OPEN-SHOP FIELDS: THE BRACERO PROGRAM AND FARMWORKER UNIONISM, 1942-1964

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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ABSTRACT

Between 1942 and 1964, the Bracero Program provided large growers in the United States with ready access to Mexican agricultural workers through a government-run guestworker program. Despite program protections designed to minimize the adverse effects of bracero employment on domestic farmworkers, growers frequently used the program to hold down agricultural wages and prevent the unionization of their labor force. Because growers so easily dominated the program and because of the long history of failed farmworker organizing campaigns, historians of the Bracero Program have given short shrift to organized labor’s role in opposing the program. This dissertation places organized labor at the center of the struggle to reform and end the Bracero Program.

The dissertation argues that agricultural unionism was defeated in the mid-twentieth century because farmworkers were excluded from New Deal-era labor legislation and had to compete not only with guestworkers laboring in the poorly enforced Bracero Program, but also with growing numbers of undocumented workers pulled northward by that program. Nevertheless, dedicated organizers operating on shoestring budgets in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union/National Farm Labor Union/National Agricultural Workers Union (the union underwent three name changes during its lifetime) consistently tried to organize farmworkers against all odds, even as increasing numbers of them pulled up stakes and migrated with the harvests. That difficult task was made virtually impossible by the long tenure of a Bracero
Program that gave the nation’s largest growers the tool they needed to keep their fields open-shop by using braceros to break strikes and undermine organization efforts.

The dissertation argues that unionists settled on an approach that eventually removed the barrier in their way. Failing at the organizing job in the face of unbeatable odds, they pioneered innovative organizing strategies such as cross-border organizing, public relations campaigns, and the mobilization of allies in government and among the liberal, religious reform, and civil rights communities in their bid to improve farmworkers’ lives. In the end, these strategies helped generate a policy debate over the Bracero Program that led to its eventual termination and cleared the way for future organizing successes.
For my Father,

whose passing made me

think deeply about

the stewardship of the land.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAA</td>
<td>Agricultural Adjustment Act/Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIO</td>
<td>Committee/Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>COCM</td>
<td>Confederación de Obreros y Campesinos</td>
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<td>CPN</td>
<td>Confederación Proletaria Nacional</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Confederación de Trabajadores de México</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Community Service Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>FSA</td>
<td>Farm Security Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTA</td>
<td>Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INS</td>
<td>Immigration and Naturalization Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUD</td>
<td>Industrial Union Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LULAC</td>
<td>League of United Latin American Citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAWU</td>
<td>National Agricultural Workers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFLU</td>
<td>National Farm Labor Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STFU</td>
<td>Southern Tenant Farmers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCAPAWA</td>
<td>United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPWA</td>
<td>United Packinghouse Workers of America</td>
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Introduction: The Bracero Program and Organized Labor, 1942-1964

By the middle of the 1950s, the two leaders of the National Agricultural Workers Union—the nation’s only farmworker union—were ready to call it quits. They had been trying to organize farmworkers in California for over a decade in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Their potential membership was beset by poverty, increasingly migratory work patterns, and exclusion from the nation’s labor laws. Organizing such workers would have been difficult under any circumstances, but the union’s job was made all the harder by the presence of the Mexican Farm Labor Program, or Bracero Program, as it was more commonly called. Since 1942, the nation’s largest and most powerful growers had ready access to hundreds of thousands of Mexican guestworkers brought to the nation’s largest farms through the Bracero Program. Growers’ control over that program allowed them to hold down wages for all farmworkers and defeat organizing efforts at every turn. On top of that, the abuses Mexican workers suffered in the Bracero Program encouraged many more of their compatriots to immigrate to the United States without formal bracero documentation or the thin legal protections that came with it, further intensifying labor competition in agriculture.

The National Agricultural Workers Union (and its precursors the National Farm Labor Union and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union)\(^1\) had attempted to organize farmworkers despite the Bracero Program for years. After repeated setbacks and failures, though, its two most important leaders, H.L. Mitchell, who co-founded the union and ran what he called a “farm labor lobby” from Washington, D.C.’s Dupont Circle neighborhood; and Ernesto Galarza, a Mexican immigrant, researcher, and labor organizer in California, had all but given up hope on the organizing front. Instead, they sought to publicize the effects of the program on American farmworkers, mobilize a reform coalition dedicated to lobbying government officials to improve

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\(^1\) The union underwent two name changes over the course of its existence.
farmworker conditions, and push the national labor movement to use its clout and financial resources to organize farmworkers.

In their darkest days of waiting for organized labor to make a decision on farmworkers while their union teetered on the verge of bankruptcy in the mid-1950s, Mitchell and Galarza waxed philosophic about farmworkers’ relationship to the labor movement and the prospects for organizing the nation’s poorest workers. Galarza doubted that organized labor would ever commit to a farmworker organizing drive since he considered the postwar labor movement driven by “big business unionism” that cared little for the concerns and participation of the rank and file. Such a union model could never succeed when it came to organizing workers left uncovered by national labor laws. Instead, thorough unionization would require an organization that made “decent and creative use of the talents and abilities of the people you work with,” not a conventional labor union.² He saw little chance that the AFL-CIO would choose the correct strategy to organize farmworkers, if it ever chose to act at all.

