Citizens, Immigrants, and Foreign Wage Workers: The Chicana/o Labor Refrain in U.S. Labor Historiography

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About the Author:

Zaragosa Vargas is a Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has also served as a professor in Departments of History at Ohio State University, Williams College, and Yale. Vargas was also a lecturer in American Culture at his alma mater, the University of Michigan. He served as an Assistant Dean with the College of Letters and Science, and Associate Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Vargas has taught courses on Chicano History from colonial times to the present, Chicano Historiography and Labor History, and Race and Ethnicity in American History. Much of Vargas’ work and publications have focused on Chicano laborers in the United States, particularly in the Midwest.
The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest’s premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute’s mission includes:

- **Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.**

- **Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.**

- **Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.**

- **Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.**
Chicano historians have begun to re-focus their attention on the histories and experiences of Chicano and Chicana workers, who comprise two-thirds of the twenty-five million Latinos in the United States and one of America’s largest and fastest growing racial minority groups. Once peripheral to the dominant concerns of American historians, the study of Chicana/o workers is emerging together with the study of America’s other racial minority laboring classes as a new and vibrant area of research. The reconstruction of the everyday lives of these wage workers, their world views, values and habits provides a critical assessment of the rich diversity of their experiences. Much of this history of working class struggle and action unfolded in Texas.¹

Historically, Texas has been the largest contributor of Chicana/o labor to other states, and Tejano (Texas Mexicans) workers have played an integral role in the regional and national economies of the United States, from the turn of the century to well into the post-World War II years. Tejanos have undergone repression, discrimination and segregation, and integration. This is the historical perspective of David Montejano’s prize-winning book, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas. Using a sociological approach to history, that borrows from the world systems of Immanuel Wallerstein and the excellent studies on peasant formations by Barrington Moore, Jr., Montejano attempts a sweeping and interpretative history of race relations in South Texas from the Texas Revolution of 1836 to the present.

Montejano divides this history into four periods: incorporation (1839-1900), reconstruction (1900-1920), segregation (1920-1940), and integration (1940-1986). During the incorporation period (1836-1900), the Texas economy was transformed from Mexican hacienda/ranching to Anglo capitalist-based agriculture and trade.² The loss of economic dominance that led to the political subordination and eventual proletarianization of Tejanos sets the context from which Mexican and Anglo relations would evolve along the Texas border region. In this survey of the social and economic changes that followed the Texas Revolution, Montejano has pushed back the origins and growth of a Mexican wage labor force in one important sector of the Southwest to the early nineteenth century.

The Texas economy went through expansive “reconstruction” from 1900-1920 and an attendant recomposition of the Spanish-speaking working classes took place. Responding to market conditions, Anglos inaugurated commercial farming that soon employed vast numbers of agricultural wage laborers composed of Mexican immigrants entering the United States illegally, legally, and under government sanctioned labor contract. Commercial farming in Texas would be built on the backs of these Mexican workers, especially the rapid development of the cotton industry that had previously relied on white sharecroppers and blacks. Through formal and informal law making, government agencies in Washington began assisting Anglo Texas farmers and cotton growers in the maintenance and control of this virtually inexhaustible supply of labor from Mexico.³

The context for Jim Crow in Texas was state-sponsored coercion, legal fiat, and indiscriminate violence as Anglo agricultural interests transformed, organized, and disciplined the Tejano and Mexican labor force. Montejano states that workers “escaped” from Texas by crossing back into Mexico or by migrating out of the Lone Star state. Though Montejano points out that labor repression was never complete, there is a lack of focus on the kinds of spontaneous, informal, and organized actions taken by Mexican wage laborers in South Texas to maintain control over their labor. This subject is taken up in the prize-winning book The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas by Emilio Zamora. While Montejano has analyzed how the structural contours of the South Texas economy were shaped by the transition to American capitalism, The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas is the first definitive historical account of the various collective struggles that unfolded in the South Texas border region against the rise of industrial development and commercial agriculture.

