novel was a precursor to Mexican workers' unfair labor practices.

The mistreatment of migrant workers from Mexico by the American government and employers can be traced all the way back to the labor shortage during World War I, when most of the laboring American men were fighting overseas. After the war was over and Americans returned to a peacetime economy, the labor provided by the migrant workers was no longer necessary. The late 1920s marked the beginning of the Mexican Repatriation, when thousands of foreign workers were deported and forced

to leave their undocumented families in the United States after settling into a life in America. History continued to repeat itself with World War II and the Bracero Program, though on a larger, crueller scale. The Bracero Program was a mutual agreement made by the Mexican and American governments to allow Mexican men to be contracted by the agricultural industry to work in the United States. Though this arrangement provided employment opportunities, it ripped the braceros from their families and required the Mexican laborers to endure harsh labor. Accounts from Mexican braceros indicate that their working conditions were dangerous and they were unfairly compensated. In an article about the effects of the bracero program on Mexican families, Ana Elizabeth Rosas writes, “ Braceros were denied fair wages, health insurance, housing, meals and transportation to and from their place of employment, as well as regular access to representatives who would report their concerns to their US employers and the Mexican government” (386). Rosas’s sentiments show the exploitation of Mexican workers, and gives clear illustrations of the unfair labor practices that braceros faced.

These issues are the same issues that modern day migrant workers face as well, showing that time has changed little for this suffering demographic. After the Bracero Program ended in 1965, the United States further pursued the cheap labor provided by Mexican migrants through the creation of the Maquiladora system, which gave the United States access to Mexican labor through specific, legally-binding contracts with Mexican migrants. This program was almost identical to the Bracero Program, similar in the restriction of rights and unfair labor practices, and is still in place today. Though many Mexican migrant workers are included in this program, many

are not, especially undocumented Mexican migrants. Undocumented workers struggled the most concerning workers' rights and fair labor, as they cannot present a complaint to the U. S. or Mexican government, like contracted migrant workers can, without fear of being deported. Though the highest Mexican migrant worker population remains near the U. S.-Mexico border states such as New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Texas, Mexican migrant workers are suffering the same injustices all over the country.

Some of the unfair labor practices that Mexican migrant workers face are strenuous manual labor, dangerous conditions, unfair compensation, unbalanced power within their workplace, and no collective bargaining power with their employers. According to Migrant Farm Worker Division of Colorado Legal Services, over 73% of their Mexican workers reported that they had zero days off and were hardly ever allowed to leave their location of employment, showing that Mexican migrant workers face hard long hours and strenuous labor. The majority of workers also had no collective bargaining with their employers, as more than 50% said they did not have the opportunity to read over their work contract with their employer.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, foreign-born Mexican workers make up 46% of all fatal occupational injuries when compared with workers from the United States, Central America, South America, and Europe, showing that Mexican workers clearly work the most dangerous jobs and suffer the effects. Both legal and undocumented Mexican migrants receive significantly worse wages than their American, European, and Asian counterparts. When the average annual income of Mexican workers is compared with the average salary of European, Asian, and other naturalized

citizens, average Mexican salaries are 46% less than those of other immigrants. Undocumented Mexican workers are at more of a disadvantage, as they earn 17% less than legal immigrants, showing that Mexican migrant workers experience extremely unfair compensation for their work. This empirical data shows how Mexican migrant workers are exploited through this unfair system of migrant labor.

The United States government has made some efforts to grant fair labor practices to the working class of America, and those efforts may extend to Mexican migrant workers on paper but not in practice. Congress passed the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA) in an effort to grant more fair labor practices to migrant workers. However, this effort has proved to be futile as there is no action taken against those who violate their “ requirements” for employing migrant workers, and these protections are only extended to a small percentage of Mexican migrant workers. The undocumented Mexican migrants and those whose only legal way of entry was to obtain an H-2A visa—another form of a temporary work visa—are not protected under this legislation, which leaves only a small group of Mexican migrant workers who can be protected under this law. Another effort to protect workers was the Fair Labor Standards Act, passed by Congress in 1938, which established minimum wage, maximum working hours, child labor standards, and the right of collective bargaining. Though this act did help many struggling Americans, migrant agricultural workers are excluded from the protections of the law as well, especially undocumented workers. Congress also passed the National Labor Relations Act, which allowed for collective bargaining and the ability to unionize. The rights stated in both of

these laws are not available either to Mexican migrant workers, because foreign migrant laborers and migrant worker employers do not fit the descriptions and requirements of “ employers and employees” explicitly provided in the legislation. Eventually American industries started to pay attention to labor unions and workers’ rights, which would have helped the Joad family in *Grapes of Wrath*, but Mexican migrants are still at risk of being deported, abused, blacklisted, or fired if they complain.

The unfair labor practices that the Joad family experienced can be compared to those of modern day Mexican migrant workers. Both Mexican migrant workers and the Joads faced unfair compensation for their labor, which caused them to suffer financially. In *Grapes of Wrath*, the lack of stable and sufficient income led to the lack of food on the table, which consequently led Rose of Sharon’s baby to die in childbirth. This same struggle is all too relatable to José Martinez, a Mexican migrant worker who left his family across the border in Mexico in search of work. In a report conducted by Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) called *Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States*, thousands of migrant workers were interviewed about the labor conditions they face, including Martinez. When he got a H-2A visa for seasonal agricultural work, Martinez hoped to find work with good wages so he could send money home to feed his starving family. When Martinez heard that his two-year-old son died of malnutrition, he was devastated that his wage wasn’t enough to save his small family from starvation. This same predicament is expressed in *Grapes of Wrath*, as Steinbeck writes, “” There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here

that topples all our success. ...And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates - died of malnutrition" (Steinbeck 449). This quote shows that the crime of unfair wages leads to death of innocent children, prevalent to the Joad and Martinez families. Also, Mexican migrant workers are subjected to hard, dangerous jobs, working like animals from dawn until dusk, and deprived of the simple human necessities. The Joads also experienced these unfair labor practices in California, as the oppression of the owners and growers was evident. When Thomas, an employer, is conversing with his workers regarding the people staying in government camps, he says, " Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans. When they go back to the squatters' camps they'll be hard to handle," (296). This quote shows that migrant workers were oppressed and not treated humanely outside the government camps. The mistreatment of migrant workers transcends the boundaries of race and time period, and unfair labor practices continue to be a problem for today's Mexican migrant workers.

Conclusively, there has been a long history of how Mexican migrant workers have been subjected to unfair labor practices, and this unjust treatment still occurs today. Mexican migrants, similar to the Okies in *Grapes of Wrath*, face demanding manual labor, dangerous conditions, unfair wages, unbalanced power within their workplace, and also fear of deportation if they raise a complaint. There have been efforts to stop this mistreatment, but none of these benefits have reached the majority of Mexican migrant workers, especially those undocumented immigrants. These unfair labor practices

cause grave results such as starvation and anger, with both effects visible in Grapes of Wrath.