Mitchell agreed. He had had plenty of experience with the labor movement’s ambivalence or outright hostility to workers on the land. When he first embarked on organizing Arkansas sharecroppers and tenant farmworkers in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union during the New Deal, Mitchell encountered opposition from Memphis craft unions who considered his biracial union little more than a pipe dream of agrarian radicalism inspired by the socialist Norman Thomas. The opposition of traditional unionists continued in the postwar era. In 1948, George Meany—then secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Labor—took the opportunity to speak to the National Farm Labor Union’s 1948 conference so he could declare, “I don’t believe that the farm workers of this country can be unionized. I don’t believe any of you

want to be organized.” As Mitchell and Galarza pondered the fate of their union specifically and agricultural unionization in general, Mitchell concluded bitterly, “We are and always have been the stepchildren of Labor.”

Nevertheless, the union persevered despite the insurmountable odds confronting it. Although growers’ domination of the Bracero Program made it impossible for the National Agricultural Workers Union to organize effectively in the fields in the 1940s and 1950s, the union’s organizing defeats taught it important lessons about the challenges it faced. Rather than continue the hopeless fight to organize farmworkers directly, the union instead turned its efforts toward publicizing the abuses perpetrated by growers on both American and foreign farmworkers through their control over the Bracero Program. In doing so, the union mobilized allies concerned with farmworker conditions. In the midst of the growing reform cries, the Eisenhower Administration’s Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell—an unlikely ally—used the growing public clamor over farmworkers to reform the Bracero Program itself. Furthermore, at the same time as the union began to raise the Bracero Program to the center of the public conscience, it also pressed the national labor movement to commit to an organizing campaign among farmworkers in a bid to marshal the financial and organizational clout of organized labor toward improving agricultural labor standards. Although the labor movement’s eventual response—the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee—was purchased at the price of the National Agricultural Workers Union’s dissolution, and although the organizing committee stumbled badly in California, Mitchell and Galarza had succeeded in mobilizing the forces that ended the Bracero Program and prepared the way for future organizing successes.

3 AFL President William Green, a friend of Mitchell’s and an honorary member of the NFLU, was scheduled to address the conference. When a scheduling conflict prevented his attendance, Green sent Meany. Meany, as quoted by Mitchell in Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, and Co. Publishers, Inc., 1979), 223.
4 Mitchell to Galarza, November 19, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
Ernesto Galarza summarized the union’s impact perfectly in a 1954 letter to George Meany in which he defended the union’s contribution despite its halting progress in organizing the fields. “It has been our Union,” Galarza wrote, “that has defined the problem, accepted the challenge, fought the abuses of this contract system, brought the irresponsible government officials who have covered up those abuses to heel, and developed a record of what is actually happening to American workers through this device of the bosses.”\(^5\) He was right. The union’s research and publicity efforts were its most important contribution to ending the Bracero Program. It failed to realize its mission to organize farmworkers in postwar agriculture not only because of the Bracero Program but also because of the massive structural barriers standing in the way of farmworker organization. The tiny, chronically underfunded union was engaged in a tireless, tragic fight that it could not hope to win through direct labor organization. Yet, it managed to succeed in the face of daunting odds because it mobilized allies to influence agricultural labor policy in the United States. The union’s efforts provided Bracero Program opponents with the data they needed to raise public awareness of farmworkers’ plight, data they would use in the battle to take down the program. Before farmworker unionization could begin in earnest, the union and its allies would have to deal first with the Bracero Program.

Indeed, the fact that the union managed to survive at all to achieve this feat represented a significant victory. It successfully transitioned from a New Deal era union of sharecroppers and tenant farmers into a postwar union of farmworkers that faced members’ migrancy, well-organized grower opposition, hostile bureaucrats, competition from braceros and undocumented workers, and a vacillating labor movement whose leaders were never sure whether farmworkers could be organized at all. Although it would not last to see the end of the Bracero Program and the rise of large-scale farmworker unionism, Mitchell’s and Galarza’s union played an

\(^5\) Galarza to Meany, June 10, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
indispensable role in creating the conditions necessary for the breakthrough of farmworker organizing in the 1960s and 1970s led by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, though the union’s earlier organizing experiences also pointed to the limits that organizing breakthrough would encounter by the 1980s—growers’ abuse of undocumented immigrants, farmworker migrancy and poverty, and growers’ control over their farms, communities, and labor force.

A Brief History of the Bracero Program

The Bracero Program was created in 1942 as part of wartime labor mobilization. Growers demanded access to Mexican agricultural guestworkers by arguing that the war effort had created critical labor shortages on American farms that threatened U.S. success. Although it initially arose on these grounds of wartime necessity, the program lasted until the end of 1964. Over the course of its twenty-two year duration, the federal government issued over four million short-term work contracts to Mexican farmworkers who sought work on some of the United States’ largest farms, mostly in California and Texas (though they worked in almost all fifty states). Indeed, even the term “bracero” itself denotes the role these men played in the agricultural economy; it derives from the Mexican brazo, or arm, and bracero translates roughly into “farm hand.” Braceros were simply the hand labor growers needed to harvest their crops, “stoop” labor that American workers supposedly refused to perform. While growers made their arguments about labor shortages and unwilling American workers throughout the program, critics in the labor, civil rights, and religious reform communities argued that these were flimsy pretexts for a program that gave growers what they really wanted: an easily disposable captive labor force that could be paid low wages and sent packing across the border should workers protest too much.