Mexican unions based in fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies included both Tejanos [Texas Mexicans] and Mexican nationals. The quest for self-identity as a Mexican working class underlined the response to radical politics in South Texas. Workers belonged to the anarcho-syndicalist Partido Liberal Mexicano [PLM] or were active in radical causes initiated by the Texas Socialist Party. The PLM’s offered a nationalist message and a combination of trade unionism and anarchism as an answer to

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labor’s predicament. The Texas Socialist Party attracted thousands of Mexicans who perceived their struggles for worker equality along socialist lines. The Industrial Workers of the World and the Western Federation of Miners similarly drew large numbers of Mexican workers into its ranks.

According to Zamora, an “ethic of mutuality” formed the basis for collective action and a political strategy to fight against racism in the workplace and in the larger South Texas border community. The various mutual aid societies, patriotic clubs, and the Masonic orders helped strengthen the cultural bonds between Tejanos and Mexican nationals as well as mold the foundation of an emergent Mexican-American working-class identity.

Unfortunately, Tejana and Mexicana working women do not figure prominently in *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*. Industrialization, high unemployment rates, seasonal work, and the rising cost of living were forcing Mexican women into the Texas labor market. Feminists, socialists, and to a lesser extent, working-class women lent their support to the men at the grass-root level, in strikes, and in other actions against worker and racial exploitation. The integration of the history of such notable women of Texas’s borderland as Jovita Idar and Sara Estela Ramírez with that of Tejano and Mexican men would have enhanced the overall accounts of the struggle for equality and labor unity in *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*. Nonetheless, Zamora’s book is a richly detailed and solid account of a significant moment in the early history of Mexican-American wage laborers in South Texas. It is the first comprehensive history of Chicano working-class formation in the Southwest.

By the beginning of the twenties, Mexican and Tejano workers had established and shaped a “new labor frontier” in Texas that extended into and beyond the Southwest. As the 1930’s ended, a depressed agricultural economy, race segregation, and the accompanying employment barriers were pushing Tejanos out of the Lone Star state. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration eliminated hundreds of thousands of acres from cotton production. Federal land reclamation projects also forced many Mexicans off the land. Of equal importance however was technological displacement—the mechanization of crop production and crop harvest. Texas led the Southwest in this mechanization of agriculture. The Tejano migrants moved from as far south as the Rio Grande Valley all the way across the intervening states into the agricultural sectors of the upper Midwest, the Mountain States, and the Pacific Northwest, with branch routes extending out to states on either side of the main routes.

From 1940-1986, the political and economic influence of agriculture in Texas declined. Urban commercial interests now dominated, creating a new social order that was less racially segregated and politically repressive. The civil rights activism of Tejanos and Tejanas notwithstanding, large-scale legal and undocumented immigration from Mexico deeply affected class and race relations in both rural and urban Texas. Montejano’s world system approach thus overlooks the impact of international and national events on Tejano-Anglo relations, the extreme poverty along the border, and the simultaneous rise of a Spanish-speaking underclass. Still, Montejano provides crucial insights into the composite dynamics of race and class in South Texas.

On the eve of World War II, Tejanos and Chicanos from New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona were part of the exodus of American workers to cities with war-related industries, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit, in search of high-paying defense jobs. As the leading economic and commercial center of California, Los Angeles would serve as a magnet, pulling Tejanos out of the Lone Star state, Chicanos out of the Mountain states, and out of Arizona. The men and women found employment in service occupations, construction, and in airplane, iron and steel production, and vehicle assembly. With their families, the newly arrived Chicano migrants provided the labor necessary to specialized agriculture. Yet this time, the United States was deeply divided by race. A “color line” separated racial minorities politically, socially, and economically from the rest of Americans. Mexican-Americans began organized efforts to secure their share of jobs being created through war mobilization. In the summer of 1941, A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders planned a mass march on Washington to protest discrimination in the defense industry and by the armed services. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 set up the Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC). In his book *Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness*, Clete Daniel argues that by calling for an end to discrimination in hiring, the FEPC would...
assure that all workers could participate fully in defense industries, without the burdens of discrimination based on race, creed, color, or national origin. In an unprecedented move, the U.S. government established equal employment as official public policy.

