



National
Farm Worker
MINISTRY

Farm Worker Issues: Agricultural Timeline

1600s: Indentured Servants from Europe arrived in Virginia as cheap labor to help care for the land. The first African slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619. Between 1620 and 1866 almost 600,000 slaves were brought to what is now the U.S.

1860s-1921: The Civil War ceased in 1865, and the Reconstruction era began. In the years following, the Black Codes (yearly labor contracts) were created with the intention of limiting the rights of Black people. The laws required permits for Black people who wanted to work in sectors other than agricultural, bans on raising their own crops, and required permission to travel. Indebted landowners, formerly enslaved persons and their descendants, continued to work in the fields.

By the early 1870s, tenant farming and sharecropping dominated the south for cotton planting. Tenant farmers rented land from landowners, owned their own tools, seeds, fertilizers, and livestock, and kept all of the money they made from working the land. Sharecroppers, on the other hand, couldn't afford or weren't allowed to rent the land and had to use the tools, seeds, fertilizers, and livestock of the landowner. For these reasons, they had to give crops or a percentage of the income to the landowner at harvest. The amount of crops the sharecropper was required to give depended on their agreement with the landowner.

Farming became a large-scale industry at this time. The U.S. began importing Asian labor as African Americans move into other industries and the need for labor increased. In 1882, The Chinese Exclusion Act banned the employment of Chinese workers. It is the first major attempt to restrict the flow of workers coming to the U.S.

During World War I, migration to the U.S. from Europe declined, increasing the demand for Mexican laborers to fill the void. 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.

1930s: The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl (a period of drought that destroyed millions of acres of farmland) forces 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. More than 500,000 Mexican Americans were deported or pressured to leave during the Mexican Repatriation.

The U.S. government passed a series of labor laws to protect workers, but they intentionally excluded farm workers and domestic laborers. In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRB) provided the right to organize without retaliation, but intentionally excluded farm workers and domestic workers. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLS) created overtime rules and established a minimum wage but again, intentionally excluded agricultural workers.

1942: Due to labor shortages during WWII, the U.S. government started the Bracero Program in 1942. (Bracero means “one who works with their arms”). The 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. Enforcement of regulations on Bracero wages, housing, and food charges, was negligible. The Bracero Program ended in 1964 due to rampant abuses.

1952: A temporary guest worker H2-A and H2-B visa program was made an official law as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

1960s: The African American agricultural workforce dispersed into other industries in search of better opportunities, creating a shortage of labor in the fields. By the 1960s and '70s, the farm labor force was mostly comprised of immigrants, primarily, though not exclusively, from Latin America. Filipino farm workers began organizing around labor issues on the West Coast along with Mexican American farm workers.

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta joined the organizing efforts of the Filipino farm workers, which culminated in the landmark Delano Grape Strike of 1965. The United Farm Workers (the modern farm worker movement) formed. Their worker-led movement drew national attention to farm workers' struggles and laid the groundwork for other farm worker unions and organizations.

1980s-Today: The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act of 1983 passed, requiring employers to disclose occupational expectations and comply with proper documentation in the workplace (such as a pay stub). However, this act did not guarantee collective bargaining or freedom of association rights.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act passed, which intended to give citizenship to the increasingly Mexican farm labor population. This raised farm worker wages but the situation in the fields changed very little since those who received citizenship sought work in industries that provided more security and benefits. In the late 1980s, there was a rise of farm labor contractors (FLCs) who sought more undocumented laborers. (Migration Policy Institute).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was established in 1994. Between 1994 and 2001, a flood of cheap, subsidized U.S. corn caused the price of the local corn to fall as much as 70% in Mexico. Unable to compete with subsidized imports, over two million farmers in Mexico lost their livelihoods, and immigration from Mexico into the U.S. increased.

Today, most farm workers are immigrants from Latin America, with over 60% being undocumented (Southern Poverty Law Center). The vast majority of our nation's farm workers are from Mexico and Central America, although some African Americans and immigrants from other regions of the world continue to work in the fields. The agricultural industry claims that there is a labor shortage, but farm worker advocates counter that claim saying that if wages and conditions were acceptable and deportation fears were eliminated, this shortage would not exist.

Learn more about issues affecting farm workers at nfwm.org.