

MODERNIZING MIGRANTS: TRUMAN'S COMMISSION ON MIGRATORY  
LABOR AND AN "AMERICAN STANDARD OF LIVING"

Anne Morgan

Missouri Conference on History

Harry S. Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor was established by executive order in 1950 to investigate the employment of foreign and domestic migrant workers in American agriculture. The Commission's final report recommended that employers increase the numbers of domestic workers they employed and cease to employ Mexican migrants who entered the country illegally.<sup>1</sup> It also proposed that the agricultural sector adopt better employment conditions---in effect, that agricultural labor should become more like industrial labor in order to attract domestic workers.<sup>2</sup>

The Commission clearly aligned itself with organized labor. But it faced strong opposition from growers, who portrayed Mexican migrants as inherently fit for agricultural labor. Growers contended that native-born Americans were unwilling to work in agriculture; therefore, Mexican labor was necessary. Moreover, they emphasized the modern benefits available to Mexican migrants working in America. Nevertheless, the Commission on Migratory Labor privileged the interests of domestic migrants over those of foreign migrants, insisting that domestic migrants should finally be granted access to the protections secured by modern industrial workers. Under pressure from organized labor and Mexican-American advocacy groups, the Commission advanced a program of migrant modernization centered on extending an "American standard of living" to domestic migrants.

In 1942, Mexico and the United States established the Emergency Farm Labor Program, or *bracero* program.<sup>3</sup> As an emergency wartime provision, the program enabled Mexican

---

<sup>1</sup> President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), Box 9, Folder 5, Record Group 220: President's Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, XII-9, XII-13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., XII-16.

<sup>3</sup> David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 133-4. Bracero is a Spanish word for farm laborer.

laborers to work temporarily on American farms, in order to increase agricultural production and support the domestic front.<sup>4</sup> The braceros, however, represented only one facet of the American migrant labor force. In its analysis of migrant labor in America, the Commission divided migrants into two main groups, domestic and foreign.<sup>5</sup> Foreign migrants encompassed the legally sanctioned braceros as well as illegal immigrants, the so-called “wetbacks.”<sup>6</sup> The majority of domestic migrants were Mexican-Americans.<sup>7</sup> These migrants, joined by Mexican nationals, harvested cotton, fruits, vegetables, and sugar beets.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, migrant farm laborers made up a comparatively small proportion of the total agricultural work force---about seven percent.<sup>9</sup> However, the Commission observed that due to an increasing reliance on temporary or seasonal labor, “the economic status of the majority of farm workers is becoming similar to that of the migrant.”<sup>10</sup> Mechanization had caused an overcrowded labor market and increased competition for jobs; thus, the Commission focused its efforts on raising employment standards and using domestic labor more efficiently.<sup>11</sup> In order to do this, they invoked a labor ideology summarized by the phrase “American standard of living.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

<sup>5</sup> President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-8.

<sup>6</sup> “Wet” from crossing the Rio Grande.

<sup>7</sup> President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, III-1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., I-11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., I-19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, labor leaders began to call for an “American standard of living,” shifting to a new acceptance of wage labor and consumerism.<sup>12</sup> Instead of “wage slavery,” “a living wage” became the motto of trade unionists.<sup>13</sup> The American standard was a loaded term, carrying the assumption that the prototypical worker was an American citizen, white, and male.<sup>14</sup> It was not a fixed concept, but “ever-increasing.”<sup>15</sup> White labor advocates argued that racial minorities and immigrants possessed inherently lower standards of living; these groups, generally paid lower wages, could undercut white workers’ economic status.<sup>16</sup> Fears of displacement and depressed wages were linked to deeply racist ideas about non-white workers’ innate inferiority.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the American standard of living was implicitly contrasted to foreign migrants’ standard of living, defined by their perceived willingness to labor in the fields for minimal pay and few benefits.<sup>18</sup>

Competition between foreign and native-born workers took place within a split labor market, a market which “contain[s] at least two groups of workers whose price of labor differs for the same work, or would differ if they did the same work.”<sup>19</sup> Groups which had access to less economic resources, such as Mexican migrants, were driven by necessity to accept lower

---

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Glickman, "Inventing the 'American Standard of Living': Gender, Race and Working-Class Identity, 1880-1925," *Labor History* 34, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 1993): 222.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>19</sup> Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market," *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 5 (1972): 549.

wages.<sup>20</sup> Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor focused on growers' role in keeping wages low by exploiting Mexican migrant labor. Its main contention was that foreign labor presented a serious threat to domestic migrants' standard of living.

Truman's Commission affirmed that domestic migrants were constrained by a premodern, preindustrial agricultural labor system which excluded them from a genuine American standard of living. The Commission recognized that migrants, as a class, were treated much differently than their industrial counterparts: "Beyond wanting migrants to be available when needed and to be gone when not needed, they are expected to work under conditions no longer typical or characteristic of the American standard of life."<sup>21</sup> Wages for migrant workers remained "a little over a third but well below one-half the average wage paid in manufacturing," far from "a decent American income."<sup>22</sup>

The Commission sharply criticized farm employers for their part in perpetuating these conditions. The whole system of agricultural labor represented stubborn resistance to the march of progress:

When industrial employers were denied the immigrant workers they demanded, they were compelled among other things to develop working conditions and job standards compatible with the expectations of American workers. Farm employers...continue to offer jobs and working conditions that are no better and in many respects are worse than those offered three and four decades ago.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> President's Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., I-21, I-33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I-29, I-30.

Rather than raise living standards for Americans, farm employers turned to foreign labor.<sup>24</sup> They claimed that the employment of foreign migrants was the inevitable result of certain economic constraints: the exigencies of production and the unavailability of domestic labor.

Growers told the Commission that, due to a shortage of willing domestic workers, foreign labor was necessary to keep agricultural production at sustainable levels.<sup>25</sup> According to these growers, Americans were simply too proud to perform hard work in the fields. These farm employers manipulated the ideology of the American standard in order to justify to the Commission why they were unable to hire native-born Americans. Glenn White argued that “[the] supply of stoop labor has dwindled away because of the advance in the living standards of lots of peoples that we drew on in the past.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in his statement before the Commission, Delmar Roberts claimed that “practically none of the listed unemployed will hoe or pick cotton. Probably ninety per cent of these workers do not have the background or the desire necessary for them to work in the cotton fields under the hot sun.”<sup>27</sup> Such work---harvesting “slave crops” such as cotton---was odious to respectable whites.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, growers’ racialized language portrayed Mexican migrants as naturally fit for agricultural work.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Southern California Farmers’ Association reported that

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., I-26.

<sup>26</sup> Statement of Glenn White, 31 July 1950, in President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Stenographic Report of Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: Ward & Paul, 1951), Box 2, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Statement of Delmar Roberts, 4 August 1950, Box 6, Folder 6, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-26.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011), 56.

“workers of Latin American extraction are able to produce up to twice as much per hour as other workers.”<sup>30</sup> The Association cited payroll records in order to prove that Mexican migrants picked more than North American migrants.<sup>31</sup> According to growers’ statements before the Commission, Mexicans’ prodigious output stemmed from their biological makeup, which predisposed them to farm work.<sup>32</sup> Mexicans easily endured the intense heat of the Southwest and were “especially fitted” for picking.<sup>33</sup> Historian Deborah Cohen has noted that American workers were “too inefficient,” unable to achieve the same levels of productivity as Mexicans, and “too advanced”---their modern standards made them unwilling to perform agricultural labor.<sup>34</sup> The braceros, on the other hand, were “just the right combination: modern enough to be efficient, yet not too modern to be productive with a hoe and pick.”<sup>35</sup> This blend of qualities made them ideal agricultural workers.

Growers claimed that the bracero program allowed Mexican migrants to improve their own standard of living. White contended that Mexican migrants assimilated and became “regular American citizens,” with the result that “second and third generations live just as well as you or I, in most cases.”<sup>36</sup> Migrant farm labor transformed backwards Mexicans, who lived like

---

<sup>30</sup> Southern California Farmers Association to Commission on Migratory Labor, 9 August 1950, Box 7, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Statement of John W. Crill, Box 7, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Statement of Glenn White, 16; Statement of C. H. DeVaney, 31 July 1950, Box 6, Folder 5, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *Braceros*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>36</sup> Statement of Glenn White, 14.

“Indian[s],” into productive workers.<sup>37</sup> Mexican migrants became more prosperous and developed a good work ethic.<sup>38</sup> “We are a training ground,” White told the Commission, adding, “We bring them in who don’t even know how to open the door in a house.”<sup>39</sup> “Untamed” Mexicans received the gift of “advancement,” and the employer gained a competent employee---on the surface, a relationship which benefited both parties.<sup>40</sup> Clarence Stringer testified that “when these men return to Mexico...they are well fed, well clothed and are healthier individuals”; migration “works for the betterment of these men both physically and mentally.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, according to growers, the American environment molded Mexican migrants into modern workers.

Moreover, farm employers insisted that their Mexican workers were treated well, even generously. Benevolent employers brought their workers to welfare centers and clinics.<sup>42</sup> One farmer’s wife testified that the Mexican migrants living in her home county were provided with free health care, food, and even a public library for migrant children.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, according to

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Statement of Clarence Stringer Before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, Box 6, Folder 6, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Statement of Glenn White, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Testimony of Mrs. Russell Cherry, 31 July 1950, in President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Stenographic Report of Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: Ward & Paul, 1951), Box 2, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 25-6.



employers, Mexican migrants were simply trying “to make a living”; it was morally imperative for growers to employ them.<sup>44</sup> Growers felt fewer obligations towards domestic migrants.

Indeed, growers strongly opposed attempts to raise wages or work conditions. Growers such as Austin E. Anson viewed seasonal and migrant labor as inherently worth less than other types of labor, due in part to the shorter period of employment.<sup>45</sup> They resisted minimum wage controls on these grounds.<sup>46</sup> If wages were raised for migrant workers, Anson warned, “it would come out of only two sources---the producer or the consumer.”<sup>47</sup> Anson played on consumer fears of inflation in order to persuade his audience that standards could not be raised for migrant laborers. This reasoning was rejected, however, by the Commission on Migratory Labor.

The Commission used the claim that the braceros received more work-related benefits than domestic migrants to highlight the plight of domestic migrants. The Commission’s report noted that braceros could claim certain privileges under the Migrant Labor Agreement, jointly negotiated between Mexico and the United States, which were not available to domestic workers, such as “guarantees of employment, workmen’s compensation, medical care, standards of sanitation, and payment of the cost of transportation.”<sup>48</sup> The difference between the two governments was striking: “Mexico, by law, prescribes minimum standards in several respects for her nationals leaving for employment abroad whereas we, by law, prescribe virtually no

---

<sup>44</sup> Statement of T. Rucker Stanford, 31 July 1950, in President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Stenographic Report of Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: Ward & Paul, 1951), Box 2, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Testimony of Austin E. Anson Before House Labor Committee, ca. January 1949, Box 6, Folder 5, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-8, I-9.

minimum standards for domestic agricultural workers.”<sup>49</sup> Labor representatives reminded the Commission that domestic agricultural workers remained unprotected by major New Deal-era labor laws, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.<sup>50</sup> The Commission thus sought to prove that braceros’ standard of living was actually better than domestic migrants’, emphasizing the institutional barriers faced by domestic workers.

Still, the braceros faced significant setbacks of their own. In theory, they were protected by the Migrant Labor Agreement. However, “in practice, the bracero program fell far short of the terms stipulated in the Migrant Labor Agreement.”<sup>51</sup> Wage theft and housing violations were routine.<sup>52</sup> But the braceros had written contracts, while native-born American workers did not; this was enough to rile organized labor.

The Commission, allying itself with organized labor, pushed for migrant workers to possess the same rights as industrial workers.<sup>53</sup> The National Farm Labor Union requested a minimum wage and collective bargaining rights for agricultural workers.<sup>54</sup> The union’s goal was “an extension to the workers in agricultural [sic] of the same considerations which have become an accepted part of the American way of life for our other citizens, and an opportunity to work

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., III-22.

<sup>50</sup> Statement of William Green to the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, 26 October 1950, Box 8, Folder 7, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 3. See also Anne B. W. Effland, “The Emergence of Federal Assistance Programs for Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Post-World War II America,” PhD diss., Iowa State University, 1991, 11, <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/9523/>.

<sup>51</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 142.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 143-4; Statement of O.W. Manney Before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, 7-8 August 1950, Box 6, Folder 7, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-25.

<sup>54</sup> Statement of William Becker to the Committee to Survey the Agricultural Labor Resources of the San Joaquin Valley, 1 August 1950, Box 7, Folder 1, Record Group 220: President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL, 5.

regularly, to earn a living.”<sup>55</sup> Labor advocates declared that it was employers’ substandard pay and work conditions which repelled domestic workers.<sup>56</sup> They challenged growers’ claim that domestic labor could not be found: “Labor is available if adequately paid and working conditions improved to make the job more attractive.”<sup>57</sup> The dominant presence of Mexican migrants in the labor force, labor advocates argued, enhanced the potential for the exploitation of American workers.<sup>58</sup> The Commission agreed, speaking of the government’s “obligation to make certain that these foreign workers do not reduce still lower the wages of domestic farm workers and the incomes of family farm operators.”<sup>59</sup> The influence of organized labor was clear.

Mexican-Americans proposed their own interpretation of the American standard, one which emphasized nationality over race. Mexican-American activists were largely hostile to the bracero program.<sup>60</sup> The prospect of a large immigrant population threatened to undermine their assimilationist policies, which “promote[d] fundamental patriotism and Americanism among Mexican Americans...[and] advocated Americanization and naturalization for the resident alien population.”<sup>61</sup> Latino advocacy groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) contended that assimilation, “blending in” with the white population, would spare

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Joecken to Harry S. Truman, 15 January 1948, Box 1379, Folder 1, Truman Papers, Official File, OF 407-D: Mexican Agricultural Workers, HSTL.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Statement of William Becker, 3.

<sup>59</sup> President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-32.

<sup>60</sup> Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 135.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 142-3.

Mexican-Americans from Anglo discrimination and allow them to cast off their minority status.<sup>62</sup>

Restrictionist immigration policies were a key part of facilitating assimilation. Thus, the Mexican-American National Association wrote to the Commission stating its opposition to the continued use of contract labor from Mexico.<sup>63</sup> The letter's authors expressed their concerns that braceros were displacing American citizens and depressing wages.<sup>64</sup> The underlying message was that Mexican-Americans, as productive citizens, were entitled to resist foreign encroachments on the labor market, just as white workers were.

As growers lobbied for further institutional support of the bracero program, LULAC campaigned against the employment of "wetback" laborers, on the grounds that illegal immigration harmed the interests of Mexican-Americans. At its national convention in 1951, the organization demanded an end to the employment of illegal immigrants and called for the U.S. government to penalize growers who persisted in employing them.<sup>65</sup> "The hiring of illegal labor," the president of LULAC, George J. Garza, stated, "constitutes a threat to our standard of living and institutes a form of peonage."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Hector Garcia, chairman of the American

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>63</sup> F.R. Cuellar and F.G. Vallez to Maurice T. Van Hecke, 1 August 1950, Box 6, Folder 6, Record Group 220: President's Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> George J. Garza to Cleveland Bailey, 27 June 1951, Box 1379, Folder 2, Truman Papers, Official File, OF 407-D: Mexican Agricultural Workers, HSTL, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

G.I. Forum, asked Truman to avoid lowering Mexican-Americans' "standard of living" by admitting large numbers of illegal immigrants.<sup>67</sup>

Correspondents painted a grim picture, in which deserving Mexican-Americans faced poverty and unemployment due to lax immigration enforcement. In a letter to Truman, Jesus Clemente informed him that "this valley [the Rio Grande Valley] is full of wetbacks and they working in all kins [sic] of jobs."<sup>68</sup> The Border Patrol, he complained, had done nothing to stop them; Truman was his last resort.<sup>69</sup> Another letter, signed "An Unemployed Native-Born Latin-American Farm Laborer," implored the Commission to halt the flow of Mexican migrants:

Such a practice has led to unemployment and economic hardship among the available native-born Latin-American farm laborers. In many cases many families have had to migrate or lower their living standards because of the hiring of cheap labor...How can we support our families and bring up our children to be strong and healthy American citizens, if some one is allowed to take away our jobs---and literally---the bread from the mouths of our children?<sup>70</sup>

These appeals, combined with those of organized labor, were clearly in line with the Commission's position on illegal immigration and the use of foreign labor in general.

Growers, labor advocates, and Mexican-Americans proposed different programs of migrant modernization to Truman's Commission. The same phrase recurred throughout their testimony before the Commission: each group was focused on raising "standards of living" to meet modern expectations. Their disagreements centered on whether foreign or domestic migrants were most deserving of the benefits of the modern. Despite the Commission's efforts,

---

<sup>67</sup> Hector P. Garcia to Harry S. Truman, 30 June 1951, Box 1379, Folder 2, Truman Papers, Official File, OF 407-D: Mexican Agricultural Workers, HSTL, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Jesus Clemente to Harry S. Truman, 15 June 1950, Box 1379, Folder 2, Truman Papers, Official File, OF 407-D: Mexican Agricultural Workers, HSTL, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1-2

<sup>70</sup> "An Unemployed Native-Born Latin-American Farm Laborer" to Maurice T. Van Hecke, 4 August 1950, Box 6, Folder 6, Record Group 220: President's Commission on Migratory Labor, HSTL.

growers' lobbying influenced the passage of Public Law 78, allowing for the continued importation of Mexican migrant labor---in defiance of the Commission's recommendations.<sup>71</sup> Truman signed the bill, in spite of misgivings about its shortcomings.<sup>72</sup> The bracero program originated as an emergency wartime provision; by 1951, with the outbreak of the Korean War, growers renewed calls for foreign contract labor to sustain the nation during its crisis. The continuation of the bracero program actually led to an increase in illegal immigration.<sup>73</sup>

The Commission was well aware of the challenges it confronted. It repeatedly quoted the Country Life Commission, set up by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 to investigate migrant labor.<sup>74</sup> The Country Life Commission, too, had identified the main issues facing domestic migrants and cautioned against the widespread use of foreign labor.<sup>75</sup> But the Country Life Commission's recommendations did not generate substantial change; in 1951, Truman's Commission was reiterating many of the same points, covering the same territory.<sup>76</sup> Truman's Commission was ultimately unable to break this historical precedent of failure.

---

<sup>71</sup> Robert S. Robinson, "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950–1952," *Agricultural History* 84, no. 3 (2010): 390.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 394-5.

<sup>73</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 147.

<sup>74</sup> President's Commission, *Migratory Labor*, I-26, I-28, I-30.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, I-30.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*