Daniel contends that from the very beginning, President Roosevelt saw the FEPC not as a vehicle to achieve equality in the workplace, but rather as a tool to appease the growing threat by southern Democrats to thwart the New Deal agenda, including programs like the FEPC. Rather than pursuing an active course, the Roosevelt administration thus opted for an accommodationist approach. Moreover, public hearings on job and pay discrimination against Mexican-American workers were canceled, since the U.S. government did not want to jeopardize its Good Neighbor Policy in Latin America. As a result, the long-time and widespread employment discrimination experienced by Mexican-American workers in the Southwest was never fully addressed nor challenged.

Mexican-American organizations and individuals advocated on behalf of workers to gain employment in war industries and to end racist hiring policies. The work of Ernesto Galarza for the Pan American Union made the federal government aware of the plight of the Mexican-American rank and file. New Mexico Senator Dennis Chavez played an active role in the Senate subcommittee hearings on the FEPC and helped place Mexican-American workers in the war industries in his home state. In the Midwest, the Spanish Speaking People’s Council of Chicago focused on fair employment in the defense industries.

Embroided in jurisdictional disputes, AFL and CIO affiliates provided little assistance to Mexican-American union organizers. The United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA, which became the Food, Tobacco, Agriculture, and Allied Workers of America), the militant International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (MMSW), and the International Longshoremen’ and Warehousemen Union were the exceptions. Reflective of the purge of left-led unions within the CIO and the mass blacklisting that would mark the Taft-Hartley post-war years, Mexican-American labor organizers faced red-baiting as the federal government attempted to link communism with the work of the CIO along the border and with Mexican nationals entering the United States. Unfortunately, the commitment of the national CIO to civil rights for its minority and women members was not shared as a whole by the Anglo rank and file, nor did it extend to the contracts the CIO bargained and signed with employers. Along with blacks and women, Mexican-Americans would pursue alone their struggle to achieve equal rights in the workplace and within the CIO unions.

At this time, Chicana women donned pants, put their hair up in bandannas, and went to work in the defense plants. Chicana women performed almost every kind of job, even those previously typed “men’s work.” “Rosita the Riveter” became the familiar symbol of the Chicana war worker, “making history working for victory.” However, like their Chicano male counterparts, Chicanas faced discrimination in employment. Despite federal rules requiring equal pay for equal work, Chicanas earned about sixty-five percent of what men did for the same work, and along with African-American women, were confined to the worst war production jobs. Notwithstanding, Chicanas gained unprecedented employment opportunities, self-esteem, and a new sense of their potential.

Daniel provides only a partial history of the struggles of Mexican-Americans to gain entrance into defense work. Examination of additional FEPC files will shed light on the extent of the failure of this ineffectual government body to correct the condition of inequality among Mexican-American workers during the World War II years. Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness nonetheless chronicles one important though unfamiliar chapter of the history of the Mexican-American rank and file to achieve civil rights. Scholars will want to examine the full path that Mexican-American working-class identity took during the World War II years and after.

During World War II, a short-term solution to labor shortages in agriculture led to the Bracero Program. Over the next twenty-two years, approximately five million Mexican nationals were brought into the United States for seasonal employment in agriculture, the majority working in Texas, Arizona, and California. These temporary workers thus provided American agri-business interests (as well as some railroad companies) a cheap and abundant source of labor.
The bounty of cheap Mexican labor increased during the post-war years through the influx of undocumented Mexican workers. Northern Mexican agri-business brought large numbers of Mexicans to the border to offset the equally great numbers of Mexican workers who, drawn by the higher American wages, crossed clandestinely into the United States. Smuggling of undocumented workers was the other factor contributing to the growing numbers of Mexican workers entering the United States illegally. About 4,300,000 undocumented Mexican workers were apprehended between 1947 and 1955.

