

TIMELINE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR IN THE U.S.



Historically, agricultural workers in the U.S. have been imported from other countries with vulnerable populations, have always been a disenfranchised group of workers, and have in general never had the right to vote. We can see this history of exploitative conditions in the events and policies that laid the groundwork for our broken agricultural system today.

- **1600s:** Indentured servants were brought from England to work in the fields. They were guaranteed passage into the colonies in exchange for their labor.
- **1650s-1800s:** When indentured servants weren't providing enough labor, African people were brought to the U.S. as slaves to work in the fields and as domestic servants.
- **After 1848:** Following the end of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), tens of thousands of migrant workers from Mexico began arriving in the United States. In many cases, they freely moved across the border for temporary jobs and then returned home.
- **1865-1866:** The Black Codes were created after the Civil War. Their intention was to limit the rights of black people. The laws included requiring a special permit for black people who wanted to work in anything other than agricultural labor, prohibiting them from raising their own crops and requiring that they seek permission to travel. These laws were repealed in 1866 because they were too harsh.
- **Late 1860s-1870s:** During the Reconstruction era, the U.S. government passed laws to prohibit slavery and involuntary servitude (13th Amendment of the Constitution), give all men born in the U.S.- including African Americans- citizenship rights (14th Amendment of the Constitution), and the right to vote (15th Amendment of the Constitution).
- **1860s-1930s:** Farming became a large-scale industry. The U.S. began importing Asian labor as African Americans moved into other industries and as the need for labor increased. By 1886, 7 out of every 8 farm workers were Chinese. Japanese and Filipino workers were also brought into the country.
- **1882:** The Chinese Exclusion Act banned the employment of Chinese workers. It was the first major attempt to restrict the flow of workers coming to the U.S.
- **1890s-mid 1900s:** Even though the constitutional amendments were passed, segregation was maintained under the Jim Crow laws, which systematized inferior treatment and accommodations for African Americans. Former slaves and their descendants continued to work in the fields, because they were in debt with the landowner or by sharecropping (working the fields in return for a share of the crop produced in the land).



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- **1914-1918:** During World War I, migration to the U.S. from Europe declined, increasing the demand for Mexican labor to fill the void. During this period, growers lobbied to create the first guest worker program, allowing more than 70,000 Mexican workers into the U.S. The program ended in 1921.
- **Early 1930s:** Filipino workers started to organize, and Mexican workers were brought into the fields as farm workers.
- **1930s:** The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl (a period of drought that destroyed millions of acres of farmland) forced white farmers to sell their farms and become migrant workers who traveled from farm to farm to pick fruit and other crops at starvation wages.

Due to the Great Depression, more than 500,000 Mexican Americans were deported or pressured to leave during the Mexican Repatriation, and the number of farm workers of Mexican descent decreased.

Finally, in this period, the U.S. government also passed a series of labor laws to protect workers, but that excluded farm workers and domestic laborers, the jobs that were historically held by African Americans and immigrants. These laws specifically exclude farm workers from basic labor protections such as overtime pay, workers' compensation, protection for unionizing and collective bargaining, workers' compensation, and child labor laws.

- **1942-1964:** Due to labor shortages because of WWII, the government started the Bracero Program. This program imported temporary laborers from Mexico to work in the fields and on railroads. The program was also seen as a complement to efforts against undocumented workers, or programs of deportation (such as Operation Wetback).
- **1943:** Sugar cane growers in FL obtained permission to hire Caribbean workers to cut sugar cane on temporary visas.
- **1952:** Temporary guest worker visa program was made an official law as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).
- **1962:** Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta joined the organizing efforts of the Filipino farm workers and founded the National Farm Workers Association (later to become the **United Farm Workers - UFW**) in California. Their worker-led movement drew national attention to farm workers' struggles, and laid the groundwork for other farm worker unions and organizations.
- **1964:** The Bracero program was ended because of the abuses to which Bracero workers were subjected. The enforcement of regulations on Bracero wages, housing, and food charges was negligible; to this day, Bracero workers who worked in the fields are still fighting to get the 10% mandatory reductions from their wages that they were supposed to receive when their contracts ended and they returned to Mexico.



- **1970s-Today:** As African Americans moved to other industries, there was a shortage of labor in the fields. Immigrants, primarily from Latin America, began to work in the fields. Today, most farm workers are immigrants from Latin America, and it's calculated that up to 75% of them are undocumented. The vast majority of our nation's farm workers are from Mexico and Central America, although many African Americans and immigrants from other regions of the world (particularly Asia) continue to work in the fields.
- **Today:** H-2A seasonal guest workers currently provide about 3% of the agricultural workforce of the U.S., and they are exploited much like the Bracero workers of the 1940s-1960s. Today's guest workers are denied one of the most fundamental rights offered by American society: the right to change jobs. Because they are brought over by a specific employer and then tied to them, workers are vulnerable to abuse and live in fear of reporting injustices. These workers are exploited on both sides of the border—paying exorbitant rates to unregulated hiring agencies in their home country and arriving deeply in debt to a country where they are often underpaid.

Based on this history, we can argue that in modern times not much has changed: farm workers continue to be some of the most exploited workers in the U.S.



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