A Legacy of Exploitation and Oppression: The Grim History of Labor on the U.S. - Mexico Border

Greg P. Balliet

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/theses

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
APUS Library Capstone Submission Form

This capstone has been approved for submission to and review and publication by the APUS Library.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name [Last, First, Mi] *</th>
<th>Balliet Greg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Number [e.g. INTL699] *</td>
<td>HIST 699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Date [See Title pg.]</td>
<td>01/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Name [Last, First] *</td>
<td>Bowles, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Name *</td>
<td>See list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords [250 character max.]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed with Distinction * Y or N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Sensitive Information *</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Review Required * Y or N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnitin Check * Y or N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If YES, include IRB documents in submission attachments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All capstone papers must be checked via Turnitin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Required

Capstone Approval Document

The thesis/capstone for the master’s degree submitted by the student listed (above) under this title *

A LEGACY OF EXPLOITATION AND OPPRESSION: THE GRIM HISTORY OF LABOR ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

has been read by the undersigned. It is hereby recommended for acceptance by the faculty with credit to the amount of 3 semester hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Representatives</th>
<th>Signatures</th>
<th>Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed, 1st Reader *</td>
<td>Mark D. Bowles (Jan 28, 2016)</td>
<td>Jan 28, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[capstone professor]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(if required by program)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on behalf of the program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>director *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approved by academic</td>
<td>Grace M. Glass (Feb 2, 2016)</td>
<td>Feb 2, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dean *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Required
A LEGACY OF EXPLOITATION AND OPPRESSION: THE GRIM HISTORY OF LABOR ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

FINAL DRAFT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

GLOBAL HISTORY

By

Greg Balliet

Submission Date:

January 17, 2016

The author hereby grants the American Public University System the right to display these contents for educational purposes.

The author assumes total responsibility for meeting the requirements set by United States Copyright Law for the inclusion of any materials that are not the author’s creation or in the public domain.
© Copyright 2016 by Greg Balliet

All rights reserved.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends, who have given me the support and encouragement I’ve needed to complete this work.

I would like to thank my instructors at APU, particularly Dr. Steve Kreis and Dr. Mark D. Bowles, for their help and guidance. I also thank my Content Specialist, Dr. John Gaines, for providing me with some very useful feedback and suggestions for the writing of this thesis.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A LEGACY OF EXPLOITATION AND OPPRESSION: THE GRIM HISTORY OF LABOR ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

by

Greg Balliet

American Public University System, January 17, 2016

Charles Town, West Virginia

Dr. Mark D. Bowles, Thesis Professor

This thesis will examine the history of labor along the U.S.-Mexico border. As a backdrop, the history of the border region as a whole will be used to show the development of industry in the region over the past several generations. Two types of labor will be specifically showcased, the Bracero Program (1942-64) and the maquiladora industry (1965-present). This thesis will pay particular attention to human rights, examining the condition of Mexican workers in relation to what would be universally acceptable. Secondary literature will be drawn upon, whose research has shown that these workers have been exploited and marginalized. With this as a basic premise, this thesis will explore the following questions: Why have these workers been so mistreated? Why have these workers been largely unable to improve their situation? What are the future prospects for workers in the border region? This thesis will argue, given the fact that industry along the U.S.-Mexico border was started by foreign investors who have long employed exploitative practices with little interference by regulatory bodies, the likelihood that workers will have it any better in the future is not good.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINITION OF TERMS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.  HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER REGION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.  THE BRACERO PROGRAM</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.  THE BORDER INDUSTRIALIZATION PROGRAM (BIP)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.  HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES ALONG THE BORDER</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.   CONCLUSION</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

Figure 1: U.S.-Mexico Border at Tijuana ................................................................. 19
Figure 2: President Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) ......................................................... 26
Figure 3: Bracero Being Fingerprinted ................................................................. 36
Figure 4: The Mexicali Riot of 1954 ................................................................. 45
Figure 5: Bracero Pay Stub, 1945 ................................................................. 50
Figure 6: Foxconn Suicide Nets ................................................................. 78
INTRODUCTION

The history of labor along the U.S.-Mexican border is primarily a tale of suffering, when examined from a humanistic standpoint. This has been true from the very establishment of the border region, and has become more evident as Mexico has become increasingly dependent upon and subservient to the U.S., as has been reflected in its foreign policy. With this as a backdrop, the current maquiladora situation along the border and elsewhere is bleak indeed, at least for the workers. As this thesis seeks to examine the topic from the viewpoint of the workers, the future prospects for these workers must be considered. It must be asked whether the maquiladoras will change and the workers will enjoy a better future, or if things will remain the same.

This thesis will further the hypothesis that maquiladoras will not change their practices, and that as a result of this, conditions for maquiladora workers will not improve. Rather, maquiladora workers will remain as they have always been, and how the braceros were before them; exploited, oppressed, and marginalized. This is not to say there is no hope at all for maquiladora workers. This thesis does not intend to be overly fatalistic in its approach, or to predict the future. After all, there are some signs that the pay and conditions for maquiladora workers have improved somewhat, at least over the last decade or so.\(^1\) However, this thesis will attempt to show that these improvements have been largely inconsequential when considering the overall working conditions in maquiladoras, and have been in fact instigated by maquiladora management as a means of simple appeasement towards their workers. Basically, maquiladoras change only as much as they absolutely are forced to. A good example is the environmental effects of maquiladora production. Consequently, given the fact that they have been allowed to

exploit and violate the human rights of their workers for decades, it seems a natural deduction that the future will hold more of the same. Thus while this thesis does not attempt at predicting the future, this researcher feels that it will at the very least give a fairly accurate prognostication of what is to come for maquiladora workers, unless some drastic governmental, regulatory, and institutional changes are realized.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

This thesis will use sources that illuminate what it has historically been like to work in the Mexican maquiladora industry, to situate the maquiladora workers’ present condition in relation to what would be considered to be acceptable working conditions. It will draw from sources such as Abell\(^2\), Lugo\(^3\), and Pelled\(^4\), whose research has shown that maquiladora workers are an extremely exploited and marginalized group. With this as a basic premise, it will examine the following questions: Why are maquiladora workers so exploited and marginalized? Why have maquiladora workers historically been largely unable to improve their situation? Whose interests is it in to assure that maquiladora workers remain in their current powerless state? And finally and most importantly, is there anything to indicate that maquiladora workers’ situation is improving, or will ever do so?

The hypothesis of this study is that, given the fact that the maquiladora industry was started by foreign investors and have long employed exploitative practices with little interference by regulatory bodies, the likelihood that maquiladora workers will have it any better in the future

---


is not good. Maquiladora workers are most often very poor migrants from rural parts of Mexico, with little to no means of protecting their interests. Thus, they are completely at the mercy of the largely unregulated cadre of profiteers who run the maquiladora industry. Maquiladora workers are seen and treated primarily as property, and taken care of and accounted for in much the same fashion that a beast or a piece of machinery would be. Further, the success of the maquiladora industry largely depends on the continued exploitation of its workers. The reason maquiladoras are profitable is because they do not pay or otherwise take care of their workers in a progressive manner; consequently, their profits largely hinge on the continued subjugation of their workers. With the increasing competition maquiladoras face from countries such as China, there is little likelihood these maquiladoras will change their practices any time soon.

To test this hypothesis, the thesis will use the sources gathered to illustrate the following: The exploitation of maquiladora workers is central to the success of the maquiladora industry, thus it will continue unabated. This thesis will draw from sources that support its hypothesis by showing the primary reasons for this unlikelihood of change, namely; growing competition, the lack of government regulatory intervention\(^5\) on behalf of maquiladora workers, and the very nature of the maquiladora industry (vehicle of exploitation), which necessitates that it continue to operate as it has historically done so.

**Significance of the Study**

It appears fairly obvious to this researcher, that the plight of the Mexican worker has been largely neglected by those who can make a difference, i.e. their employers, along with the governmental and other regulatory bodies controlling them. This especially holds true for

\(^5\) Lance Brouthers; John McCray. “Maquiladoras: Entrepreneurial Experimentation to Global Competitiveness,” Business Horizons (Mar/Apr99, Vol. 42 Issue 2), 37-44. Brouthers illustrates how government has in fact regulated (NAFTA) maquiladoras in such a way as to ensure the continued exploitation of workers.
workers along the U.S.-Mexico border region, and for those workers who migrated from this region to the U.S. to work, whether it be legally in the Bracero Program, or illegally in some other fashion. This thesis will focus on reasons for this neglect that have been historically overlooked by historians and others. Because of the humanistic approach to this project, aided by a wealth of source information coming straight from the mouths of Mexican workers, this researcher proposes to go where too few have gone before him in addressing this subject. It is the hope of this researcher that this thesis will influence future historians to consider humanity before profit, and to be concerned for the welfare of people more than the economic bottom line. By using such grass roots sources as Womenontheborder.org, this researcher hopes to encourage others to support such organizations, and to help empower future generations of Mexican workers, encouraging them to use the voice they were afraid to use.

Too often in the past, the plight of the Mexican worker has been neglected in favor of the bottom line. Politicians and lawmakers have proven time and again to be far more concerned with how much money the Mexican workers will bring them, rather than with how the workers are treated and what kind of quality of life they enjoy. However, in recent years and especially with the advent of the internet and social media, there has been a significant rise in the number of human rights organizations and others who are trying to help improve conditions for the workers. It is the hope of this researcher that this project will aid in this effort, however may be possible.

**Research Methods and Limitations**

The research methods employed in this project will consist of analyzing primary and secondary sources, to include among others; books, journal articles, government surveys, and studies based on the results obtained by interviews and questionnaires (this researcher will not be conducting any interviews or distributing such questionnaires himself). These sources will be
used to examine the maquiladora industry in a critical fashion, focusing primarily on the specific plight of the maquiladora worker in Mexico.

Research on this project will be limited in several ways. First, there will be external limitations. The topic of this thesis concerns the maquiladora industry in Mexico. This researcher will not be able to travel to Mexico throughout the duration of this project, primarily due to constraints due to time and money, and consequently will not be able to get a first-hand look at the maquiladoras and their surrounding environs that are the focal point of this project. One other possible external constraint is the fact that although the researcher has a considerable background in working with the Spanish language, and has taken several years in Spanish instruction in school, the researcher has not had the opportunity to practice his Spanish skills very much in the last several years. This is not foreseen as being a great difficulty, as the vast majority of the sources gathered for this project were written in English or at least translated from Spanish to English; therefore, rustiness in dealing with the Spanish language should not be a very big problem.

There are also internal limitations to this thesis. The foremost of these limitations is the fact that this project will mostly examine the maquiladora industry as it is manifested in the towns along the U.S.-Mexico border, such as Ciudad Juárez. Consequently, research will be somewhat limited in that it cannot possibly examine the maquiladora industry from a truly empirical standpoint (all of Mexico). However, to help illuminate and supplement his research and sources, the researcher has chosen to use some sources that deal with maquiladora in different areas of Mexico. Given the fact that maquiladoras are largely fueled by, and consequently dependent upon, the migration of Mexican workers from different parts of the country (mostly from rural areas to the city), the researcher feels it is necessary to at least offer a
glimpse of maquiladoras in varying locales throughout Mexico. One other important internal limitation of this project will be that the researcher is examining this problem primarily from the standpoint of Mexican workers; focusing on the difficulties they face in being a part of the maquiladora industry. Therefore, the bulk of sources, as well as subsequent interpretation of them, will be drawn from this premise. The researcher has included some sources that focus on the maquiladora industry from other perspectives; maquiladora management, economic viewpoints, etc. However, these other types of sources have been added primarily to illuminate the specific focus of this thesis.

**Literature Review**

The Mexican maquiladora industry began as a result of the search by foreign investors for a cheap place in which to conduct business. These entrepreneurs were originally comprised largely of American interests, who took advantage of the great number of unemployed Mexicans living along the U.S.-Mexico border after the end of the Bracero Program in 1964. This thesis will draw upon sources such as Larudee’s “Causes of Growth and Decline in Mexico's Maquiladora Apparel Sector,” to examine the background and general structure of the industry. While the maquiladora industry has continued to grow and thrive in the past several decades, this progress has largely been unfelt by those most integral to its success; the Mexican maquiladora workers. Though there have been volumes of literature that have chronicled the abuses of the maquiladora industry to the Mexican worker, precious little popular research has examined the problem of human rights abuse as seen from the workers’ perspective, at least from a potentially corrective stance. This thesis will use primary sources such as David Bacon’s interview, “The Life of a Maquiladora Worker;” and articles such as Maria Fernanda Garcia’s “The Five
Dimensions of Pay Satisfaction in a Maquiladora Plant in Mexico,” and Lisa Pelld’s “Employee Work Values and Organizational Attachment in North Mexican Maquiladoras” to illuminate this.

Given this evidence, it is clear that maquiladoras operate with little regard as to the welfare of their workers. Profit is always first and foremost in the minds of maquiladora managers. And this fact, that maquiladoras are highly profitable, cannot be denied. This thesis will use sources such as Lance Brouthers’ “Maquiladoras: Entrepreneurial Experimentation to Global Competitiveness,” James Biles’ “Export-oriented Industrialization and Regional Development: A Case Study of Maquiladora Production in Yucatán, Mexico,” and GAO Reports’ “International Trade: Mexico's Maquiladora Decline Affects U.S.-Mexico Border Communities and Trade; Recovery Depends in Part on Mexico's Actions: GAO-03-891,” to illustrate this. One of the great obstacles in the quest for maquiladora workers to improve their working conditions is the fact that the maquiladora industry has historically been extremely profitable; therefore, maquiladora management has seen no reason to change its ways. Further, there has been much legislation, primarily in the form of treaties such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which has only further to solidify maquiladora management practices in regard to their employees’ welfare.6 Thus, it appears that the Mexican government is unconcerned about the greater welfare of maquiladora workers, and has consistently placed maquiladora profit far above the problems of these workers. This thesis will consult sources such as the Truett’s “NAFTA and the Maquiladoras: Boon or Bane?” Hilary Abell’s “Endangering women’s health for profit: health and safety in Mexico's maquiladoras,” Alejandro Lugo’s

Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico

6 Lila J. Truett and Dale B. Truett, “NAFTA and the Maquiladoras: Boon or Bane?” Contemporary Economic Policy 25, no. 3 (July 2007): 374-386. The Truett’s show that NAFTA has been detrimental to maquiladora workers, while serving to increase maquiladora profits and stimulate the U.S., Mexican, and growing global economy.
Balliet 13

Border, and David Bacon’s *The Children of NAFTA: Labor Wars on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, to illustrate this. It seems obvious that without government regulatory intervention, the maquiladoras will go unchecked in regard to human rights violations.

Maquiladoras are and have always been vehicles of exploitation. There has been much research presented that has documented this. This thesis will draw heavily upon works such as Justin Akers Chacón’s *No One is Illegal: Fighting Violence and State Repression on the U.S.-Mexico Border* to highlight this fact. Recent research has been presented to illustrate this, and has been based on the statements taken from a significant sample of maquiladora workers.⁷ There has also been a significant body of research presented that has very clearly detailed the primary roadblocks in the way of maquiladora workers and their desire for better working conditions. The biggest of these roadblocks are, as previously mentioned; the lack of governmental or other influence in maquiladora regulatory conditions, the increasingly competitive industrial environment which has been brought on primarily due to globalization, and perhaps most importantly of all, the fact that the very nature of the maquiladora is that of a self-sustaining exploiter of its workers.⁸ Throughout this project, this researcher will refer to works such as the Comaroffs’ *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, and James Cyphers’ “Mexico’s Economic Dilemma: the Developmental Failure of Neoliberalism: a Contemporary Case Study of the Globalization Process” to highlight the negative and far-reaching consequences of the maquiladora industry as it relates to the global economy as a whole. Hence, if a maquiladora were to implement policies aimed at looking after the welfare of

---


its workers, profits would plummet due to the subsequently higher operating costs. Maria E. deForest’s “Are Maquiladoras a Menace to US Workers?” Manuel Solano’s “Maquiladoras and the implications for your tax bill,” and Grunwald’s “Opportunity missed: Mexico and Maquiladoras,” will be consulted to show the effects the maquiladora industry has upon U.S. workers and consumers.

Perhaps the most important source of information used in the compilation of this thesis will be the interviews of several workers. As one of the prime objectives of this project is to highlight the significant plight of the Mexican maquiladora worker in the present, these interviews will prove to be extremely valuable in doing so. Though this researcher could not conduct such interviews himself, there is no shortage of great testimony to be drawn from for the purposes of this thesis. In particular, Womenontheborder.org and the Bracero History Archive are a wealth of primary source information that have inspired this researcher and given great life to this project.
DEFINITION OF TERMS

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO): the largest federation of unions in the United States.

Bracero Program: a series of agreements between the U.S. and Mexico through 1942-1964, by which Mexican workers could come to the U.S. and work legally for a designated period of time.

Border Industrialization Program (BIP): a system of manufacturing in Mexico, which heavily encourages foreign investment, and favors the manufacturers in a multitude of ways.

Campesinos: rural Mexican peasant farmers.

Doha Development Agenda (DDA): the trade negotiation round of the World Trade Organization, engaged in regulating world trade.


Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): agency of the U.S. government, in charge of regulating the environment.

Export-oriented Industrialization (EOI): a trade policy that seeks to facilitate the process of industrialization by exporting certain goods.

Fondo del ahorro: savings fund initiated by the Mexican government, in which a portion of braceros’ earnings were deducted from their pay stubs, to be held until they returned to Mexico and then returned to them, so they could buy farm equipment and other necessities.

Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA): a proposed agreement to eliminate or reduce trade barriers among all countries in the Americas, excluding Cuba.

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT): multilateral agreement regulating international trade. GATT was put into effect in 1948, and phased out upon the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994.9

Globalization – the increasing unification of the worldwide economic scheme or order via methods such as the elimination of tariffs and other trade barriers.

Hacendados: wealthy Mexican landowners.

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS): agency of the U.S. federal government, in charge of processing immigrants.

---

International Monetary Fund (IMF): according to its website, “The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an organization of 188 countries, working to foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability, facilitate international trade, promote high employment and sustainable economic growth, and reduce poverty around the world. Created in 1945, the IMF is governed by and accountable to the 188 countries that make up its near-global membership.”

La Década Perdida (“The Lost Decade”): period of financial crisis in Latin America, especially Mexico, during the 1980s.

Machismo: the concept that males are the dominant species, and that females are inferior and should be subservient.

Manufacturing Industry, Maquiladora and Export Services Program (IMMEX): a program instituted in 2006 by the Mexican government, aimed at revitalizing the maquiladora industry.

Maquiladora: foreign-owned companies located in Mexico that operate by using goods that have been imported from outside of Mexico, and producing finished export products, to be sold primarily in the countries from which the raw materials used in their production have been sent from.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): a tri-lateral agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico ratified in 1994, whose immediate function was to eliminate all trade tariffs between these countries. The long-term proposed goal of NAFTA was to create a trade environment between the concerned nations that would be totally free of trade barriers of all kinds.

Office of Environmental Protection (PROFERPA): Mexican governmental agency in charge of environmental regulation.

Porfiriato: period in Mexican history (1876-1911) under the rule of President Porfirio Díaz.

Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF): program instituted by the Mexican government; failed predecessor to the Border Industrialization Program (BIP).

Promotora: amateur female legal advocates, who educate workers about Mexican labor law and assist them in disputes with their employers.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): an agency of the U.S. federal government whose obligation is to protect human health and welfare along with the environment.

Value Added Tax (VAT): a type of consumption tax paid to the federal government, based on the price of the item in question.

World Bank: international institution, headquartered in Washington, D.C., that offers loans to developing countries. Established in 1941, its stated mission is to end extreme poverty and promote global prosperity.¹²

World Trade Organization (WTO): an intergovernmental body that regulates international trade, formed in 1994.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER REGION

Mexico and the U.S. have maintained an intimate diplomatic relationship for over two hundred years. This relationship has been made possible mostly through strong and mutually beneficial economic connections. Throughout this time, Mexico has been dependent upon foreign capital to stimulate economic growth, a large portion of which has been provided by the U.S. With this as a backdrop, it has been a natural progression that huge numbers of Mexicans have settled along Mexico’s northern border, or have ventured further north into the U.S. to try and find work. Consequently, the U.S.-Mexico border region has experienced periods of varying success and opulence, or lack thereof. There have been several key factors that have beckoned Mexican workers northward in search of employment, such as: the *Porfiriato* (1876-1911), the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), the Prohibition era in the U.S. (1919-33), the Bracero Program (1942-64), the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) and the start of the maquiladora industry (1960s), the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, and most recently, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Of all these factors, the Bracero Program, since its inception in 1942, has been the impetus for the most significant migration of Mexicans northward into the U.S., both legally and illegally. This is because the program was one of the first opportunities to be developed with the cooperation of both governments, in the modern era, for Mexicans to improve their economic status.
Despite, or perhaps because of, the Bracero Program and the other aforementioned factors, in addition to the country’s heavy reliance upon foreign money, Mexico has consistently been unable to secure first-world status. Consequently, many Mexicans have given up on trying to make a life for themselves in their home country, and have migrated to the U.S. and elsewhere in the hopes of improving their lives. The promise of higher pay is the primary motivating factor for this mass migration. The Mexican migrants are not the only ones who have gained from this migration; U.S. companies, land owners, and many others have made fortunes on the backs of Mexican workers and the cheap labor they provide. The illegal status of many Mexican workers in the U.S. has also made it easy for American employers to hire new workers, and to fire them very easily if the need arises. After all, an illegal worker does not have as strong a voice as a documented worker has. The focus of this chapter will be upon U.S.-Mexican relations over the

---

past several generations. Particular attention will be paid to the events and other factors that have shaped U.S.-Mexican economic relations, and have been so integral in stimulating migration along the border, and the development of the border region as a whole, throughout this period. A full understanding of the historical context is essential, if one is to hope to grasp how the Bracero Program came to be, and how this program then led to the enactment of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP).

Politics has also played a significant role in these developments, particularly the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), who had a monopoly on Mexican politics through the entirety of the twentieth century, and eventually lost its dominant role when Vicente Fox assumed the presidency in 2000. 14 Throughout its reign, the PRI encouraged foreign investment in Mexico, and subsequently perpetuated Mexican dependence upon foreign money. A lot of this foreign money was coming from companies in the U.S; because of this, PRI ensured that Mexico maintained intimate ties to the U.S., both economically and politically. Seeing as how the U.S. was the world’s leading superpower throughout this period, it has predictably had a substantial influence on the decisions of the PRI. The inception of the Bracero Program, and how it came to pass, is a prime example of this. Beginning in 1942, the PRI was encouraged by the U.S. government to start the program, and President Manuel Avila Camacho signed the program into effect. Over the next couple decades, PRI leaders were heavily influenced by the money that was flowing into Mexico via U.S. channels. Presidents Aleman (1946-52) and Ruiz (1952-58) used U.S. investment to fund large industrial and public works projects, and the Bracero Program continued to flourish as a result. Later, President Ordaz (1964-70) signed the BIP into law and the maquiladora industry began to flourish. After decades of economic growth, in the 1980s

Mexico went through a devastating recession that came to be known as *La Década Perdida* (“The Lost Decade”).

During the 1980s, most of Latin America experienced a sharp economic downturn, due primarily to the fact that countries owed far more international debt than they could repay. During the petroleum crisis of the 1970s, many Latin American petroleum producers profited greatly, and recycled their profits back into their own countries’ infrastructure. They tended to overspend and in turn, wound up borrowing vast sums from entities such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As the world economy spiraled into its own recession, interest rates climbed to a point where developing nations could not meet their loan payments. In 1982, the Mexican government realized it could no longer meet its loan payments. Consequently, new loan terms were negotiated with its creditors, and Mexico wound up borrowing a lot more money, particularly from the IMF.\(^{15}\)

The Latin American recession of the 1980s hit Mexico especially hard, hence the moniker *La Década Perdida*. The Mexican government took several steps to try and alleviate the problem. For example, President López Portillo devalued the peso by historic levels, and in 1982 nationalized all financial institutions. In an effort to try and stimulate new economic growth, Mexico gained inclusion in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986, under the administration of President Miguel de la Madrid. This opened up new avenues of international trade, and stimulated the influx of foreign capital into Mexico that had been sought

after by the government. Consequently, inflation was brought under control and La Década Perdida gradually came to an end in the late 80s.\textsuperscript{16}

In an effort to alleviate the pressure brought about by Mexico’s substantial national debt, PRI leaders took it upon themselves to implement peso devaluations as a remedy. After the recession had passed, President Gortari (1988-94) was instrumental in the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, which entered Mexico into partnership with Canada and the U.S., to try and strengthen the Mexican economy and make the country well-equipped for competition in the world market, in the long-term.\textsuperscript{17}

Before the PRI came to power, the U.S. and Mexico had long-experienced diplomatic relations that were not always pleasant or mutually beneficial, relating to the border region. Most disputes between the two countries had historically been territorial. Ever since the early days of independence, the border region has been rife with conflict, and sometimes has been host to violence. In the early days, Mexico owned most of the western territory in the region, though the U.S. in its expansionist nature, had always expressed an interest in acquisition. Predictably, this was the cause of much conflict between Mexico and the U.S. As early as Thomas Jefferson, U.S. leaders were consumed with the idea of acquiring western lands. Jefferson himself stated:

Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled. We should take care, too, not to think it for the best of that great continent to press too soon on the Spaniards. Those countries cannot be in better hands. My fear is that they are too feeble to hold them till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them piece by piece.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Truett, “NAFTA and the Maquiladoras,” 374-386.
\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Jefferson, \textit{Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson}, Volume 3, Part 1 (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2009), 433.
Motivated by leaders such as Jefferson, the U.S. government eventually started acquiring Mexico’s territories. This acquisition was also enabled by the fact that the U.S. was concurrently acquiring lands from other nations. For example, the Louisiana territory was purchased from France in 1803, and Florida was acquired from Spain in 1819. Despite American desires to gain more land, Mexico was so easily relieved of its territories, and in 1832 a treaty was enacted that gave Mexico possession of all lands from Louisiana to the Pacific. Despite this treaty, however, the relentless U.S. expansionism would not be deterred.

Subsequently, Americans continued to press westward, and the U.S. eventually acquired virtually all the disputed western lands. In 1836, Texas was captured and Texan independence from Mexico was secured via the Treaty of Velasco. The loss of the Texas territory began a domino effect, leading to the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48), which resulted in Mexico surrendering much of its remaining western lands to the U.S. This was made official by the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in 1848. By the end of the war, Mexico had lost a significant portion of its overall territory to the U.S. On the other hand, the U.S. had further cemented its dominance in the region by acquiring vast fertile lands, rich with gold, silver, and other precious natural resources. Mexico was, in effect, forced to sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, as to refuse to sign it would have surely meant a continued American

military presence in the region, which could only have resulted in the loss of more land and money.\textsuperscript{23}

After this tumultuous period in Mexican history, and with the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, Mexico had relinquished a large part of its territory to the U.S., despite the 1832 treaty that supposedly had asserted Mexico’s sovereignty.\textsuperscript{24} The end result of this catastrophic loss of territory to the U.S., was that Mexico was put into an extremely unfavorable and largely powerless position in relation to the U.S. This powerlessness would be evident in all subsequent U.S.-Mexican relations, and would become more extreme as the U.S. grew to be the world’s leading superpower.

During the 1860s, as the American Civil War raged, France took advantage of the opportunity by invading Mexico and installing a puppet ruler, Maximilian I. Mexico knew that the U.S. government was too preoccupied with the Civil War to respond to the French aggression in Mexico. After the Civil War ended and the U.S. was unencumbered, it was able to aid Mexico. France subsequently relinquished its control of Mexico, and Maximilian I was executed.\textsuperscript{25} Because of the help of the U.S. in gaining its independence from France, Mexico has always been in a relatively subservient diplomatic position to its northern neighbor.

**THE PORFIRIATO**

The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo did not mean that conflict in the border region ended. To the contrary, there were several territorial disputes and invasions that erupted during the 1860s and 1870s, with Mexico usually being on the receiving end of any aggression.

\textsuperscript{23} Rodríguez and Vincent, eds., *Myths, Misdeeds, and Misunderstandings*, 11.
and violence. This climate of dispute and occasional violence persisted until Porfirio Díaz came to power in 1876. The Díaz regime, which came to be known as the Porfiriato, was responsible for bringing a relative political stability to Mexico. Díaz also heavily encouraged foreign investment in Mexico, which improved U.S.-Mexican diplomatic relations and largely stabilized the border region. Díaz thought that in order for Mexico to thrive, it must maintain a friendly relationship with the U.S., as it was the world’s greatest power. Under the Porfiriato’s motto of “Order and Progress”, Mexico achieved a steady rate of growth during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Díaz was so successful in attracting foreign investment, that by the end of his tenure, the vast majority of Mexican railroad stock was owned by investors from the U.S. Though the Porfiriato stimulated a great deal of economic growth, most of it was heavily centered in the northern states. So much so, in fact, that by the end of Díaz’ reign in 1910, nearly a quarter of U.S. investment was in Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Chihuahua, and Sonora.

Because of the Porfiriato’s lopsided focus on the northern states, the border region flourished at a rate far greater than the rest of the country. Border towns became significant centers of trade and transportation, and as a result, Mexicans began migrating north in huge numbers. In the border region, Díaz created a zona libre (“free zone”) where Mexicans were enabled to buy all sorts of duty-free goods. Hordes of people began to flock to the zona libre, where they could cross over to the U.S. side to do their shopping. Concurrently, many Americans ventured into the Mexican side of the zona libre to buy various foods and other items. As the zona libre flourished due to the economic policies of the Porfiriato, Mexicans began to migrate

26 Martínez, U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 45.
28 Martínez, U.S.-Mexican Borderlands, xvi.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 85.
north in record numbers. As U.S.-Mexican trade and commerce soared, this migration continued to increase.

Figure 2: President Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915)

Another key factor in the growth of the border region was the development of the Mexican railroad, which was a major priority of the Porfiriato. Before Díaz came to power, Mexican railroads were not very well-established. However, during Díaz’ reign, much attention was given to the development of railroads, particularly in the border region. The development of the railroads during the Porfiriato played a big part in the growth of the border region during this time. A prime example of this growth, and of the influence of the railroad in the region, is the city of El Paso, Texas. Before the expansion of the railroad, El Paso was a small town with a population of around 800. By the end of Díaz’ reign in 1910, the population of El Paso had

increased to nearly 80,000.\textsuperscript{32} The tremendous growth and success of the railroads had a significant impact upon many industries, including mining and agriculture. As a result, the demand for labor increased and Mexican migration northward continued to flourish.\textsuperscript{33} By 1930, a staggering number of Mexicans had migrated north to find work in agricultural.\textsuperscript{34} This huge influx of Mexican labor had a great impact on the U.S. economy. The border was largely invisible, economically speaking, due to growing economic interdependence between the two countries.

**MIGRATION DURING PROHIBITION AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

Despite the tremendous economic growth experienced by the border region as a result of the Porfirian motto of “Order and Progress”, many northern Mexicans began to see the evils of the Díaz administration’s policies. The Díaz regime was characterized by its repression of the people, and by the favorable treatment it gave to the upper class. Díaz’ economic policies were extremely biased toward the *hacendados* (wealthy Mexican landowners); consequently, many *campesinos* (Mexican peasant farmers) were forced off of their land, and left unable to make a living.\textsuperscript{35} A career military man, Díaz ruled with an iron fist, often quelling any criticism of his regime with extremely punitive measure, including imprisonment and even death to anyone who dared challenge his authority.\textsuperscript{36} Though Díaz was largely responsible for bringing economic stability to Mexico, by the end of Díaz’ reign, Mexican elites began to see the need for reform.\textsuperscript{37} This call for reform was stimulated by the fact that the Mexican economy was also declining.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
because of the U.S. recession in 1907. To make the situation worse, the wheat harvest of 1907 was greatly impacted by a serious drought. Mexico was forced to import much of its wheat and corn, which led to an increase in the price of commodities. Amidst these troubles, Díaz announced that he would step down as President in 1910. However, he went back on his word and again ran in the 1910 election. This was the last straw for many northern Mexicans, and as a result, Francisco Madero, a northern elite, urged for a revolution. Madero received a great deal of support from the Mexican populace, a large number of whom were peasants. Subsequently conflict broke out and it would last for over a decade. During the Revolution, the border region experienced a significant economic downturn as diplomatic relations suffered. However, the migration boom persisted, due to the fact that many people were seeking to flee the violence of the Revolution. At this time the U.S. was experiencing an economic boom due to the preparation for World War I. This also drew many Mexicans north in search of opportunity. Overall, nearly ten percent of the population of Mexico migrated to the U.S. from 1900-30.

During the Prohibition era (1919-33), as Mexicans were flocking northward to the border region and beyond, many Americans were going south. This was due to the signing of the Volstead Act (1919) and the onset of Prohibition, liquor and other vices became not only illegal in the U.S., but much harder to come by. As a result, Americans went to Mexico to drink, gamble, and solicit prostitutes. Many American owners of establishments of ill repute, such as bars and casinos, packed up and moved to the border area, concentrating heavily in areas such as Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. Because of this, these and other border towns experienced an

---

39 Ibid., 66-7.
economic boom as Americans flooded south to spend their money on vice. A very important result of this free-flowing American spending, was that many towns along the border region were able to vastly improve their infrastructure, making great improvements in areas such as roads, sanitation, electricity, and other amenities. 42

When the worldwide depression hit in 1929, the economic boom experienced by the border region came to a grinding halt. As the U.S. economy collapsed, Americans no longer had the disposable income to be able to travel to the border region in search of taboo pursuits. Before the Depression, Mexicans could illegally migrate to the U.S. without much fear of being shipped back home if caught. As the effects of the Depression hit America and many Americans lost their jobs, illegal Mexican immigrants no longer enjoyed the relative immunity from the law that they previously had. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were sent back home to Mexico, along with a fair amount of their children who were born in America. 43 Regardless of where they were originally from in Mexico, the majority of these people congregated in the border region. The further away from the border, the more difficult it was for Mexicans to find work. Though they did not want to leave their homes, many people were forced to head toward the border to earn a living. 44 This influx of people without jobs or money, coupled with the decrease in American tourism, caused the border region to undergo a severe economic depression during this time.

POST-WAR BOOM

________________________

42 Ibid.
43 Guerin-Gonzales, Mexican Workers, 98.
Though the border region was adversely affected during the Depression era, it would again soon experience a period of growth. This occurred when the U.S. joined the war effort. In 1942, the governments of Mexico and the U.S. finalized planning and instituted the Bracero Program. This program was largely implemented as an attempt to relieve the shortage of labor brought about by the American involvement in the war effort. It enabled Mexican workers to temporarily migrate to the U.S., where they were to work in the fields. The opportunity to venture north and make some money in the U.S. drew many Mexican workers to the border. Despite what dangers and harsh conditions they may face, they still take the chance to come to the U.S. to improve their lives.45 By the end of the Bracero Program, millions of Mexican workers had taken part in it. During the program’s peak years, over 400,000 braceros entered the U.S. every year.46 Most braceros sent most of their income back to their families in Mexico, and as a result of this, they and their families became more and more dependent upon the money they earned in the program. Another effect of the program was that many workers came to enjoy life in the U.S., and would often fail to return back home to Mexico at the end of their tenure in the program. In 1964 the program was ended, and many people suddenly became unemployed. The Mexican government took measures to alleviate this problem. To start with, in 1965, the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was established, in an attempt to put some of the unemployed Mexicans back to work. The Mexican government also heavily encouraged foreign investment during this time. As an incentive to stimulate this foreign investment, Mexican factories were relieved of paying duties on exports. Consequently, the border region began to again function as a zona libre, similar to the original one created by the Porfiriato. Though the Mexican

government intended for the displaced braceros to work in the newly-formed maquiladoras, few actually did so. Braceros were exclusively male, and in contrast, the maquiladoras employed a workforce made up largely of female workers. Despite this problem, the border region as a whole experienced a period of overall economic growth during the years immediately following the institution of the BIP, which was due in large part to the maquiladora industry.47

THE BIRTH OF NAFTA

In 1986, the U.S. passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The IRCA attempted to give Mexicans currently living in the U.S. an opportunity to become citizens, and it also attempted to curb the growing problem of illegal immigration into the U.S. Though it was somewhat effective in its aims, illegal Mexican immigration into the U.S. continued to grow. To make the problem worse, in 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was enacted by the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.48 NAFTA made it much easier for the three countries to engage in trade with each other, by lowering or eliminating regulations on foreign trade in the region. One outcome of NAFTA has been that Mexican migration to the U.S., both legal and illegal, has increased tremendously.49

As has been demonstrated here, several historical events have greatly shaped the patterns of migration along the border. Though there have been times when migration has come to a halt, for the most part it has occurred uninterrupted and at an ever-growing pace. One constant throughout the period in question, is that the Mexican government has continually been reliant upon foreign investment as a means of bolstering its economy. During the Porfiriato and before,

47 Lorey, The U.S.-Mexican Border, 118.
49 Ibid.
the Mexican government used foreign investment to build railroads and to develop the border region as an area of free trade. After the Porfiriato came to an end, the PRI worked in tandem with the U.S. government in establishing vehicles such as the Bracero Program, the BIP, the IRCA, and NAFTA. While historical events were greatly influential, the primary motivating factor in the decision of many Mexicans to migrate north, both legally and illegally, was the prospect of making money. Even today, many Mexicans are trying to find work along the northern border, both in the maquiladoras and elsewhere, and many others continue to try and migrate further north to the U.S.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BRACERO PROGRAM
Perhaps the most influential factor during the twentieth century, that stimulated Mexican migration to the U.S., was the Bracero Program (1942-64). The program was promoted as a way for Mexican workers to earn money for their families, whom they left at home in Mexico while they went north to work in the fields. Mexican braceros crossed the border in hordes, all in search of economic prosperity. As a result of the frenzy of Mexican workers who traveled north in hopes of securing a job, several strikes, and even some violence, broke out along the border.\textsuperscript{50}

While Mexicans braceros hoped to find decent wages and fair working conditions, the prime motivating factor in the minds of American farmers, was money. Because of this, talks disintegrated on a number of occasions, before they finally agreed on the ground rules and launched the program in 1942. Events such as the El Paso and Mexicali Riots of 1953, along with Operation Wetback (1954), highlighted the incongruities between the Mexican workers and their American employers. The American farmers were in an advantageous position, as there were far more Mexican workers in need of employment than there were jobs available. American farmers used this fact to exploit the workers.

Conditions for braceros were commonly sub-standard; they were often mistreated, and were often paid unfairly or not at all for their work. Firsthand accounts from former braceros, like those of Juan Loza, José Parra, and Mauro González are filled with descriptions of how difficult the conditions were that they had to endure.\textsuperscript{51,52,53} Mr. González mentions that sometimes the bracero camps would become dangerous. The braceros would often gamble with each other to try and earn extra money, and there were frequent disputes. González describes the brutal

\textsuperscript{52} Mireya Loza, "Juan Loza," in \textit{Bracero History Archive}, Item #175, August 31, 2005, \url{http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175} (accessed January 3, 2016).
murder of one bracero by another, over a gambling dispute. Eventually ending in 1964, the Bracero Program left a legacy of enduring human rights violations. Sadly, this legacy has not been amended. The BIP picked up largely where the Bracero Program left off, mistreating and abusing workers to the extreme. This continues today.

**WHY THE NEED?**

As large numbers of Americans joined the armed forces after America entered World War II in 1941, there arose a great need for laborers in the fields. As an initial remedy, American farmers tried replacing their workforce with young boys and young women. This was not effective, though. Farmers soon complained that these young workers were not suitable for the job. The farmers turned to the government for help with this problem, and a solution was arrived upon, namely that Mexican workers were to be sent in seasonally to help alleviate the labor shortage. By late 1942, the specifics of the Bracero Program were ironed out at the bureaucratic level, and Mexican workers began migrating to the U.S. in large numbers on a temporary basis.

While the vast majority of the braceros went to work in the fields, there were a small number of them who worked on the railroads as well. There already had been, for many years, a large number of Mexican workers who had traveled northward to work in the U.S. illegally. However, for these illegal workers, conditions were often much worse and more dangerous than under the restrictions of the Bracero Program. Tirso Yepes describes how he was mistreated by his employers in the U.S., and also by immigration officials when he was caught and made to return home to Mexico.

---

54 Ibid.
55 *El Paso Times*, April 17, 1942.
The President of Mexico at this time was Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-46). Camacho was largely responsible for ushering in a period of great change for the PRI.\(^{57}\) The PRI had originally been founded as the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) during the administration of Plutarco Calles (1924-28).\(^{58}\) It soon was restructured and renamed the Revolutionary Mexican Party (PRM) under the Lazaro Cardenas (1934-40) regime, and was heavily focused on improving conditions for the lower classes. Further restructuring occurred under Camacho, and eventually the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was formed. The PRI has remained essentially the same ever since.\(^{59}\)

During the early days of the Camacho administration, the Bracero Program was not a key concern for the Mexican government. Legislators saw the potential pitfalls of the program for Mexican workers, and were also fearful that sending many braceros to the U.S. would create a shortage of workers domestically. Because of these fears, the Bracero Program did not immediately get off its feet.\(^{60}\) However, soon Mexico would thrust itself into the middle of the fighting, and the Mexican government were sympathetic to the labor shortage being felt by American farmers, the Bracero Program was launched.\(^{61}\) In order to garner support for the program, Mexican workers were told that they would not only be aiding the war effort and making money, but that they would also be gaining valuable work experience in the technologically superior U.S., which they could use to gain permanent employment once they returned home. Sadly, this was hardly ever the case. More often than not, Mexican workers were


\(^{59}\) Ibid., 12-17.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 17.

treated unfairly by their temporary American employers, receiving very little pay for the work they performed, and were met with unemployment when they went back home.\textsuperscript{62}

![Figure 3: Bracero Being Fingerprinted\textsuperscript{63}]

Negotiations for the program were extensive. As agreed upon, braceros were to be paid a decent wage and given suitable conditions by which to work and live. Additionally, braceros were promised to not be drafted into the U.S. armed forces, and were guaranteed to be returned home to Mexico upon completion of their contracts. Transportation to and from America was to be paid for by the employer, and the braceros were guaranteed a minimum hourly wage of 30 cents.\textsuperscript{64} Employers tended to dispute this wage, and usually wound up compensating the braceros far less than they were guaranteed by law, paying them in “piece wages” rather than by the hour. This means that braceros were generally paid for each “piece” of their work, which was usually measured by pounds, acres, etc. As far back as Karl Marx, it has been an accepted fact that the piece wage has historically been used to give the employer an unfair advantage over the

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{El Continental}, August 7, 1942.


\textsuperscript{64} \textit{El Continental}, August 7, 1942.
Further adding to this unfair advantage was the fact that most braceros were uneducated people who came from the poorest regions of Mexico, and consequently were unable to accurately measure how they were being paid. American farmers knew this and used it to their advantage, effectively cheating the braceros out of their wages.

**THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER**

In addition to using these unscrupulous methods of figuring the wages of the braceros, American farmers also were in control of the living situations of the braceros, as a condition of being legally responsible for their housing. Though the legislation did actually provide for proper suitable amenities and proper living conditions, it was not usually followed by the employers. Instead, conditions were regularly sub-standard according to both the braceros and Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) inspectors. Braceros were regularly subjected to conditions that would be deemed cruel and unsatisfactory to most anybody, immediately upon entering the processing centers.

The U.S. government did assign people such as Richard Hancock to the centers, to make sure that everything ran smoothly and that the regulations of the program were being followed. Hancock mentions that he and other Americans who were fluent in Spanish were especially valuable in the centers, as they acted as valuable intermediaries between the braceros and their employers. John Augustine, who worked as a liaison between braceros and American farmers under the Bracero Program, says that to the best of his knowledge, there were no major disputes

---

that could not be resolved. He believes that the program ran smoothly, without any hitches.\textsuperscript{67} Despite of what he says, however, there is much evidence to the contrary.

Faye Terrazas, who worked as a clerk in one of these centers, recalls how degrading the process was for incoming workers. Families were often separated, and the braceros had to undergo a brutal delousing procedure, among other inhumane treatments.\textsuperscript{68} They were often forced to sleep on floors, were not provided with adequate restrooms and showers, were poorly fed, denied health care, and subjected to a myriad of other human rights violations that today would make us cringe.\textsuperscript{69}

Braceros attempted to remedy the harsh conditions with which they were faced. There were some instances of labor strikes, and even the occasional outbreak of violence. Also, the Mexican government attempted to negotiate a better deal for the braceros. While the braceros enjoyed a relatively favorable position in the eyes of American employers during the very beginnings of the program, as time wore on, American farmers began to realize that they truly had the advantage in the negotiations. There were simply too many braceros attempting to fill too few job vacancies; employers knew this, and used this fact as leverage in any negotiations they had with braceros and the Mexican government. Throughout the entirety of the Bracero Program (1942-64), American farmers held the upper hand in negotiations and, sadly, used this as a means to exploit and abuse the braceros in the name of profit. American employers even encouraged braceros to join them without legal approval of the Mexican government. This was done in the hopes of circumventing the rules and regulations of the Bracero Program altogether. Braceros


\textsuperscript{68} Fernanda Carrillo, "Faye Terrazas," in \textit{Bracero History Archive}, Item #50, April 1, 2003, \url{http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/50} (accessed January 3, 2016).

\textsuperscript{69} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 66-78.
realized what was occurring, and as a result, riots and other violence occasionally broke out. However, despite their attempts to fix their plight, the braceros were never able to right the situation in their favor, and American employers continued to abuse and exploit braceros throughout the entirety of the program. Whereas the braceros had some modicum of leverage with which to negotiate in the early days of the program, as time wore on, their situation continued to worsen to the point where many Mexicans refused to take part in the program altogether, preferring to live at home in poverty, than to be abused in a foreign country. However, the location in which they were employed played a big part in how they were treated. The Bracero Program placed Mexican workers in many different states across the nation, and there were definitely better places to work if you were a bracero. For example, Texas was excluded from the program altogether until 1949, because of the history of poor treatment of workers that was the legacy of Texas farmers. Because of this exclusion, many Texas farmers lost large portions of their harvests and were eventually motivated to comply with the regulations of the Bracero Program, and in 1949 were included. 70 Though Texas had a comparatively shoddy human rights record regarding the Bracero Program, there were many braceros who had generally positive experiences. Patricio Padilla, for example, worked in Texas for many years, and was able to establish legal residency there. However, he eventually returned to Mexico, where he was able to buy land with the money he’d saved as a bracero. 71 Above all, the simple fact that there were far too many braceros than were needed by American farmers, basically ensured that braceros would never be treated as fairly as they should have been under the law.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION SOARS

70 El Paso Times, October 15, 1942.
Adding to the difficulties faced by braceros who attempted to engage in the program and come to work in the U.S. legally, there was the problem of illegal immigration and the fact that the INS, at least tacitly, encouraged illegal immigration. Illegal workers were often “legalized” if they happened to be detained by the border patrol, especially if it was during a peak season for American farmers.72 At some points during the program, depending on the state in question, the number of illegal workers actually outnumbered legal braceros.73 This certainly served to make the plight of the braceros an even more unsavory one. As Mexicans flooded across the border in ever-increasing numbers, the advantage held by American farmers continued to strengthen until eventually, virtually all rules and regulations of the Bracero Program were merely suggestions, instead of law.

Though it was originally meant to encourage the legal and productive temporary immigration of Mexican workers into the U.S., the Bracero Program actually served to enable a large number of people to flood across the border illegally. The Mexican government was at least partly to blame for this, as it was their obligation to afford work opportunities to the poorest areas of the country, which were often located quite far from the border. However, American employers were far more concerned with convenience than with the plight of the Mexican poor. Consequently, they preferred to recruit Mexican workers from locations very near to the border. As a result of this, illegal immigration flourished, as unfortunate Mexicans from far-away locations were unable to gain entry into the program.74 Braceros were allowed to work for up to six months in the U.S. and were then obligated by law to return to Mexico. Upon returning

---

72 Cohen, “Caught in the Middle,” 224.
74 Tanya Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He... Stayed. Guest Worker Programs and the Issue of Non-Return,” International Migration 38, no. 2 (2000), 223.
home, braceros would usually immediately re-apply for another position in the program, but they were guaranteed nothing. Because of this lack of job security, many braceros would choose to stay in the U.S. illegally after their assignments had ended, rather than to return home to Mexico and face long periods of unemployment.75

**TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE**

Early on, the program enjoyed dutiful governmental regulation due to its “wartime status.” However, this came to an end in 1947, when individual American farmers took control of the program. Workers no longer enjoyed the relative protection of the government under the program. Abuses became rampant as employers took full advantage of their newly-gained control, and conditions for braceros deteriorated rapidly. With the employers in control of wages, living and working conditions, braceros faced an untenable situation indeed. They were regularly paid far less than the wages they were guaranteed, and subjected to the abuses of the employer-favored piece meal system of payment.76 Additionally, braceros were often forced to pay for their room and board, often at exorbitant prices. This made it virtually impossible for them to save any money.77 Employers often intimidated the braceros, and sometimes even resorted to violent coercion as a means of getting what they wanted. Because of this terrible treatment, many braceros left their jobs and attempted to find new ones with different American employers. However, they were often unable to do this without the proper documentation, and were either deported to Mexico, or forced to work for a different employer but under the same dismal

75 Ibid.
conditions. After years of continually-worsening conditions, the Mexican government finally stepped in and resumed an active role in protecting the rights of the braceros. Public Law 78 came into effect in 1951, and the rules and regulations of the program were re-examined. They seemed committed to improving conditions for the braceros. However, though it looked good in theory, Public Law 78 held no penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers. Because of this, many American farmers were motivated to do exactly that, and the unintentional result of Public Law 78 was that it caused undocumented workers to cross the border in unprecedented numbers.

“WETBACKS”

The Mexican government had to address the growing problem of illegal immigration, and attempted to fix it by moving the bracero recruitment centers away from the border. Illegal immigration was not only a problem for the U.S.; it was also hurting Mexican employers, particularly farmers in the border region who were being adversely affected by an extreme lack of able-bodied farm workers. As a result, in 1949 the U.S. agreed to recruit braceros from the interior of Mexico, rather than simply picking workers from the border region. They agreed to this reluctantly, since American employers were bound by contract to pay for the transportation of the braceros to and from their place of employment, and the interior of Mexico was a lot further to transport them than the border was. This meant American employers would pay significantly more in transportation costs. Because they were forced to consent to this stipulation,

78 Ibid.
80 Calavita, Inside the State, 44.
they were able to convince the Mexican government to allow Texas to participate in the program, though specific areas of Texas were still excluded by virtue of their bad track record.\textsuperscript{82}

Despite these concessions, illegal immigration continued to be a big problem. Undocumented Mexicans picked up the pejorative “wetbacks”, and were demonized in the media and in the public sphere. They did pose a significant problem for American workers, who were losing their jobs to Mexican workers who would work for considerably less than they would.\textsuperscript{83} By 1953 the “wetback problem” continued to be an issue. All along the border, Mexicans continued to cross the border illegally.\textsuperscript{84}

**OPERATION WETBACK**

Despite the efforts of the EPVCA and the INS, illegal immigration continued unabated. The simple fact was that Mexican workers were willing to work for far less than American workers. This, coupled with the intensely profit-driven mindset of the American farmers, ensured that undocumented Mexicans would continue to cross the border. American workers were just not able to compete with the throngs of “wetbacks” who would work for next to nothing, and so they turned to the U.S. government for help. Consequently, in 1953 “Operation Wetback” was launched. This was an effort led by the U.S. government to try and round up all illegal Mexican immigrants, and deport them back to Mexico. The operation was a great success, and by 1955 more than 2 million illegal immigrants were sent back home.\textsuperscript{85} The operation was bolstered by the American press, which continued its demonization of undocumented workers as “dirty wetbacks” who were responsible for the spread of filth and disease throughout areas of the U.S.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} El Paso Herald Post, September 6, 1951.
\textsuperscript{84} El Continental, September 3, 1953.
\textsuperscript{85} Lorey, The U.S.-Mexican Border, 121.
“Wetbacks” were also blamed for other societal ills, such as increasing crime rates. While there is a certain amount of truth in the “wetback” stereotype, “Operation Wetback” was mostly a product of American racism and xenophobia. Over time, “wetbacks” were no longer seen merely as a minor social and economic problem; they came to be regarded by many Americans as a significant threat to themselves and to American society as a whole.

Americans had become too dependent upon Mexican labor, and despite the initial success of Operation Wetback, illegal immigration continued to be a significant problem. American growers were still given the tacit approval of the U.S. government and the INS via its ineffective policies, and the fact that American employers faced little to no threat of legal action if they were caught employing illegal immigrants. During this time, the Bracero Program experienced a period of restructuring and re-negotiation. American farmers were increasingly pressured to hire documented braceros and eschew the hiring of illegal immigrants. They were also faced stiff penalties if they were caught hiring undocumented workers, including the loss of their right to participate in the Bracero Program at all. As an additional measure, the U.S. government beefed up the border patrol in an effort to deter “wetbacks” from jumping the border. Despite some opposition, the new conditions of the Bracero Program were eventually agreed on, and the program continued on for several more years.

Over time, the U.S. Department of Labor began to scrutinize the Bracero Program much closer and as a result, pressured American farmers to be in better compliance with the rules and regulations of the program. This higher level of scrutiny caused many farmers to become disillusioned with the program, and in some cases motivated them to stop participating in the program at all. Then in 1961, the program was extended by the House of Representatives, but

---

89 Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 151.
stricter regulations were applied. American workers were becoming more outspoken in their protest of the importation of bracero labor, claiming that braceros were stealing American jobs. As a result, the U.S. Department of Labor guaranteed that American workers would earn the same wages as braceros. Also, bracero camps became more highly-regulated, and subsequently many bracero camps were closed down.90

In 1962, American farmers protested mightily against a proposed raise in the wages of bracero cotton pickers, from 50 to 70 cents an hour. Opponents of the wage increase argued that farmers would inevitably turn to machine labor to replace the ever-increasing cost of bracero labor. Eventually, this is exactly what happened; American farmers adopted machines to replace braceros and thus, the Bracero Program began to come to an end. The adoption of machines, along with new regulations brought about by the U.S. Department of Labor, caused many to call for an end to the Bracero Program. The American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) argued that as long as the program existed, it would be impossible for American farm workers to unionize, due to the abundant supply of cheap Mexican labor readily available to American farmers.91 The U.S. Congress began to feel increased pressure from opponents of the Bracero Program, and eventually in 1964 the program was terminated. In hindsight there have many people, lawmakers included, who have come to consider the Bracero Program as institutionalized slave labor. Despite being founded on legal principles and backed by the governments of the U.S. and Mexico, the program simply could not continue to exist as long as its rules and regulations went unheeded by American employers. Regardless of the intent of the Bracero Program, in practice the program was a detriment to the Mexican economy and to its people. The program caused a great shortage of skilled labor in many regions of Mexico,

90 Ibid.
91 Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He... Stayed,” 222.
especially in impoverished and isolated areas where such labor was needed most. Therefore, although many braceros were left without jobs, and undoubtedly would have liked to have seen the program continue, it is hard to deny the fact that Mexico as a whole was better off without the program.

**WHERE’S MY MONEY?**

Adding insult to injury for many newly-unemployed braceros, was the fact that they were unable to collect the money that was promised them in the event that the Bracero Program were ever to be terminated. This money was taken from the braceros’ wages and put into a savings fund, or *fondo del ahorro*, at the behest of the Mexican government. In addition to giving the braceros a reason to return to Mexico if they should ever lose their jobs in the U.S., the money was meant to enable them to buy farm equipment and other machinery once they returned home, and to thus strengthen the agricultural industry in Mexico. Ten percent of each paycheck was deducted and put into the *fondo del ahorro*. The U.S. government then deposited the money into a special bank account, and was then transferred to Mexico City. Upon the termination of the Bracero Program, braceros would come to find that they were not able to get their money. Most of them had no clue there even was a fund at all, and if they did know about it, they were oblivious as to the steps required of them in order to receive their funds. Nobody knows for sure what became of the money; some people think it was used to fund the construction of the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C. Others think it was absorbed by the PRI.

Eventually there was an investigation into the lost money, and in 2005 the Mexican government finally agreed to pay the braceros $3,500 apiece. However, only around a quarter of

---

94 Ibid.
those who applied to receive their funds were able to prove they had actually participated in the program.95 Another problem was that the $3,500 applied to every bracero, regardless of their duration of service in the program. To compound their frustration, braceros who applied to receive their just compensation were put through an arduous process of red tape in order to receive the money. Surviving braceros were required to show original contracts and other documents that most of them did not have anymore. For those braceros who had died, their families were also charged with producing such documentation, and most could not do so.96

For some descendants of braceros, they spent decades even after their relatives had passed on, trying to get a straight answer from the Mexican government. One descendant of a bracero, Ventura Gutierrez, tells of the many years he spent trying to reclaim his dead grandfather’s money, so that he could give it to his aging grandmother. Over a period that spanned several Presidential administrations, he pleaded his case to government officials in Mexico City and elsewhere. What began as an effort to help his grandmother, turned into a fight in which he organized groups of ex-braceros in both Mexico and the U.S., holding protests and pleading their cases to whomever would listen. Though they had the support of the U.S. Congress, and he could prove the braceros’ money was still being held on deposit in several Mexican banks, the Mexican government was not supportive of his effort.97

Gutierrez tells of the harassment he endured by the government, even including being kidnapped and threatened on one occasion. In 2005, Gutierrez was finally able to get the government to begin making payments to surviving braceros and the relatives of deceased
braceros.\textsuperscript{98} Though this was a monumental victory against the government, it was quite difficult for many braceros to prove they had actually worked in the Bracero Program. Over several decades many things can happen, and documents can be lost. The government required documentary proof in the form of pay stubs and similar documents, which many braceros and their relatives no longer possessed. So though many braceros and their families did receive restitution, there are still many thousands of people who have yet to receive compensation.\textsuperscript{99} Marselina Meza, whose father and husband both worked as braceros, has been trying unsuccessfully for decades to collect the money owed to her family.\textsuperscript{100} There are tens of thousands of families with similar experiences. Thus, we can see that the \textit{fondo del ahorro} was yet another way many braceros and their families were oppressed.

Many surviving braceros still believe there is a need for a bracero program in the United States. They point out the fact that despite the many abuses that braceros must endure, it is still better than trying to find work in Mexico, where labor is so much cheaper.\textsuperscript{101} One bracero, Anacleto Morales, expresses great pride in his service as a bracero. Although conditions were rough (he became seriously ill due to overwork, and was hospitalized for several days), he still believes the program should be re-established.\textsuperscript{102} However, despite those like Anacleto who believe the Bracero Program was a good thing and should be re-established, many surviving braceros vehemently oppose this idea. Pedro Benitez, for example, states that he suffered far too much as a bracero, and would never do it again. That fact, combined with the ongoing \textit{fondo del ahorro}...
ahorro debacle, has left a bitter taste in the mouth of Benitez and many other braceros. Some braceros were able to save enough money on their own to buy farm equipment, or to start a business for themselves upon returning to Mexico. Artemio Cantú, for example, saved enough money to buy a small store when he returned to Mexico after his tenure as a bracero. However, he states that he acquired a problem with alcohol abuse that caused him to lose the store and most of his money. He subsequently obtained a visa to return to the U.S., where he stayed.

Figure 5: Bracero Pay Stub, 1945.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BORDER INDUSTRIALIZATION PROGRAM (BIP)

Upon the program’s nullification in 1964, many braceros were left unemployed and moved in large numbers to the border region in search of work. Consequently, the PRI along with a consortium of Mexican investors, created the maquiladora industry partly in an effort to alleviate the braceros’ joblessness. In 1965, the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was enacted, and a new wave of foreign investment began. The maquiladora industry was attractive to foreign investors for many reasons, including its supply of cheap labor, and tax breaks for employers.\(^{106}\) Though it was originally intended for braceros to find work in the maquiladoras, from the very beginning braceros found it very difficult to get jobs. Employers preferred to hire female workers, mostly because they would work for less money, and generally provided companies with a very submissive and compliant, and highly productive labor source.\(^{107}\) Mexican women were also more likely to be motivated and pacified by threats made by the employer. These threats took many forms, such as sexual harassment and various kinds of discrimination, and even violence as an intimidation device.\(^{108}\) Additionally, maquila workers were subjected to unsafe and hazardous workplace environments, and generally did not receive a suitable living wage for their work. To add to the financial struggles of maquila workers, the maquiladoras often were adversely affected by negative conditions in the U.S. economy.\(^{109}\) During periods of recession, plants would even close down altogether, leaving maquila workers jobless. This relationship continues to this day. Sadly, even though Mexican labor law is generally favorable to workers, the maquiladora workforce has historically not enjoyed the same protections as other Mexican workers. Maquiladoras are very important to the Mexican

\(^{106}\) Akers Chacón, *No One is Illegal*, 116.


economy; maquila operators know this fact and abuse it. For example, though workers may be legally guaranteed a minimum wage, maquila operators will often overlook this and pay the workers much lower, knowing the Mexican government is unlikely to intervene.¹¹⁰ Human rights violations have plagued the maquiladora industry since its inception.

PRECURSORS

Before the BIP, there was the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF). Created by the Mexican government under President Adolfo López Mateos, PRONAF was an attempt at improving the Mexican border region. It provided substantial funds for infrastructural improvements in the northern states, which was done in the hopes of attracting both domestic and international investors. There were also many tax-free and other trade incentives and provisions made possible by PRONAF. Despite efforts with this program, PRONAF was not very successful, and the government soon began considering various other options to stimulate growth and improvement along the border. As a result, in 1964 the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was started under the Ordaz administration. In many ways, the aims of the BIP were identical to those of PRONAF, though the BIP proved to be far more successful in achieving those aims.¹¹¹

The outlook was bleak for the braceros after the Bracero Program ended in 1964. While there were those braceros who stayed in the U.S. to try and find employment, the majority of braceros were forced to return to Mexico, where they predominantly settled near the border. Those who were from isolated places far from the border, often discovered if they went back to

their hometowns, the situation was worse than when they had originally left.\textsuperscript{112} Therefore, a large number of these workers inevitably moved north to the border region, in the hopes of finding work there. The Mexican government was aware of the growing problems of poverty and displacement in the border region, and in 1965 the BIP was started, largely to alleviate these problems along the border.

**A NEW DEAL**

The BIP was revolutionary in many ways. First and foremost, it defied the Mexican Constitution by permitting foreign investors to lease land along Mexico’s border. In 1971 after the BIP had been in place for a few years, a stipulate was then attached that made it possible for foreign investors to buy Mexican land and own it outright, for a period of 30 years. After this time had passed, the investors were then required to sell the land back to a Mexican national.\textsuperscript{113} As if this were revolutionary enough, further amendments to the BIP were added in 1972 under President Alvarez, when the maquiladora program was made to include all of Mexico, and not just the border region.\textsuperscript{114} With these changes, foreign investors were given tremendous power, and gained further leverage with the Mexican government.

There were many reasons for foreign investors to Mexico, particularly the border region, as a place to do business. As competition increased among multi-national companies during the late 1960s and 1970s, these companies searched for ways of cutting costs, and began flooding to Mexico and building maquiladoras along the border.\textsuperscript{115} Labor was cheaper and more abundant in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} Akers Chacón, *No One is Illegal*, 119.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 10.
\end{flushleft}
Mexico than in many other places around the world. Maquiladoras were an especially attractive option for U.S.-based companies, due to their close proximity to the U.S. Not only could these companies produce their products in Mexico and then simply transport them across the border for sale in the U.S; the companies were also incentives in the form of reduced tariffs and tax breaks. In particular, they were often required only to pay a value added tax (VAT), which meant they only had to pay tax on the value of their products in Mexico, rather than the retail price of their products. The VAT alone was incentive enough for many companies to move their operations to Mexico. Moreover, U.S.-based companies often had factories in Mexico, and also maintained facilities directly over the border. El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua are prime examples of cities that are in very close proximities to each other, and there are many companies who conduct operations there in this fashion.

**SMALL FISH IN A BIG POND**

The most compelling reason, by far, for foreign investors to conduct business in the border region was the extremely cheap labor to be found in abundance there. This made Mexico especially attractive to companies who were competing with the overseas markets, such as China and Taiwan, where labor was also very cheap. Whereas an American worker might make $1.25 an hour in 1964, his Mexican counterpart would make around 30 cents an hour in a maquiladora. With this incredible difference in wages, it is quite easy to see why so many companies flocked to the border. Because of the fact that Mexican labor was so comparatively cheap, maquiladoras enjoyed a substantial amount of free capital, which they often put back into their companies and expanded operations. Because of the extremely favorable business environment offered to foreign investors in the northern border region, the BIP was predictably a

---

117 Ibid.
huge economic success, with the maquiladora industry enjoying continuous expansion from its inception in 1965 on through to the present. In the first year of the BIP, 12 factories set up shop along the border. Thirty years later, the number of factories had increased from 12 to over 2,000. Concurrently, the number of maquiladora employees in the region increased from around 3,000 to over 70,000.\(^{118}\)

**WOULD WOMEN HAVE IT ANY BETTER?**

Whereas the labor force utilized by the Bracero Program was 100% male, the BIP relied predominantly on female labor. Though the PRI had originally intended for the BIP to put the displaced braceros back to work, in practice it did not do this. In fact, in the early days of the BIP, maquiladoras employed almost 90% women as a whole.\(^{119}\) Historians have agreed that the prime reason for this shift from a male to a female workforce, is that companies realized women were more docile, submissive, and easily controlled than men.\(^{120}\) Mexican culture, and its long history of *machismo* also undoubtedly was a key factor in explaining the nearly all-female workforce in the maquiladoras. Because of this tradition of machismo, Mexican women were far less likely than men to cause problems if they were being mistreated and abused. They also were unlikely to complain about working conditions and low pay, and they were usually comparatively easy to reprimand and discipline than men.\(^{121}\)

Although in recent years there has been an increase in the number of female maquiladora workers who are becoming more aware of their rights, and who have demonstrated that they are willing to stand up for themselves, the BIP has long served to cement the gender stereotypes of

---

\(^{118}\) Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border*, 107


\(^{121}\) *El Paso Times*, May 4, 1979.
Mexican workers. Female workers have historically been afraid to speak up against abuses in the workplace, because they fear the consequences of doing so. In one interview, worker Patricia Leyva says she has put up with abuse in several different maquiladoras for over fifteen years. For example, she has been exposed to various toxic chemicals, been made to work extremely long hours, and constantly has dealt with headaches and flu-like symptoms. However, she has not spoken up about these things, for fear of being fired.\textsuperscript{122} In another interview, an anonymous female worker states that she is so tired when she arrives home from work, that she cannot clean her house and “cannot even talk to anyone.”\textsuperscript{123}

Foreign companies knew of the machismo tradition and exploited it to the fullest extent in order to ensure that their workforce would be docile and subservient. Many devious tactics were implemented by companies in order to control their female workers, including various methods of harassment and intimidation, and sometimes even physical violence.

Traditionally in Mexican society, women had stayed at home to take of their children, while their husbands would work. Only under special circumstances would women take to the workplace.\textsuperscript{124} Women were also usually not expected to obtain an advanced education, which meant they had very little chance of ever landing a job in a supervisory or administrative capacity. Before the maquiladora industry came along, if women were to work at all they would usually stick to relatively few, mostly unskilled occupations, such as barmaid, beautician, or


store clerk. Maquiladoras offered a variety of jobs to women that they had never held before. Their lack of education, however, meant that women were virtually assured of never attaining an executive position in the maquiladora industry. While the vast majority of the maquiladora workers were women, most of the higher paying jobs were still held by men. Though many maquiladoras provided various educational programs and even offered opportunities to attend outside schools, most female workers did not participate in these programs. In addition to their jobs in the factories, many women still also were expected to perform all their traditional duties as mothers and housewives. This left very little in the way of free time. The maquiladora industry, therefore, perpetuated the gender stereotypes in Mexico and mostly made the lives of Mexican women a lot more difficult.¹²⁵

Though in the beginning of the BIP, maquiladoras were comprised mostly of female workers, as time passed the industry changed. As advancements in technology necessitated the need for more highly-skilled and educators workers, the workforce began to see an influx of men. When the BIP was launched, most factories offered jobs that required little skill, as they were mostly producing items such as textiles and electronics, which could be assembled in large part by production lines.¹²⁶ However, as the technology for these industries and others became far more advanced, higher-skilled employees were needed. This provided an opportunity for many men to enter the maquiladora workforce. In an attempt to attract more skilled male workers, maquiladoras began to offer more suitable working conditions, better benefits and pay.

Consequently, by the mid-80s tens of thousands of male workers had found employment in maquiladoras.127

**TALK IS CHEAP, BUT LABOR IS CHEAPER!**

The 1980s was a time of great economic instability in Mexico, especially along the border. The country was fully entrenched in *La Década Perdida*, and border industry was suffering greatly.128 With the devaluing of the peso by the PRI, there was massive inflation that in turn had an effect on the wages of maquiladora workers. While there was still a high demand for workers, their paychecks would not go as far as they used to. Many workers were forced to quit their jobs due to this and seek employment elsewhere. In cities such as Ciudad Juarez, there was an extremely high turnover rate, and as a result, many workers left the maquiladoras and fled illegally to the U.S.129

During this time, many people were migrating to the border region from the interior of Mexico to replace the workers who were leaving their jobs. While many of these migrants were able to find work in the maquiladoras, a significant number of them were not, and therefore attempted to enter the U.S. illegally if they did not go back home.130 Though the maquiladora industry did experience many problems such as a somewhat transient workforce and high turnover rates, by and large the industry has been a massive economic success since its inception. While maquiladora workers were mistreated and underpaid, the maquiladora owners kept stuffing their pockets with more profit. When NAFTA was introduced in 1994, the maquiladora

---
industry underwent another massive boom period, as the legislation made it far easier for companies to engage in international trade in the Americas.  

**UNION INTERVENTION**

Human rights advocates are not the only ones who have criticized the maquiladora industry. One of the industry’s big enemies has been U.S. labor unions such as the AFL-CIO. These unions accuse the maquiladora industry of damaging American industry by the way they exploit the cheap labor in Mexico. American labor is far more expensive than Mexican labor, and as such, American industry cannot compete with maquiladoras in many ways. A typical American factory cannot produce its product for anywhere near as cheap as its counterparts in Mexico can. Because of this fact, many American companies have been forced to move their operations to Mexico or elsewhere, or have gone out of business entirely. Because of the cheap labor in Mexico, and the extremely favorable tax conditions, reduced tariffs, and other incentives available to maquiladora owners, labor unions assert that there is no way for American companies to stay competitive in the world economy. In the early 70s there was a series of hearings conducted by the U.S. Tariff Commission that examined these grievances of American labor. However, despite the efforts of labor unions, the hearings were not effective in changing anything in favor of American companies. Around this time, the AFL-CIO was also active in attempting to enact changes in favor of American industry, but they too were ineffective. As a whole, maquiladora operators were making far too much money to be persuaded to make any policy changes that might affect them negatively, and they were bolstered by unanimous governmental approval. They realized that as long as the conditions remained as they were along

---

the border for maquiladoras, the profits would continue to soar. Unfortunately, this attitude has led to a very negative human rights track record. Employers simply ignore the Mexican labor laws in many cases, because they know they face very little risk of accountability if they are caught in violation. Workers’ advocates like Juan Pablo Hernández note the fairness of the Mexican labor law as it is written, but also note that the average worker is not aware of their rights under the law. As a result, workers continue to be underpaid and abused, while the factory owners get richer and richer.

CHAPTER FOUR

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES ALONG THE BORDER

Like the Bracero Program before it, the BIP enabled U.S. employers to manipulate the system, aided by the PRI and the U.S. government, maximizing profits while largely ignoring and neglecting the needs of its workforce. Both the Bracero Program and BIP exploited gender in the workplace; braceros were all male, and maquiladora workers mostly female. The overall

experiences of the braceros and maquiladora workers are very similar, and not in a beneficial way for them. Both groups of workers suffered (maquila workers continue to suffer) at the hands of their employers, enduring various forms of abuse and mistreatment. Though both groups made many attempts to improve their situation, they were mostly unsuccessful, with the exception of some notable recent cases in which maquila workers have garnered small victories over their employers in the courts. 134 There was a precedent-setting case in 1994, in which an El Paso, Texas court used U.S. labor law to apply to a maquiladora in Mexico, and subsequently awarded a financial settlement to the family of a worker who was killed. 135 In a 1999 case, a U.S.-owned maquiladora was forced to pay $30 million to the families of workers who were killed when one of the company’s shuttle buses crashed. 136 Then there was the 2006 court victory and financial settlement in favor of several Sanyo maquiladora workers in Tijuana. 137

Despite the recent court victories in favor of maquiladora workers, the fact remains that maquila operators still enjoy a position of relative immunity from the law. Sadly, workers’ rights often take a back seat to corporate profits. 138 Though there are many unions for maquiladora workers, they have long-developed a reputation as “paper unions”, meaning they are advocates on paper only, and in practice are mostly ineffectual and incapable of improving conditions in the maquiladoras. 139 Often these unions are created by the maquila operators themselves, without

---

137 Maquilapolis (2006), DVD, directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre (San Francisco: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2006).
the workers’ knowledge, merely to uphold appearances and, arguably, to hoodwink their employees into thinking they are protected.\textsuperscript{140} Some commentators have asserted that Mexican unionism is completely corrupt, and that union leaders are paid off by factory owners, leaving the workers to fend for themselves.\textsuperscript{141}

As the maquiladora workforce is comprised mostly of females, these women are subject to many gender-specific forms of abuse and mistreatment. A prime example of this is pregnancy discrimination. Employers frequently screen women to see if they are pregnant, asking invasive questions about their sex lives and menstruation.\textsuperscript{142} Humiliating tests are conducted on the women, and they are forced to give urine and other samples to show if they are pregnant or not.\textsuperscript{143} Usually, if women are found to be pregnant, it means they will not be hired in the maquiladora. If women become pregnant while employed in the maquiladoras, they are often subject to further discrimination and often are coerced into quitting their jobs.\textsuperscript{144} Supervisors are encouraged by upper management to make the pregnant employees’ lives miserable, often to the point of physical damage, and even miscarriages, to the women if they do not quit.\textsuperscript{145} The prime reason that pregnancy discrimination occurs is that the Mexican labor law is very beneficial for pregnant women, offering them benefits such as maternity leave. Despite the massive profits reaped by the maquiladoras, often they would rather discriminate against pregnant employees in

\textsuperscript{143} Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 595-600.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
the hopes they would quit or be forced out of their jobs, rather than simply paying for their health care costs.\textsuperscript{146} Pregnancy discrimination continues to be a problem in the maquiladora industry.

Sexual harassment is another huge problem in maquiladoras. It is used to intimidate female workers and pacify them into compliance, and it has occurred since the very beginning of the BIP. Male supervisors often harass and intimidate the female workers sexually, including speaking dirty to them, touching them, and sometimes even raping them.\textsuperscript{147} Women are threatened with tougher jobs, firing, and sometimes even physical violence if they do not comply with the sexual advances of their supervisors. Because of the Mexican concept of machismo and machista cultural norms, women are already placed in positions of subservience and obedience to men. Their supervisors know and exploit this, and will often choose to fire a non-compliant women rather than take a blow to their ego by accepting their refusal.\textsuperscript{148} For many women, the discrimination begins before they are even hired. Gender is often used to discriminate against the women in the hiring and job selection process. If a job opening is available and there are two candidates, a man and a woman, the man will almost always get the position regardless of who is better-qualified.\textsuperscript{149} Thus, the cards are stacked against female maquila workers from the very beginning. As it does in other areas, the Mexican government mostly ignores the various ways in which women are harassed and discriminated against in the maquiladora industry, preferring instead to focus on profit instead of human rights.

Despite being technically protected by Mexican labor law, which in many ways is more favorable than American law, maquiladora workers are often forced to endure substandard

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Pelled and Hill, “Employee Work Values...,” 495-505.
workplace conditions along with bad wages, often in violation of the law. Similar to the braceros before them, the maquiladora workers are at a tremendous disadvantage due to many factors, not the least significant of which is their ineffectual government. The Mexican government has a long history of neglecting the needs and wishes of Mexican workers. When the braceros came home and requested their rightful pay, they were turned away empty-handed. Similarly, maquiladora workers often are cheated out of their rightful earnings by their employers. This often goes unreported by employees, who are usually just trying to ensure that they keep their job. Although there have been some cases in which employees have taken their employers to court and won cash settlements. Even these small victories are not much of a reason to celebrate, as workers know that if they are to challenge their employer, they will be fighting a multi-billion dollar corporation who has time and resources on its side. They will likely face a long court battle, and may never see compensation, in addition to likely losing their job. For these reasons, such legal victories are rare. One particular case in which maquiladora workers did win a settlement against their employers, was against Sanyo in Tijuana. In this instance, many employees had been let go from their jobs, and were owed a substantial amount of money. As time passed and the company made no effort to pay the workers, they began to organize in an attempt to receive their rightful compensation. With the help of local promotoras (women who act as workers’ advocates and help to educate workers about labor law), many of the Sanyo

---


employees banded together and sought legal help to try and get paid. Though the process was long and arduous, the workers were able to win a substantial claim from Sanyo.

Besides being regularly cheated out of their pay, maquiladora workers often are forced to work in conditions that range from being simply unpleasant, to downright unhealthy, toxic, and dangerous. They often work with large machines, and it is common to see employees missing fingers. They are often forced to work with and around harmful chemicals, and perform dangerous tasks while on the job. This has led to many workers experiencing various health problems. In the town of Chilpancingo, Tijuana, for example, many maquiladora workers have become ill with various types of illnesses caused by the factories. Because their pay is so low, workers often are not able to afford suitable housing and are therefore forced to squat in makeshift housing very near to the maquiladoras in which they work. They often have no running water or electricity. People often hang wires from power lines. The wires get tangled up, and you can actually hear them sizzling and smoke rising from the wires. This is obviously very dangerous, and in Chilpancingo alone, several people and animals have been electrocuted.

There are other dangers, too. For example, one maquiladora worker describes seeing a man murdered in a bar. The squatter’s village of Chilpancingo, comprised mostly of maquiladora workers, is in a valley below several large factories. The factories often dump their waste water into the local stream, which runs downhill right through the mud streets of Chilpancingo. Children play in this water, and some people even use it to bathe in. Because of this, many local

152 Ibid.
153 Ibid. There were a series of claims and negotiations, and Sanyo eventually agreed to pay each worker around $2,000.
154 Akers Chacón, No One is Illegal, 118.
155 Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 598.
156 Maquilapolis (2006).
people have gotten sick, mostly with sores on their feet and hands from coming into contact with the toxic water.\textsuperscript{158} There is also a very noticeable chemical smell in the air near Chilpancingo, which is due to the factories burning their waste. While showing a camera crew the area where one factory dumps its waste water into the stream, two local women were overcome with coughing due to the smell coming from the factory’s smokestack. They also remarked that they could see particles in the air, which burned their skin and eyes upon contact.\textsuperscript{159}

The factories are technically in violation of Mexican environmental laws, but they face little consequence for non-compliance.\textsuperscript{160} A perfect illustration of this relative legal immunity is the case of Metales y Derivados, a Tijuana maquiladora that was shut down by the Office of Environmental Protection (PROFERPA) in 1994, because of numerous violations.\textsuperscript{161} After it was shut down, the factory was abandoned and condemned, though over 6,000 tons of lead slag was left onsite, exposed to the elements.\textsuperscript{162} The company claimed they had covered the hazardous material with tarps, but to inspectors it was very plain to see that the tarps they had used, had been eaten away by the elements and rendered totally useless. As a result, when it rained the lead would run into the local water supply.\textsuperscript{163} An arrest warrant was issued in Mexico for the owner of Metales y Derivados, but since he lived across the border in San Diego, he was untouchable by the Mexican authorities. With the help of \textit{promotoras}, local people banded together and demonstrated outside the PROFERPA offices. Though government officials were sympathetic to their situation, the people were told that PROFERPA was not responsible for the cleanup. Word of the situation even reached President Fox, who denied there was a problem at all, due to the

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Maquilapolis} (2006).
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Maquilapolis} (2006).
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
fact that the company had covered the hazardous material with tarps. In actually, the residents of Chilpancingo had been exposed to levels of lead over 3,000 times higher than what was considered safe, over a period of several years. If he had visited the site personally, perhaps he would have seen how ineffective the tarps were, and perhaps would have sung a different tune. It took many years, but in 2004 with the assistance of the EPA, clean-up was finally begun on the waste site. Finally in 2009, clean-up was completed.

Since many maquiladora workers are very poor and do not have their own transportation, they are often forced to use employer-provided shuttle buses to and from work. These shuttles are often late, and workers frequently have to leave home several hours before their shifts if they hope to make it to work on time. Since workers’ compensation is dependent upon their punctuality, this means that they often lose their bonuses and other benefits due to the inefficiency of the shuttles. If they happen to be late, even by just a few minutes, the security guards at the maquiladoras will often turn them away.

Once employees actually arrive at work, their time is micro-managed down to the minute. They must clock in and out with time cards, and literally every minute is scrutinized. Because of this, when they are allowed to go to lunch, usually for 30 minutes, they often do not have enough time to wash their hands and/or use the restroom before they eat. Consequently, many workers are forced to either skip lunch, or eat with their hands covered in hazardous materials. Many

164 Ibid.
165 Akers Chacón, No One is Illegal, 118.
166 Maquilapolis (2006).
168 Lugo, Fragmented Lives, 128.
169 Ibid., 129.
170 Ibid., 133.
Workers get sick because of this, and they are blamed because of it.\(^{171}\) Workers often are made ill by eating cafeteria food, as well. There have been many cases of workers being treated in hospitals for food poisoning. In one notable instance, there was an outbreak of salmonella in Ciudad Juarez in 1991, and several workers died from eating chicken in the workplace cafeteria.\(^{172}\) Maquiladora kitchens are often in violation of health codes, and kitchen employees are frequently ill-trained, making the food more likely to be unsuitable for consumption.\(^{173}\)

Maquiladora operators have historically viewed Mexican workers as cheap and easy to control. The U.S. has long-maintained a position of dominance over Mexico in many ways, and largely because of this, Americans have tended to view Mexicans as inferior to themselves. This idea of inferiority has affected not only diplomatic relations, but has been largely to blame for the maquiladora owners’ attitudes toward their employees.\(^{174}\) When investors from other countries began moving to Mexico to open maquiladoras there, they tended to adopt the American view of Mexicans as inferior. Therefore, just as American expansionism captured much of Mexico’s territory during the 1800s, what could be referred to as “maquiladora expansionism” has swept over the border region and other parts of Mexico, with similarly negative consequences for the people of Mexico. The Mexican government has been mostly complicit with this, preferring to remain in a subservient role to its superpower neighbor to the north, favoring silence and compliance in favor of rocking the boat. Mexico has historically been very reliant on U.S. and other foreign investment; a trend that continues to this day. Whatever

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 137.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 125.
\(^{173}\) Ibid., 126.
\(^{174}\) Gay Young and Lucia Forts, “Household Responses to Economic Change: Migration and Maquiladora Work in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico,” *Social Science Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (September 1994): 656-670.
efforts that have been made by the Mexican government to stand up for its people, have been largely ignored by the U.S. and others.

THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY

Despite the initial economic success of NAFTA and subsequent maquiladora boom in the mid to late 90s, the maquiladora industry would soon experience a significant downturn. At the peak of the industry’s success in 2000, there were over 3,700 factories in operation. By 2002, more than 400 factories had closed, the majority of which were located in the border region. This meant a drastic loss of jobs as well. This downturn was caused mostly by a series of factors: higher wages and taxes, along with increasing foreign competition. Though the industry has rebounded somewhat from this downturn, there are still many concerns for maquiladora operators, if they are to be competitive in the future. For the maquila workers, this means further uncertainty in an already unstable situation.

Until very recently, maquiladoras were subject to a very favorable tax structure. This all began to change in the late 90s with changes in the tax law having to do with permanent establishments, or elements of a company located in a particular country, that are operating elsewhere. Ever since the inception of the BIP, maquiladoras were exempt from permanent establishment (double) taxes, instead having only to pay minimal taxes in their home countries. However, in the late 90s the Mexican government began recognizing the maquiladoras as permanent establishments, and thus began taxing them as such. As favorable taxes was one of the primary reasons for most maquiladoras to choose to do business in Mexico, this development caused many companies to either downsize their operations in Mexico, or to leave the country.

entirely, throughout much of the 90s and in the first few years of the new millennium. The Mexican government took steps to remedy this, however, and in 2006 the Manufacturing Industry, Maquiladora and Export Services Program (IMMEX) was launched. This program has been very effective, as we will address in a few paragraphs.

Foreign competition is arguably the most significant current threat to the future or the maquiladora industry. Many third-world manufacturing havens are becoming more attractive in the new era of globalism. Since joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has been the biggest foreign threat to the maquiladora industry. In the past decade, China has steadily gained market share in the U.S. in virtually every sector, and as such has cut into the maquiladora industry’s profits. China is attractive to foreign investment for the same reasons that maquiladoras were attractive in the 1960s; namely, everything is cheaper in China. Labor, electricity, water, taxes… all much cheaper in China than in Mexico. Additionally, there is comparatively little government regulation applying to foreign businesses in China. All of these factors are making China more and more attractive in the eyes of foreign investors. While the current globalist model encourages production sharing, or the division of the production process across several countries, it has been hard for Mexico to compete with China in this regard. Production sharing is meant as a way for companies to become more competitive in the global market, decreasing response time and otherwise streamlining the production process. Mexico has had a difficult time engaging in this process, especially with China, due to the fact that China has many other production partners where it is comparatively cheaper to do business. China is not the only foreign threat to the maquiladora industry. Mexico also faces stiff competition from

Central America and the Caribbean as well, particularly in the clothing and apparel industry.\textsuperscript{177} This is because in these regions, the cost of labor is much cheaper than it is in Mexico. The U.S. has in recent years expanded its trade relationship with much of the third world. This has made it possible for China, several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to become more competitive in the global marketplace.

**CURRENT CHALLENGES**

The maquiladora industry has been prompted to make many changes in order to combat the economic downturn of 2002, to ensure that the industry remain competitive. It has been forced to become more technologically advanced, as production methods improve across the globe and workers become more skilled.\textsuperscript{178} It has also been forced to seriously examine its production and management strategies, focusing on streamlining production by hiring better-qualified managers and supervisors, which in turn would ensure that laborers would be trained better.

Corporations have also began pursuing free trade agreements with nations other than the U.S. The maquiladora industry has always been heavily dependent on its relationship with the American consumer.\textsuperscript{179,180} In an effort to compete in the globalist system, there has been a push in the industry to expose itself to markets elsewhere. Once again China has been largely


\textsuperscript{179} Mariah E. deforest, “Are Maquiladoras a Menace to US Workers?” *Business Horizons* 34, no. 6 (November/December 1991), 82-86.

responsible for this, as the American consumer has become increasingly favorable of goods coming from China, than Mexican goods.  

**LOOKING TOWARDS TOMORROW**

In order to ensure its future success and remain globally competitive in an age of increased competition from China and the rest of the third-world, maquiladora operators have many factors to consider, such as: affordable energy and other environmental reforms, infrastructural improvements, the development of a well-skilled workforce, reforms in labor regulations, and possibly most importantly the relationship between Mexican manufacturers and the U.S. consumer. This is not going to be an easy task.

Energy reform is incredibly vital to the maquiladora industry. The cost of resources such as electricity and water are much cheaper in China and other manufacturing centers than in Mexico, and to remain competitive it is necessary for Mexico to reduce its energy costs. If the industry fails to address the issue of energy reform, a crisis could possibly be on the horizon.

Labor reform is equally vital to the future success of the industry. To begin with, labor regulations must be improved in an effort to enable maquiladora operators to remain competitive, while at the same time ensuring they abide by suitable and just labor practices. Currently there is a certain amount of dissent between employers and Mexican workers. This is a gap that must be bridged if the industry is to continue to thrive.

Labor skills is another area the industry must seek to improve. There is a need for highly-skilled, educated workers, who are capable of operating in a highly technical environment.

---

However, the vast majority of the labor force in the border region is made up of relatively unskilled workers, most of whom have little education. Because of this fact, many companies are beginning to move their operations away from the border and into areas of Mexico that have better educational systems and trade schools, and thus have larger pools of suitable prospective workers.

Infrastructural improvement is going to be key for the future success of the industry. In order to be competitive, it is absolutely necessary for the infrastructure of the region to be sound. This has long been a problem in the border region, and maquiladora operators have taken steps to fix it. The primary reason for this problem is the fact that maquiladoras have been guilty of bringing too much advancement, too fast, to many border towns. For example, Arnulfo Castro Munive, former secretary of Mexico’s national maquiladora association, said of Ciudad Juarez: “We went from a community with no industry to an industrialized city in about 15 years.”182 The kind of unchecked growth that characterized Ciudad Juarez throughout the development of the BIP has been typical in other border towns as well.183 Most importantly, this means that increased attention needs to be paid to Mexico’s roads, in particular its federal highway system. Though recently there has been an effort in this area, roads are still considered to be in fairly poor condition throughout the region. This presents various logistical challenges to maquiladoras, including product distribution, as well as transportation of workers to and from the workplace. Poor infrastructure discourages investors from investing, and with China paying more attention to its own infrastructure, Mexico must do so as well in order to stay competitive.

183 Ibid.
Governmental trade negotiations are important to ensure the industry’s future success. A key factor in these negotiations will be how the U.S. takes on its mounting concerns with homeland security and the liberalization of trade.\textsuperscript{184} If competitors such as China continue to be allowed more access to American consumers, the maquiladora industry will undoubtedly be adversely affected. The U.S. has been very active in trade negotiations in many different venues, and has passed substantial legislation aimed at further exposing American consumers to the global market, such as: the now defunct FTAA, the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), and the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) in collaboration with the WTO. The DDA has been ineffective since negotiations broke down in 2008.\textsuperscript{185,186} Though trade negotiations have not gone as smoothly as the U.S. government would have liked in recent years, there is still the potential for agreements such as those mentioned to open up the U.S. economy to further trade opportunities. While NAFTA has largely accomplished its aims in the Americas, there still are many non-NAFTA countries that would benefit greatly from increased U.S. trade participation. This could be detrimental to the maquiladora industry and the economy of Mexico, especially if the Mexican government does not take sufficient steps to prepare.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, homeland security has become an increased priority in the U.S. This has meant stricter security measure in all areas, including ports.

and border crossings, which has had an impact on international trade. The maquiladora industry relies heavily on the constant flow of people and goods across the U.S.-Mexican border, and as a result it has become much tougher for companies to move its assets back and forth. Companies have adapted to deal with the increased security measures, but there is always the possibility of stricter access and border control, which could be potentially devastating to the maquiladoras.

The maquiladora industry faces many challenges that will dictate its future success. The future is uncertain, as the global economy is constantly and rapidly changing. Also, maquiladoras no longer are given as many incentives and tax breaks as they used to, especially since trade legislation has made it increasingly difficult for them to do business. Therefore, maquila operators must be willing to adapt to these changes, or the industry will surely experience another downturn.\(^\text{187}\)

Despite the many challenges faced by the industry, it still has a lot going for it. Mexico remains a very desirable place for factories to operate, due in large part to its close proximity to the U.S., its economic stability, and the fact that its government still encourages foreign investment and is willing to trade openly in the world market. In 2006, IMMEX was launched by the Mexican government in an attempt to revitalize the maquiladora industry by promoting international trade.\(^\text{188}\) Recently, there have been indications that Mexico is not only competing with China and its other main competitors, but that it is actually \textit{beating} them. In 2014, Mexico’s maquiladora industry was called “a raging bull that’s busting up the competition in China and


other Asian nations for the first time in decades.\footnote{Kevin Robinson-Avila and Lauren Villagran, “Mexico’s maquila boom extends across the border,” Albuquerque Journal (April 14, 2014), \url{http://www.abqjournal.com/383652/biz/mexicos-maquila-boom-extends-across-the-border.html} (accessed January 4, 2016).} Production costs in Asia have been consistently rising, and the cost and logistics of shipping to and from Asia have become increasingly problematic. For these reasons, many of the world’s major producers have decided to operate in Mexico.\footnote{Ibid.} This means a great deal to the border economy, as well as to the U.S. and Mexico as a whole. The border region will benefit from the many new jobs and the influx of foreign investment, and the U.S. will benefit from the great business opportunities that will be created over the next several years.\footnote{Ibid.} China has been forced to deal with the new realities of international trade, and as such, has sought to forge a new trade relationship with Mexico. As trade conditions become more and more disadvantageous for China, it has been friendlier with Mexico. For example, in 2013 China agreed to buy 30,000 barrels of oil a day from Mexico.\footnote{Nick Miroff, “Mexico and China look to trade away old rivalry,” The Washington Post (April 17, 2013), \url{https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/mexico-and-china-look-to-trade-away-old-rivalry/2013/04/17/d001c432-a2ec-11e2-bd52-614156372695_story.html} (accessed January 4, 2016).}

China has also been forced to deal with the fact that its workers are becoming more aware of their rights. In past decades, China was among the world’s most notorious human rights abusers, with its sweatshop labor turning out products for far less than anywhere else in the world. Several years ago, dozens of workers leapt to their deaths from the upper floors at factories, to escape their prison-like existence. “Suicide nets” were quickly installed to prevent future deaths, but stories such as this were spread far and wide, and factories were forced to examine their policies and address workers’ rights more seriously.\footnote{Tom Randall, “Inside Apple’s Foxconn Factories,” Bloomberg Business (March 30, 2012), \url{http://www.bloomberg.com/slideshow/2012-03-30/inside-apple-s-foxconn-factory.html#slide9} (accessed January 4, 2016).} Chinese workers are becoming more empowered, and over the last several years, workers’ protests have been on the
rise. Recent heavy protests in Hong Kong have caused the Chinese government more than a little concern.¹⁹⁴ Social media has played a big part in this, and workers are beginning to demand real union representation, among other basic rights.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, numerous watchdog organizations have been established to try and keep Chinese employers in check. The most visible one is China Labor Watch, headquartered in the U.S., who views “Chinese workers’ rights as inalienable human rights and is dedicated to workers’ fair share of economic development under globalization.”¹⁹⁶

---


¹⁹⁷ Randall, “Inside Apple’s Foxconn Factories.” In 2012, at Foxconn’s manufacturing facility in Shenzhen, China, Foxconn installed “suicide nets” as a preventative measure to keep employees from attempting to leap to their deaths.
The new IMMEX program has many advantages going for it that will also serve to bolster the border economy, stimulate growth, and create opportunities for U.S. businesses. The key benefits of IMMEX are that it offers tax breaks to business owners, and that it all but eliminates import duties for many production materials brought into Mexico.\textsuperscript{198} There have been recent sanctions on the maquiladora industry, mostly in an effort to generate more tax revenue for the Mexican government. Despite this, every effort has been made by lawmakers to enable maquiladoras to remain globally competitive.\textsuperscript{199} The government realizes that the industry is too important to the nation’s economy, and is not about the do anything to damage its long-term health. Consequently, though there will continue to be tax and other sanctions levied on maquiladoras, they will surely be allowed to flourish in the ever-competitive global marketplace.\textsuperscript{200}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the history of labor in the U.S.-Mexico border region, focusing on the largest employer there, the maquiladora industry. A humanistic approach was taken, in order to showcase the plight of the Mexican worker, and to bring to light the many human rights abuses and other suffering that have long taken place for workers in the region. This researcher has argued that maquiladora workers have consistently been mistreated, underpaid, overworked, and otherwise exploited, since the very inception of the BIP and the maquiladora industry, on through to the present day under new programs such as IMMEX. Though political leaders and administrations have come and gone, laws have changed, and there have been innumerable technological and other advances that have naturally changed the way in which the maquiladora industry operates, what has not changed is the basic disadvantaged role of the workers.

Chapter 1 provided a historical overview of the U.S.-Mexico border region, focusing on the fact that Mexico from the very beginning, has not shared an equal role in diplomatic relations with the U.S. As a result of this, the border region has been seen by U.S. and other foreign investors as a great place to exploit cheap labor. This chapter also illustrated how the Mexican
government has not only been complicit in this exploitation, but in fact has encouraged it by welcoming foreign investment with open arms. Consequently, the historical backdrop was set for the following chapters of this project.

Chapter 2 examined the Bracero Program, focusing on the exploitation of braceros and the unfair treatment they received from their greedy employers. The program was marketed to potential workers as a great opportunity by which to earn money in the U.S. with the intention of saving it and taking it back home to Mexico. As a means of encouraging this savings, the *fondo del ahorro* was instituted and ten percent of braceros’ earnings was involuntarily set aside and placed in a bank account, to be returned to the braceros after their contracts were completed and they went back to Mexico. Despite the attractive appearance of the program, Chapter 2 showed what in actuality happened to braceros once they began working. All aspects of the program were examined, from the indoctrination and initial processing stage, to working in the fields, to conditions in the bracero camps, and culminating in the treatment of braceros after they returned to Mexico and attempted to collect their *fondo del ahorro* money. It was shown that braceros were not treated fairly, and in fact suffered greatly throughout their tenure in the program. Also, when they returned home they did not receive the money that was rightly owed to them.

Chapter 3 examined the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which was instituted after the Bracero Program was phased out. It was shown that the BIP was very successful in stimulating foreign investment in the maquiladora industry; great profits were made, and investors’ pockets were lined healthily. However, the rights of workers were miserably neglected and labor laws were largely ignored in regard to maquila workers. This chapter exposed the fact that the Mexican government was complicit with maquiladora operators and consequently turned
a blind eye to the maquila workers, in spite of the fact that Mexican labor law is actually quite favorable to workers’ rights.

Chapter 4 took a deeper look at human rights abuses endured by maquiladora workers, using worker interviews so as to enable the reader to better understand their situation and the difficulties they face. Through examination of workers’ testimony, most of whom are women, this researcher has shown that workers continue to be exploited and marginalized to the present day. Though maquiladoras have so-called “workers unions” to help mediate disputes between the workers and management, this researcher has shown that such unions are in fact “paper unions” and do very little, if anything at all, to help the workers. Their prime objective is to keep the maquiladoras operating smoothly, and to keep the workers under control. Chapter 4 used the case of the Sanyo workers in Chilpancingo to illustrate how difficult it is for the workers to ever actuate any change in their situation. Though a small victory was reached by these workers, it was bittersweet due to the fact that they still were faced with probably unemployment, and similar harsh conditions if they should go back to working in the maquila industry.

Throughout this thesis as throughout the history of labor along the border, the overarching theme is that of human suffering. Since Mexicans began migrating north toward the border in search of money and a better life, to the present era of multi-national maquiladoras located along the border as well as throughout Mexico, workers have consistently been faced with brutal obstacles at every turn. Though in the past several years there has been the advent of “watchdog” groups who act as advocates of the workers, utilizing greatly the power of social media and thus reaching more people than ever before, the large-scale institutional changes needed to improve working conditions have not yet occurred. A perfect example of this fact is a story that just hit the media a few weeks ago in Ciudad Juárez. There, the workers at a large
maquiladora, Lexmark, had been protesting over poor conditions and low wages. They ultimately walked out and demanded a raise, amounting to roughly 34 cents a day. The response of Lexmark management was to immediately fire all the workers.\textsuperscript{201} Though there have been some encouraging changes in recent years, the fact remains that workers are still, in many cases, worth less than the cost of a candy bar in the minds of maquiladora owners.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


Balliet 84


SECONDARY SOURCES

Abell, Hilary. “Endangering women's health for profit: health and safety in Mexico's maquiladoras.”


deForest, Mariah E. “Are Maquiladoras a Menace to US Workers?” Business Horizons 34, no. 6 (November/December 1991): 82-86.