The dynamics of state-sponsored recruitment of Bracero workers are illuminated in Kitty Calavita’s excellent book Inside the State. It offers a detailed and theoretical analysis of how, over a span of twenty-three years, Bracero Program guidelines were circumvented to fully exploit the contract labor system to benefit southwestern agricultural employers. Calavita correctly asserts that the goal of the Bracero Program, developed and administered by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), was to legalize and control Mexican migrant farm workers for the benefit of large-scale farmers along the border of the United States.

The growing presence of undocumented Mexican workers threatened to imperil the Bracero Program. To counter this massive flow of undocumented workers, the Department of Labor intervened and on June 9, 1954, initiated a repatriation drive code named “Operation Wetback.” Through a massive deportation drive organized by the INS, the United States repatriated about one million undocumented Mexican workers. Operation Wetback was a public relations coup for the U.S. Border Patrol. Actually, the repatriation drive institutionalized and stabilized the Bracero Program, gaining greater control over and stream lining a highly profitable farm labor system for American agri-business.

Bracero workers were not without allies. The pro-industrial union and labor-oriented Asociación Nacional México Americana (ANMA), led by long-time trade union organizer Alfredo Montoya, actively campaigned against the deportation raids. Although critical of the Bracero Program, ANMA protested the mass deportations of Mexican immigrant workers. Veteran labor activist Ernesto Galarza organized undocumented Mexican workers as part of the efforts by progressive elements of the labor movement to establish unions among farm workers. Through the Community Service Organization (CSO) and ANMA, Bert Corona played a prominent role as an organizer in the ethnic communities of working-class Los Angeles.

Calavita concludes her book with a fine assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of theories of the state. To analyze the Bracero Program, Calavita opts for a “dialectical model of the state” that identifies and traces the links between structural factors and the interactions among government officials, and between these officials and “clientele” agri-business employers. Anyone interested in the uses of state power will find Inside the State a convincing and original study of the intricate relationship between immigration policies and practices and contract labor in the post war era.

In his well researched and documented book Al Norte, Chicano historian Dennis Valdés analyzes the history of agricultural labor in the upper Midwest. This history traces how the introduction of sugar beet production in the Great Lakes region in the late nineteenth century triggered the emergence and eventual transformation of agriculture from subsistence farming to a labor-intensive corporate industry.

Valdés presents a detailed history of farm worker resistance to exploitation formed from mutually profitable relations between corporate farms, land grant colleges, and the government agencies that regulated and protected these workers. With the departure of the earlier European immigrants from the migrant stream to become farmers or factory workers, African-Americans and Puerto Rican-Americans briefly served as sources of labor. Eventually, however, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans comprised the majority of the farm work force in the northern region. By 1938, 10,000 Tejanos migrated to the northern beet fields of the Midwest. By 1940, more than 60,000 Tejano workers annually entered the Great Lakes region for employment in agriculture, the majority migrating to Michigan. As Valdés notes, the entry of Tejanos into midwestern cities added diversity to the extant Mexican communities, flavoring them with Tejano culture, food, and music.

Organized labor neglected and opposed the farm workers, who as early as the 1930s, established their own unions. According to Valdés, this would become a missed opportunity to link the demands of agricultural workers to that of industrial workers. In 1965,
Chicano farm workers, organized by Cesar Chavez as the United Farm Workers of America, attained union representation after nearly fifty years of unsuccessful efforts. Farm workers would make major organizational gains during this era of social and political upheaval. The farm worker victory of Cesar Chavez inspired farm labor activism and organization in other parts of the Southwest. Valdés explains that this union movement spread to the Midwest. Farm workers in the Great Lakes once again launched a concerted union drive, which was helped significantly by the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964. The labor organizing efforts of the eighteen to twenty thousand farm workers in northwest Ohio were particularly notable. Through the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), individual farmers signed twenty-two contracts in 1968. These attempts at unionization by FLOC came to fruition again in the 1970’s. Valdés has brought attention to agricultural labor relations in the Great Lakes region, a previously neglected section of the country.