Beyond that, critics argued, growers used braceros to hold down agricultural wages for domestic farmworkers and prevent farmworker organization after the rural upheavals of the
1930s. In the South, the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act that paid cotton landlords to retire acreage as a means of increasing prices had led to widespread evictions of sharecroppers and tenant farmers.\(^6\) In response, those on the lowest rungs of the South’s economic ladder revolted and organized in unions, demonstrated against evictions, and struck at harvest time for higher wages, something that deeply alarmed large growers.\(^7\) Meanwhile, in California farmworkers seized upon the federal government’s endorsement of collective bargaining in industry by waging major strikes under the leadership of militant unions that struck the farms that Carey McWilliams called “factories in the field.”\(^8\) In the end however, labor militancy in the fields during the New Deal was undercut by the political realities of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition, which required a careful balancing of urban and Southern Democratic interests. In exchange for support of labor legislation backed by the Democratic Party’s urban wing, Southern Democrats demanded farmworkers’ exclusion from all protective legislation such as

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the Wagner Act, Fair Labor Standards Act, and Social Security. Without legal protection, farmworkers were defeated by well organized and well financed growers across the country.

The Bracero Program in many ways represented an extension of growers’ control over their labor force. When wartime mobilization threatened to reduce the available labor supply and strengthen workers’ bargaining positions after a period of labor unrest, growers reacted by clamoring for foreign labor, especially from Mexico. After a brief run with the Farm Security Administration, which growers regarded as an agency bent on dangerous social experimentation for its efforts at establishing farmworker housing camps free from grower intimidation, large agricultural employers reasserted their control and secured a program that worked to their exclusive benefit. Mexico had bargained hard for guarantees for its citizen-workers in the wartime Bracero Program. For instance, the U.S. federal government was named as the employer, braceros could not be used in areas where their employment would have an “adverse effect” on American farmworkers, and they could not be paid less than the “prevailing wage” that domestic farmworkers would accept for the same work. Nevertheless, growers found it easy to manipulate the Bracero Program because federal oversight functioned through local or state agencies that growers controlled. Rather than paying braceros the prevailing wage that would have attracted domestic farmworkers, they simply advertised a wage that no one would accept, which allowed them to claim a labor shortage and secure bracero authorizations from friendly officials at that rate. This pattern of grower control through the local administration of the program emerged quickly, and it characterized the program long after the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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10 For a full account of the program during this period, see Chapter 1, Section “The Wartime Bracero Program and The Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” Subsection “The Wartime Bracero Program, 1942-1947.”
Although wartime economic controls ended in 1947, the Bracero Program continued, replaced by a system of direct grower recruitment that provided even less government oversight of the program. Between 1948 and 1951, this new program proved dramatically unstable as the Mexican government sought to regain the bargaining position it had lost at war’s end. Attempts to negotiate a more lasting program repeatedly faltered, and bracero contracting declined. Growers found it easy to cope with the decline in braceros in this interim period, however. The Bracero Program stimulated a large migration of undocumented workers from Mexico who had learned of job availability north of the border and had heard of braceros’ difficulties in the guestworker program. When these undocumented immigrants were apprehended, the U.S. simply converted them to bracero status as a way both to threaten Mexico into negotiating and to attempt to control a porous border. Meanwhile, domestic farmworkers continued to be displaced, their wages held down by growers’ continued control over the program and recourse to undocumented workers. Although unions, clergy, and liberal activists protested and lobbied Congress for improvements, growers’ iron grasp on the program remained firm.\footnote{This description is elaborated in Chapter 2, Section “The Bracero Program Adrift, 1947-1951.”}

By 1951, the U.S. and Mexico had reached agreement on the terms of a more stable Bracero Program, which passed Congress in the form of Public Law 78. The new Bracero Program gave the Department of Labor a larger administrative role in determining prevailing wages, labor shortages, and adverse effect, but it performed these functions through the same local and state officials that had allowed growers to bend the program to their will previously. As a result, domestic farmworkers continued to suffer from an unregulated program that allowed unfair competition by braceros while undocumented immigration expanded rapidly.\footnote{See Chapter 3, Section “Public Law 78 and the Institutionalization of the Bracero Program.”} The latter problem threatened not only to further complicate efforts to improve farmworkers’ conditions,
but also to make the Bracero Program completely irrelevant by giving growers a labor force free of even the pretense of statutory protection. Immigration and Naturalization Service apprehensions far outpaced bracero contracts, and bilateral relations between the U.S. and Mexico deteriorated. The solution came in 1954 with a border enforcement drive called Operation Wetback, which apprehended over one million illegal immigrants and turned many of them into legal, temporary braceros. In the years following this operation, the Bracero Program expanded rapidly, with braceros arriving at a rate of over 400,000 per year as growers enjoyed the benefits of a guestworker program for which they always set the terms.\(^\text{13}\)

Nevertheless, change was on the horizon. An increasingly vocal coalition of anti-bracero reformers began to form in the mid-1950s, motivated by the desire to improve American farmworkers’ lives by attacking growers’ abuse of the Bracero Program, and aided in that task by the simplification of the foreign worker problem and expanding importance of the program after Operation Wetback. Members of this group—who had always argued against the program and highlighted migrant farmworkers’ poverty—pressed the Department of Labor to exercise its authority, centralize the program’s administration, and better enforce protections for domestic farmworkers. Under the leadership of Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, who viewed the plight of farmworkers as the nation’s shame, the Department of Labor took notice and used the growing public outcry as a justification for enforcement campaigns and new regulations that made the program increasingly unattractive to growers. Their authority suddenly under attack from a bureaucracy whose role in the program they had always loathed, growers fought back by lobbying against the changes. With the arrival of the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s, though, the program had become more burden than blessing, and it became increasingly obvious

\(^{13}\) See Chapter 4, Section “The ‘Wetback Problem,’” Subsections “Public Law 78 and Undocumented Immigration” and “Operation Wetback.”
that reformers operating in changed political and public opinion climates were determined to end the Bracero Program. In response, growers turned to harvest mechanization wherever they could or returned to undocumented workers where they could not rely on machinery.¹⁴

Thus, the Bracero Program ended. It had come into existence when the nation’s largest farmers demanded ready access to deportable labor after a period of farmworker uprisings and when wartime labor mobilization threatened to renew that labor upheaval as farmworkers’ bargaining power increased. Growers exercised nearly complete control over the program during its long tenure, and once their control was challenged seriously and irrevocably, they shifted to other means to harvest their crops. One of this dissertation’s tasks is to trace the development of the Bracero Program as the various stakeholders shaped and challenged it, but this requires an interpretive lens that focuses beyond previous interpretations.

*Bracero Program Historiography*

With a few exceptions, thus far the Bracero Program has been interpreted in one of two ways. The first approach to emerge after the program’s termination focused on interpreting the program through the lens of interest groups and public policy, both in the United States and Mexico. This approach helped identify the major players behind the formulation, operation, and termination of the program. Richard C. Craig founded this school of Bracero Program analysis in his 1971 book, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. This work—the starting point for any serious inquiry into the program—argued that the program was structured most by the interplay of interest groups such as the U.S. and Mexican governments, the grower lobby and the congressional farm bloc, organized labor, and civic and religious organizations.¹⁵

¹⁴ This account of the program is based on my reconstruction of events in Chapters 5-7.
¹⁵ For concise examples of Craig’s interest-group analysis for each of his Bracero Program periods, see Richard C. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1971), 50-2, 63-4, 88-92, 147-9, 160-2.
With Craig’s book setting the tone, subsequent major studies emphasized different elements of the interest-group angle. George C. Kiser’s 1973 dissertation “The Bracero Program: A Case Study of Its Development, Termination, and Political Aftermath” focused more exclusively on domestic politics, but Kiser’s approach hewed closely to Craig’s, with the author paying “particular attention…to pluralist propositions relating group characteristics to political power.” In 1988, Roger Jungmeyer’s dissertation, “The Bracero Program, 1942-1951: Mexican Contract Labor in the United States,” continued to embrace the interest-group approach. Jungmeyer examined the first nine years of the Bracero Program, reserving his analysis for a chapter entitled “The Bracero Program: Conflicting Interests.”

Surveying the Bracero Program through an interest-group lens established a crucial foundation for the study of the program. Craig and those pursuing his line of inquiry identified and assessed the major groups at work arguing for and against the Mexican Farm Labor Program as it evolved over time. However, as historians digested the interest group analyses, some found them wanting. Although Craig and others generally paid some attention to twentieth-century labor migration from Mexico, an emerging group of scholars sought to cast the Bracero Program as an explicit component of U.S. immigration policy. This newer interpretation found that the program stimulated the migration of undocumented workers who followed their bracero brethren until 1954’s Operation Wetback, forming a second wave of immigration from Mexico after the one that had ended with Depression-era deportations. After Operation Wetback, the program was used to structure and control Mexican immigration until its termination, when a third wave began.

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The first scholar to interpret the Bracero Program in a broad immigration context was Juan Ramon García in his 1980 book, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. While the second half of the book contained a detailed narrative of Operation Wetback, the first half documented the long-standing immigration patterns of Mexican agricultural workers and the Bracero Program’s impact in stimulating illegal immigration prior to the INS enforcement drive.¹⁸ In 1988, Larry Manuel García y Griego’s dissertation, “The Bracero Policy Experiment: U.S.-Mexican Responses to Mexican Labor Migration, 1942-1955” brought the same analysis Ramon García applied to Operation Wetback to earlier terms of the program. In the process, García y Griego borrowed from the interest group approach, paying close attention to diplomatic negotiations and Mexican political realities that partly structured labor migration.¹⁹ Six years later, Kitty Calavita’s book *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* focused on U.S. border administration during the Bracero Program, arguing that the Immigration and Naturalization Service relied on the Bracero Program as a means to control Mexican immigration.²⁰

More recently, immigration scholars have characterized the program as a “colonized labor” system. According to Mae Ngai, the program brought Mexican agricultural workers to the Southwest as a transnational labor force during a postwar period that witnessed the final economic and political incorporation into the United States of the former Mexican territory in the Southwest. Her 2004 book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* features a chapter on the Bracero Program that argues the Bracero Program’s racialized

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labor force and contract labor system resembled both a colonial labor system and the racial slavery of the nineteenth-century cotton South.\textsuperscript{21} Two years after Ngai published her book, Gilbert Gonzalez seized upon the colonial argument to the exclusion of all other lines of inquiry in his book \textit{Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States}. While providing a narrative overview of the program, Gonzalez’s book is mostly concerned with the colonial approach, even demonstrating the similarities between the Mexican Farm Labor Program and comparable Indian and Algerian contract labor migrations.\textsuperscript{22} Most recently, Deborah Cohen has carried the immigration focus into a transnational framework that emphasizes the “modernizing project” inherent in the Bracero Program. The program was promoted as a way to modernize both Mexican agriculture and the Mexican braceros themselves by exposing them to the agricultural techniques and work habits of the U.S. Their relationships with the U.S., Mexico, growers, and U.S. farmworkers, thus made them “simultaneously national, alien, transnational, and modern,” she argues.\textsuperscript{23}

The existing literature on the Bracero Program interprets the program in useful ways. The first generation of studies casting the program as an interest-group conflict carefully enumerated the major protagonists who shaped and contested the program, including the nation’s largest growers and farm lobbying groups, the congressional farm bloc, government officials, Mexican negotiators, civic and religious groups, and organized labor. The interest group approach thus outlined the positions of major Bracero Program stakeholders and the evolution of the program over time. The immigration approach transcended the give-and-take of American politics by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Gilbert Gonzalez, \textit{Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States} (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), Chapter 1: Imperialism and Labor: Mexican, Indian, and Algerian Migrations in Comparative Perspective.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Cohen’s study focuses on braceros from Durango and their experiences in the Imperial Valley of California in the broader context of the Bracero Program. Deborah Cohen, \textit{Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 7.
\end{itemize}
placing the program in a broader context of immigration policy between the U.S. and Mexico.

This new tack gave the Bracero Program broader relevance by situating it in a longer narrative of immigration to the United States in general and Mexican immigration in particular.

Despite the strength of both approaches, however, neither sufficiently addresses the fact that the Bracero Program was first and foremost a labor program. Indeed, in the absence of labor legislation for agricultural labor, the Bracero Program’s structured guestworker immigration served as de facto labor policy. While the interest group framework may have identified all the major historical actors in the program, its analysis relegated the Bracero Program to a mere arena in which the give-and-take of policy formation and operation could take place. Likewise, the immigration framework helps contextualize the program but tends to miss the central importance of immigration policy as labor policy, thus missing the opportunity to analyze other topics in postwar U.S. history, such as organized labor in postwar America and how it grappled with the “blind spot” created in the nation’s labor laws by farmworkers’ exclusion from its protections.

An interpretation focusing primarily on organized labor’s relationship to the Bracero Program has remained elusive, though analyses of the program touching upon labor’s opposition have emerged from time to time. Such interpretations have derived from studies on farmworkers, large-scale agriculture, and most recently, guestworker programs. For instance, Linda and Theo Majka’s chapter on the program in their 1982 book *Farm Workers, Agribusiness, and the State* argued that the bracero presence in agriculture represented an era in which the state acted as a labor contractor at the behest of agribusiness. Braceros had “few of the characteristics of a free agricultural proletariat,” and growers used them to displace domestic workers from agriculture. Likewise, Cindy Hahamovitch has examined the problem of foreign labor importation programs

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and union efforts to combat them. In *The Fruits of Their Labor*, she examined the problems presented when the state acted as “padrone,” or labor contractor, during World War II, and she noted that the Southern Tenant Farmers Union tried but ultimately failed to combat the program’s labor shortage rationale by offering its own members for farm employment around the country, making the union the padrone. More recently, her book *No Man’s Land* turns repeatedly to the Bracero Program and its opponents among organized labor and allied organizations as she examines the Jamaican guestworker program used on the East Coast during the same period.

However, aside from these approaches, no work yet has made the relationship between organized labor and the Bracero Program its central framework, thus no work has been able to measure sufficiently the impact of labor’s opposition to the Bracero Program in bringing it to an end. Most studies that deal with labor’s involvement tend to craft a narrative of hopeless odds, endless defeats, and ineffectual organizing by unions like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union/National Farm Labor Union/National Agricultural Workers Union and the AFL-CIO’s Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. Indeed, Mae Ngai has even gone so far as to call

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27 The union changed its name twice during its lifetime.
labor’s opposition “little more than rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{29} This judgment is both unfair and inaccurate. This dissertation seeks to demonstrate the ways in which labor struggled against the Bracero Program and ultimately contributed to its termination.

Such an account provides important insights into postwar labor history and the effects of guestworker programs on citizen workers. After World War II, industrial workers in the United States enjoyed a long period of unprecedented prosperity as they moved into the middle class, a journey made possible partly by their ability to organize into unions and bargain with their employers over wages, benefits, hours, and working conditions. Yet, at the same time as workers in industry advanced socially and economically, agricultural workers fell farther and farther behind. This was due in large part to their exclusion from the New Deal’s labor legislation, an exclusion that persists today. To the nation’s postwar labor leaders, organizing impoverished workers without the legal protections and juridical processes to which union organizers and lawyers had grown accustomed held little appeal, especially in an era when the labor movement appeared more interested in consolidating its base than expanding its ranks. As a result, those organizers who did seek to unionize farmworkers found themselves cut off from the financial and organizational resources of a labor movement that tended to view farmworkers as poor migrants who could not be organized effectively, could not afford the dues necessary to support their unions, and would not enjoy the nation’s labor relations framework even if they organized.

Nevertheless, dedicated organizers operating on shoestring budgets consistently tried to organize farmworkers against all odds, even as increasing numbers of them pulled up stakes and migrated with the harvests. That task, difficult enough by any measure, was made virtually impossible by the long tenure of the Bracero Program, which gave the nation’s largest growers the tool they needed to keep their fields open-shop. The lax administration of the Mexican

\textsuperscript{29} Ngai, 165.
guestworker program allowed growers to break strikes and prevent the organization of their labor force. Moreover, it encouraged a wider migration of undocumented workers that proved a constant thorn in the side of those seeking to find a way to improve the agricultural labor market through unionization. Ultimately, unionists settled on an approach that eventually removed the barrier in their way. Failing at the organizing job in the face of unbeatable odds, they helped generate a policy debate over the Bracero Program, which demonstrated the central importance of guestworker policies to the ability or inability of domestic farmworkers to organize.

Open-Shop Fields

A labor history approach to the Bracero Program is necessary to give labor’s efforts against the Bracero Program their due. Such an approach is complementary to the interest group and immigration approaches because it documents labor’s role in shaping both labor and immigration policy in postwar America. The Bracero Program served as agricultural labor policy during a postwar period when organized labor benefited from clear industrial labor policy established during the New Deal that specifically excluded workers on the land. Thus, a full-length treatment of labor’s relationship and responses to the Bracero Program is important to flesh out this dimension of Bracero Program opposition. Labor contested, shaped, and eventually helped end the Bracero Program as it grappled with the problem of organizing farmworkers, and its efforts deserve attention.

Although it deals with the labor movement in the United States at large, the majority of the narrative that follows focuses on one union in particular, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), which later became the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), and later still the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU). Virtually every treatment of the Bracero Program has included some description of this union’s attempts to cope with the program as it struggled to
organize farmworkers, but aside from accounts written by the union’s leaders, no one has written a comprehensive history of the union’s struggle. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, born of sharecropper and tenant farmer displacement in the South during the New Deal, transformed itself into a union of farmworkers after World War II, reflecting broader shifts in U.S. agriculture away from the “agricultural ladder” and toward farm labor migrancy. Although it contended with impossible odds that included well-organized and well-financed growers, a guestworker program run to growers’ liking, an ambivalent labor movement, inadequate finances, members’ migrancy, and farmworkers’ exclusion from labor law, the union nonetheless survived and continued its bid to organize the nation’s farmworkers. After repeated failures in organizing, however, it came to understand that of all its obstacles, the Bracero Program loomed largest, and it began to devote its energies to eliminating the program as a necessary first step on the path of farmworker organization. The union challenged growers’ flouting of the Bracero Program’s domestic worker protections and their arguments that they required braceros in the first place. Its struggle to survive in these circumstances deserves scholarly attention because it illustrates the difficulties inherent in organizing farmworkers as well as the alternate strategies that can bring measures of success.

The dissertation argues that although traditional organizing campaigns usually failed, the union’s efforts were vital in both defining the problems inherent in the Bracero Program and effecting its eventual termination. These efforts began as soon as the wartime Emergency Farm

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31 The term “agricultural ladder” refers to the more traditional progression of farm hand, sharecropper, tenant farmer, and eventually full farm owner that most rural people expected to move through on their way to becoming independent farmers.
Labor Program was created, and they continued until the union’s dissolution in 1961. At first, the union tried to offer its services to the government in mobilizing agricultural labor for the war effort, but growers exerted their control over the program through the congressional farm bloc and stopped the union in its tracks. For the remainder of the wartime Bracero Program, which lasted until the wind-down of wartime controls in 1947, the union was forced to protest in vain and seek other methods to fight for the welfare of its members.

After the war, the union renamed itself the National Farm Labor Union and moved to California, where it attempted to organize postwar farmworkers in the face of bracero competition as the program entered a period first of even greater grower dominance, and later a rapid expansion under Public Law 78. It was defeated at almost every turn when it attempted to organize farmworkers, and it found that the labor movement, which had lent some support to its efforts, had little stomach for what was a hopelessly complicated task. The union’s struggle was further compounded by the fact that in addition to braceros, it had to contend with growers’ ready access to a growing supply of undocumented immigrants who traveled north to work without even the meager guarantees and protections of the Bracero Program, a movement of workers that would not be curtailed until the Border Patrol’s Operation Wetback. In the face of such daunting odds, before 1955 the Bracero Program affected the union’s ability to organize more than the union was able to affect the Bracero Program. That demonstrated the need for a new approach.

By the mid-1950s, the union’s leaders H.L. Mitchell and Ernesto Galarza had learned important lessons, and they began to turn their attention to alternative strategies that emphasized publicity, the continuation of lobbying efforts against the program, and the mobilization of allies to press organized labor for a decisive commitment to organize the nation’s poorest workers.
Partly born of the necessity created by the union’s meager financial resources, this new strategy began to reap rewards. A broad reform coalition mobilized in large part thanks to the union’s publicity, lobbying, and networking among unionists, liberals, Catholic reformers, and Mexican American activists. Moreover, the reformers’ job of attacking the Bracero Program had been simplified by Operation Wetback’s removal of the undocumented immigrant component of the problem (at least in the public eye) and the program’s rapid expansion as a result. By the late 1950s, the coalition began targeting its efforts on the Department of Labor, often drawing on Galarza’s research and exposés of the program’s maladministration. Furthermore, H.L. Mitchell pressed the nation’s recently merged labor movement for a firm commitment to organize farmworkers, and the AFL-CIO eventually created the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in 1959 in response, with the goal of organizing California farmworkers. Ironically, the successful efforts of Mitchell and Galarza in getting the AFL-CIO to launch AWOC brought an end to their own tiny union, which was forced to disband in deference to the new effort.

Although the union was forced to dissolve while AWOC continued its organizing drive, the union’s broader goal of clearing the Bracero Program from the path of farmworker organization through a vigorous reform coalition came to fruition. As they pressed their case, reformers found a willing ally in President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, who used the growing publicity and reform calls as cover to make changes to the program to better protect domestic farmworkers from the harmful effects of foreign guestworkers. Together, reformers and the department created an anti-bracero synergy that continued into the Kennedy Administration under Secretaries of Labor Arthur Goldberg and W. Willard Wirtz, who both built on Mitchell’s reforms. In the end, the reform coalition that the union had helped create successfully elevated farmworker conditions to a place in the national conversation and ended
the Bracero Program after a series of congressional renewals of the program that revealed both the reform coalition’s strength and the declining support of growers for a guestworker program over which they had lost control.

Throughout the arc of the Bracero Program, then, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union/National Farm Labor Union/National Agricultural Workers Union wove a thread of unbroken opposition to the program. It tried to organize farmworkers for better wages and conditions of employment during the war. As the postwar era began, it moved west to try to organize what was becoming an increasingly migratory and impoverished workforce. In the face of a guestworker program that growers used against its every effort, the union had no choice but to make a last stand against the Bracero Program itself in a bid to effect a policy change necessary to facilitate farmworker organizing. Through publicity, lobbying, mobilizing allies, and providing the program’s opponents with the data they needed, the union achieved through policy what it could not do on the ground: it challenged growers’ iron-fisted control over their workers. Although the union would not last to witness the passing of the program, it played a crucial role in its eventual termination, and in the process tilled the soil for future organizing harvests.

Chapter Outline

As this dissertation explores the efforts of the union against the Bracero Program, each chapter toggles between a history of the Bracero Program as a political and administrative program and the story of the union’s efforts to organize farmworkers in the face of that program. This back-and-forth dynamic allows this narrative to tease out how the program affected the union’s mission and its ability to fulfill it, especially in the early chapters. As the story
progresses, the character of the back-and-forth dynamic changes, illustrating the ways in which the union eventually came to influence and end the program.

Chapter 1, “The Rise of Farmworker Unionism and Its Wartime Decline: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, 1934-1947” lays the groundwork for the narrative by exploring both the genesis of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the New Deal South and the wartime Bracero Program (part of the Emergency Farm Labor Program). The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, born of sharecropper and tenant farmer displacement by New Deal agricultural policies, attempted to organize those at the bottom of the South’s economic heap, but its efforts faltered in the face of landlord hostility and a disastrous marriage with the CIO’s United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America. By the late 1930s, the STFU came out of its merger with UCAPAWA deeply weakened, but the union’s leaders hoped wartime mobilization could improve its members’ lives by providing a rationale for using wartime government agencies to move Southern farmworkers to areas of labor scarcity, thereby improving their wages and obviating the need for foreign workers. However, the rise of the Bracero Program undid those hopes. Despite a brief moment of success when the Farm Security Administration administered the program, growers rapidly asserted their control by decentralizing the program’s operation, making questions of labor scarcity and supply dependent upon local officials beholden to the largest farmers. The STFU’s only victories during the wartime program came on matters peripheral to labor supply concerns, while growers imported braceros and kept domestic farmworkers in their place with ease. By the end of World War II, then, the union had already come to understand the threat represented by the Bracero Program.

Chapter 2, “California Nightmare: The National Farm Labor Union’s Failure to Organize Postwar Farmworkers and Growers’ Dominance of the Bracero, 1946-1951” traces the efforts of
the union as it transformed itself from a sharecroppers union into a union of farmworkers dedicated to organizing postwar agriculture’s labor force. It chose California as its base of organizing operations for its new mission, while H.L. Mitchell set up shop in Washington, D.C. to lobby the labor movement and government officials on farmworker issues. Yet, just as the union reinvented itself, the Bracero Program changed and entered the postwar era as well. According to growers, the farm labor emergency had not ended with wartime controls. Indeed, growers enjoyed new dominance over the Bracero Program between 1947 and 1951. The wartime program was replaced with direct grower recruitment of braceros with even less government enforcement of provisions meant to protect domestic farmworkers. Meanwhile, those growers who found participation in even this deregulated version of the Bracero Program too onerous now benefited from easy access to increasing numbers of undocumented immigrants encouraged by the availability of work in the United States and discouraged from participating in the program by the repeated breakdowns in bilateral negotiations between the United States and Mexico.

In this context, the NFLU, now affiliated with the AFL, tried to launch a successful organizing campaign in California, the state most closely associated with industrial agriculture and one of the largest bracero users. The union drew the battle line at the Di Giorgio farm near Bakersfield, California, but the failure of its strike there revealed just how fruitless traditional organizing campaigns were against powerful growers with easy recourse to braceros, undocumented workers, and friendly government officials. In this context, the only meaningful opportunity to challenge the farmworker status quo came in the form of the Truman Commission on Migratory Labor. In hearings on the program, labor, liberals, Catholic reformers, and civil rights activists argued for farmworker reform and against the continuation of what was intended
as a wartime emergency program, especially given the abysmal conditions among migrant workers. Although the hearings revealed both migrant poverty and the potential for the creation of an anti-bracero coalition, the Truman Commission’s recommendations came too late to be of any use as the U.S. and Mexico prepared a more lasting arrangement for the program in the postwar era.

Chapter 3, “‘No Forts to Hold:’ Public Law 78 and Labor’s Continuing Struggles against the Bracero Program, 1951-1954,” examines both the stabilization of the Bracero Program through Public Law 78 and the union’s continuing difficulties organizing farmworkers in California. The Bracero Program entered a new era in 1951, when negotiators for the U.S. and Mexico sought to end the period of diplomatic tensions that had accompanied the grower-run program by reaching agreement on a new Bracero Program, which was codified in an international agreement, standard work contract, and (in the United States) Public Law 78. Both growers and reformers attacked the reformulated program, with growers denouncing the Department of Labor’s strengthened enforcement role and unionists arguing for stricter adherence to domestic farmworker protections by the department. Ultimately, however, growers continued to dominate the farm labor machinery of the program through the program’s decentralized administration, or they simply circumvented the program entirely by hiring undocumented immigrants, who now arrived by the hundreds of thousands annually.

Facing this obstacle, the union—renamed the National Agricultural Workers Union in 1952—tried valiantly to organize farmworkers by attempting to use its organizing campaigns to expose the shortcomings of the Bracero Program in the Imperial Valley of southern California. There, the growers association that dominated the valley contracted braceros and hired undocumented workers in order to displace resident Mexican American farmworkers. Ernesto
Galarza led the union effort, organizing workers, leading strikes, and lobbying the Department of Labor to enforce the program’s farmworker protections strictly, all in a bid to end bracero employment where U.S. farmworkers were available. By the mid-1950s, however, the union’s organizing had been defeated once again by lax enforcement of program standards by the Department of Labor and growers’ easy access to undocumented workers across the border. Meanwhile, the union’s other activities in California were blunted by infighting, high membership turnover, and the AFL’s waning financial support. Despite Galarza’s innovative tactics and some minor victories, though, by 1954 it became clear that farmworker organization—difficult enough given their migrancy, poverty, and exclusion from labor law—would be ineffective in the face of a foreign guestworker program.

Chapter 4, “The Border Cannot Hold: The ‘Wetback Problem’ and Cross-Border Labor Organizing, 1948-1955” breaks from the chronology and examines the central problem posed by the U.S.-Mexico border for both government officials and labor organizers. The Bracero Program’s stimulation of undocumented immigration revealed that the program was in reality little more than a band-aid on the inability of governments to control migration across the U.S. southern border. As that migration continued to grow in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it threatened to render the Bracero Program irrelevant, and it posed deep structural problems for organizers seeking a way to improve the U.S. agricultural labor market for domestic farmworkers. Gradually, Mexican American civil rights activists in Texas began working with labor organizations to publicize what they viewed as a threat to their interests—the so-called “wetback problem.” Their concerns found traction with the Eisenhower Administration, which was experiencing pressure from Congress to do something about border enforcement. The result

\[\text{32} \] The term “wetback” was coined to refer to those who cross the Rio Grande, emerging with literally “wet backs,” or espaldas mojadas in Spanish. It rapidly acquired racial and foreign connotations.
was an immigration crackdown known as Operation Wetback, which curtailed growers’ use of undocumented workers and caused a rapid expansion in bracero contracts. At the same time, the National Farm Labor Union/National Agricultural Workers Union experimented with innovative cross-border strategies in its own attempt to control the transnational labor market in which its members were forced to compete with foreign workers both with and without documents. The union, at times with the help of the broader labor movement, tried to address the international movement of agricultural workers by cooperating with unions in Mexico. However, Mexican unions’ quasi-dependent relationship with the state and their vested interest in reducing their own members’ labor competition by sending unemployed braceros north to the United States prevented any meaningful cooperation beyond boilerplate statements and showpiece committees.

Having exhausted its other options by the mid-1950s, the National Agricultural Workers Union had come to the realization that the Bracero Program was the single most important barrier to farmworker organizing. Chapter 5, “Turning Points, 1955-1959: The AFL-CIO Merger and Bracero Program Reform, 1955-1959” explores the NAWU’s last-ditch effort to martial its limited resources in an all-out publicity assault on the Bracero Program while it pushed and prodded the newly merged AFL-CIO to marshal the labor movement’s resources for a high-profile organizing drive among California farmworkers. The financial clout of a merged labor movement held the promise of organizing previously unorganized workers, and NAWU leaders felt certain they could draw on those in the AFL-CIO who sought to expand labor’s ranks for their hoped-for campaign. However, their repeated appeals for resources to wage a campaign in California were met with silence, deferrals, and hedged bets by the nation’s labor movement.

Given the lackluster support and the union’s tenuous position in the field, the NAWU turned to publicity efforts to expose the hazards of the Bracero Program for domestic
farmworkers. This effort met with success as a growing coalition of reformers from the liberal and Catholic worlds coalesced around calls to improve farmworkers’ lives by curtailing growers’ bracero excesses and demanding the program’s reform and termination. This reform coalition found an ally in Eisenhower’s Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, who used the growing demands for change as cover for enforcement campaigns and measures that increased the department’s authority over the grower-dominated local and state agencies that ran the program. By 1959, a reform synergy had emerged among the NAWU, bracero reformers, and the department, but the AFL-CIO still remained on the sidelines. That changed when the reform coalition consolidated in the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, which put the AFL-CIO on the spot and forced it to announce the labor movement’s support for a large organizing campaign in California under the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. That move in turn accelerated the demise of the Bracero Program.

Chapter 6, “The Rise of AWOC, the Fall of NAWU, and the End of the Bracero Program, 1959-1964” traces the development of the AWOC campaign and the final years of the Bracero Program. Ultimately, AWOC failed to make much organizational headway because of its leaders’ inexperience, while a power struggle at the highest levels of the AFL-CIO between George Meany and Walter Reuther resulted in the NAWU’s destruction. