



Bee file

New wave of immigrants adds tension to the fields

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By Don Villarejo

A NEW wave of migrant farm workers has quietly rolled into California fields, virtually unnoticed in the debate on immigration policy. These newcomers are Mixtecs from southern Mexico. The California Institute for Rural Studies recently published a report, "Mixtec Migrants in California Agriculture," that estimates up to 30,000 Mixtecs are currently laboring in California's agricultural industry — and their numbers are increasing.

Most Mixtecs are illiterate. Some do not understand Spanish, much less English. They speak an indigenous, pre-Columbian language that has no written form. But their story says much about California farm-labor policy and immigration in general.

Some Californians — politicians in particular — are quick to blame immigrants for our state's rising unemployment rate and overloaded social services. Conveniently overlooked is the fact that our \$18 billion agricultural industry has been built on generations of immigrants. They are human tools of the trade, providing handsome profits for California agribusiness while serving the world's most abundant food supply to consumers.

At the same time, farm workers have seen their wages fall about 10 percent over the last decade, while unemployment increased and living conditions worsened dramatically. And among migrant farm workers, none fare more poorly than Mixtecs. Mixtecs in California live under porches and in hand-dug caves. They give birth in the back seats of dilapidated cars, without prenatal or post-natal care. They camp along rivers, washing the pesticides off their skin and clothing after 12-hour days in the field.

Our researchers conducted detailed interviews

with 131 Mixtecs living under these conditions. Those interviewed reported wages that fell below the legal minimum hourly rate in one-quarter of their jobs. More than one in four Mixtecs surveyed was not paid, or was underpaid, by a U.S. employer. Some said they were owed \$500 to \$1,000 or more.

Why do Mixtecs endure such hardship and abuse? For the same reasons they leave homes and families and travel up to 2,000 miles for a string of

was saved off beneath them in the 1980s. Cuts came from several directions, including union-busting tactics by aggressive agribusiness firms; an economic crisis in Mexico that encouraged movement to California; and U.S. immigration policies tailored for the benefit of farmers who feared a worker shortage.

As the Mixtecs and other poor migrants joined the stream of labor pouring into California fields, a glut developed, creating problems for established

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jobs that may last only a few days at a time. Mixtecs are the poorest of Mexico's poor. Their homeland, the Mixteca region centered in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, has no economic base. For centuries, the Mixteca has relied on exported labor to sustain its remote villages. The Mixtecs who labor in our fields are the descendants of the peasant laborers who built the Aztec empire and Spanish missions.

In the context of California immigration, the Mixtecs are the latest chapter in an old story. For 100 years, California fields have been successively worked by Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and, since the 1940s, by *mestizos* — Mexicans of mixed European and indigenous descent. In the 1960s and '70s, *mestizo* farm workers achieved substantial gains in wages and working conditions, thanks to unionization and political activism. But the ladder

workers and newcomers alike. As our Mixtec report noted:

"In the case of a citrus farm in Ventura County, the grower purposely pit crews of Mixtec and *mestizo* workers against each other. The Mixtec crew harvested more bins of oranges per day than the *mestizo* crews. The grower then threatened to fire the *mestizos* ... the *mestizos* expressed great resentment against the Mixtecs and verbally abused them with racist comments about Indians."

The Mixtecs' distinct physical appearance — dark-skinned and small in stature — makes them an easy target for discrimination. But strong ethnic identity has also helped them organize for self-protection. At least four Mixtec organizations are active across California. And some Mixtec work crews cultivate informal relations with individual

farmers who provide reliable employment and modest improvements in living conditions.

Indeed, Mixtecs seem amazingly resilient in dealing with language, education and cultural barriers. They have shown themselves to be far more adaptable than government regulators and policymakers.

Our Mixtec study showed that California's enforcement of wage and working standards for migrant workers is woefully inadequate. Little wonder, since there are only a handful of Spanish-speaking staffers in the state labor commissioner's office that covers the entire San Joaquin Valley. And our \$350 million social services system does not include a single employee who speaks Mixtec.

NOW THE governor and some legislators want to make government even less responsive to human needs. More than 20 bills were introduced in the state Legislature this year to prohibit assistance — including health care and education — to undocumented immigrants. Politicians insist this will discourage immigration. But the Mixtecs tell us otherwise. They receive the least desirable jobs for substandard wages, and endure living conditions that may be worse here than in rural Mexico. Yet they continue to arrive, and permanent Mixtec settlements are springing up in rural California.

If we deny basic human services to Mixtecs and other minority immigrants, we effectively institutionalize misery and poverty. And that is no substitute for reasonable immigration and labor policies. If Californians, however, want to create a permanent underclass that will be subject to maximum exploitation, then Mixtecs may be the choice of the 1990s, just as African slaves and Native American Indians were in earlier times.

Special to The Bee