The history of Mexicans in the entire Midwest was inextricably tied to the out migration of Tejanos from farm work toward the need for unskilled factory labor. Corporations like General Motors, Ford, Chrysler and United States Steel hired Mexican workers for its auto plants, mills and foundries. The seasonal and cyclical fluctuations of the diversified industrial sector of the Great Lakes region continued to determine the patterns of the migration to and from Texas. The economic changes in Texas, along with the migration of Puerto Ricans and Mexican nationals, influenced the demographic composition of the Midwest following the end of World War II. These factors inaugurated a new era in the history of Spanish-speaking people in the Midwest.

As it did for blacks, the 1960’s civil rights movement raised the expectations and hopes of Chicana and Chicano workers for increased job and wage opportunities and workplace equality. Despite persistent discrimination, Chicano wage workers continued to reduce the income gap. Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s, the sustained increases in the productivity of American industrial workers paid for their annual increases in real wages. Union contracts improved the standard of living for America’s workers as a form of business unionism gained prominence. Persistent racial discrimination, however, prevented rank-and-file Chicanos, blacks, and women from reaching wage parity with their white male counterparts. Local union affiliates excluded minorities and women from membership or did not fully address issues of racial and gender equality in the call for democratic working-class solidarity. By the 1970’s, the downward shift of the American economy was beginning to undermine the vaulted status of America’s workers. The inroads in wages, offset by an upsurge in the cost of living, was occurring during a downturn in the profitability of American corporations. For the nation’s auto makers, this precipitous decline coincided with the large-scale assault by the Japanese to gain control of the world car market. Auto workers responded to the loss of their livelihood and status by staging wildcat strikes, but this worker insurgency was checked by the 1974-75 recession, the nation’s worst economic crisis since the Great Depression era. Unemployment among factory workers climbed to nearly fourteen percent but was twice this percentage for Chicanos and other blue-collar minorities, who were often the first workers let go. The recession ushered in a new economic order, one that would have severe and long lasting implications for America’s heretofore privileged wage workers. Next, deindustrialization led to the massive displacement of auto workers. Chicano auto workers would lose their recently won middle-class status through plant closures, downsizing, and consecutive wage concessions.

In the past five years, Chicana and Chicano workers, drawing on a long tradition of struggle and using well-developed organizing strategies, have played a prominent role in the growing resistance to the employer offensive. The 1990 Justice for Janitors victory in Los Angeles, led by the progressive Service Employees International Union Local 399; the strike by Chicana and Mexicana high-tech workers in Sunnyvale, California; and the recent strike by Mexicano and Latino immigrant carpenters in southern California, demonstrate that Spanish-speaking workers will organize if they believe they can hold onto their jobs. Last April, the UFW launched a major organizing campaign to rebuild the union to its membership levels of 100,000 achieved in the 1970’s. Over 30,000 farmworkers and their supporters marched from Delano, California to the state capitol in Sacramento. At issue were wages, job security, benefits, and protection against toxic workplace conditions. Through the mobilization committee of the Multiracial Alliance, the mostly Central American and Mexican immigrant membership of SEIU Local 399 are waging a movement for democratic reform and
greater worker participation within the local union. Indeed, Chicano and Latino workers, both citizens and recent immigrants, are leading the reemergence of rank-and-file unionism in America, a fact acknowledged by many employers, union leaders, and labor experts. According to labor journalist Kim Moody: “Far from undermining U.S. labor, Latino workers are on the front lines fighting to defend them.”

There has been an increase in arrests of undocumented workers. In 1990, these arrests rose above one million for the first time since 1987. Undocumented immigrants are a boon for agri-business and increasingly for the industrial and service sectors of the American economy because these fearful workers are easily exploited. For example, in the Los Angeles garment industry, forty-one percent of undocumented Mexican women receive less than the legal minimum wage. Yet Chicano/Latino workers continue to wage resistance against their exploitation in the workplace, the NAFTA, and the current wave of immigrant bashing. Ignored for the most part by organized labor, Latino workers will seek support from within their own ranks by creating and forming alternative labor movements. For example, through the newly emerging community-based “Workers Centers,” Latino workers are organizing in the agricultural, garment, restaurant, and commercial food processing sectors. The Asociación de Trabajadores Latinos [Latino Workers Association], Union de Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos [UTAF], La Mujer Obrera [Woman Worker] and other community-based worker centers stress worker empowerment through the newly emerging community-based “Workers Centers,” Latino workers are organizing in the agricultural, garment, restaurant, and commercial food processing sectors. The Asociación de Trabajadores Latinos [Latino Workers Association], Union de Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos [UTAF], La Mujer Obrera [Woman Worker] and other community-based worker centers stress worker empowerment through unionization to fight against worker abuse, anti-immigrant sentiment, and discrimination. The strong racial-ethnic identity attached to Latino working-class consciousness will spur these minority workers to gain recognition and acceptance as Latinos, and as important members of the American working classes. Along with blacks and women, Latinos and Chicanos will continue the struggle to achieve equal rights in the workplace and within the unions.

The new directions of historical research represented by the books reviewed above focus attention on the importance of Chicano workers in American history. It is an ongoing process of historical revision of scholarly work, whose beginnings can be traced back to Victor S. Clark’s Mexican Labor in the United States, produced over eighty years ago for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Chicana/o workers share a legacy of labor exploitation and special forms of oppression. However, the many dimensions of this labor history, much of which remains unexplored, illustrate that along with common differences of race, ethnicity, and gender among American workers there are also common patterns of resistance and struggle. Chicano and non-Chicano labor scholars need to introduce methods and concepts to provide new historical perspectives and insights about workers generally slighted by American history. More important, labor historians need to relate these histories to other sets of events and issues that confront the larger American society.

**Endnotes**


2. Migration of Mexican workers into the South Texas area was already evident by 1854. Entire Mexican villages were recruited as ranch hands by Anglo Texan cattlemen like Captain Richard King. Hubert J. Miller, “Mexican Migration to the U.S., 1900-1920: With a Focus on the Texas Rio Grande Valley,” Borderlands 7 (Spring 1984): 184.


6 García, Mexican Americans, 182.


8 Gómez Quiñones, Chicano Politics, 51; García, Mexican Americans, 204-212; Mario T. García, “Working for the Union,” Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 9 (Summer 1993): 242. ANMA was dedicated to gaining civil and economic rights for Mexican-Americans, and towards this end developed coalitions with other racial and ethnic minorities and with progressive organizations like the Civil Rights Congress. In light of the anti-Communist hysteria and resulting domestic repression, ANMA appealed to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to investigate the dismal plight of Mexican immigrant farm workers, publicly opposed the Korean War conflict, U.S. support for Latin American dictatorships, and interventions in Guatemala and the Middle East. Red-baited as a subversive group, ANMA soon lost credibility.

In the post W.W. II years, farm workers faced particular problems because of the growth of the corporate farm; with investments in cattle, petroleum and other non-agricultural goods, factory farming was twice as productive as industry. Restricting and eventually eliminating the contract system would be a greater challenge faced by farm workers. In 1946, the National Farm Labor Union was granted a charter by the AFL and targeted the Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation ranch in California’s San Joaquin Valley. Three years later, the NFLU organized a strike by over 20,000 cotton pickers in the region. The use of Bracero workers helped defeat this strike.


10 Moody, An Injury to All, pp. 87-92.


The Human Rights Commission in San Francisco found one garment sweatshop in which undocumented workers had not been paid for eight months and had lodged no complaints. So valuable is this cheap labor that the Chambers of Commerce of U.S. border cities throughout the decade of the seventies advertised its availability in an attempt to lure industry to the area. Exploitation of sweatshop workers is endemic. Ibid.