



National
Farm Worker
MINISTRY

Immigration Reform

Immigration policy greatly impacts farm workers. Over half of the current farm worker labor are immigrants and the majority are undocumented. Current immigration policy is inadequate and leaves many farm workers vulnerable to abuse, substandard working conditions and depressed wages. Criminalizing immigrants leaves many farm workers living in constant fear of detention, deportation and being separated from their families. Immigration reform must include pathways to citizenship for workers.

Guest worker programs, such as H-2A, are not new to U.S. policy and practice. The Bracero Program (bracero means farm laborer) invited workers from Mexico to come work in the fields to fulfill the demand of agriculture work during WWII and beyond. The guest worker programs allow immigrants to enter the country with limited documentation for 10 months or less and ties the worker to that employer. The Bracero Program became known for abuse and exploitation. A U.S. Department of Labor officer in charge described the Bracero program as a system of “legalized slavery”. Even when Congress and other federal agencies have tried to protect workers through labor law requirements, they have not had any impact. Workers are often afraid to report abuses as their invitation to work the next season is dependent upon that employer.

During the 1986 immigration reform, 1.1 million Mexican farm workers gained legal status. The expectation was that authorized farm workers would force growers to improve wages and working conditions. Yet the Agricultural Industry did not change, and many workers moved out of farm labor. Growers needed a continuous source of cheap labor, so they turned to farm labor contractors to provide mostly undocumented immigrant labor.

In 1994, the U.S., Canada and Mexico entered into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The flood of cheap subsidized U.S. corn caused the price of the crop to fall 70% in Mexico. This had a significant impact on Mexicans as corn is a staple of the Mexican diet, and many Mexican farmers grow corn. Many Mexican small farmers were unable to compete with the subsidized imports, and over 200 million small farmers in Mexico lost their livelihoods. During this period there was an increase in immigration from Mexico for economic needs.

The culmination of criminalizing immigrants and lack of pathways to citizenship for immigrants have left farm workers with fear of migrating and fear of detention, deportation and separation from their families. There are fewer immigrants to do the work, and agriculture labor shortage is becoming a reality.

There has been a recent growth of guest worker programs like H-2A. In 2017, there were 18 guest worker bills introduced. All of them increased guest workers, provided year-round visas, restricted protections for workers, and made it cheaper and easier for employers to hire immigrant workers. Although there were attempts to address some parts of immigration policy, DACA for the Dreamers and Securing America's Future Act (guest worker policy), there was no action or adoption.

As people of faith and conscience who believe in the idea of caring for your neighbor, whoever that is, farm workers are our neighbors and community members, and their work should be honored because they literally feed us. Take action by urging your congressional representative to create a path to citizenship for farm workers.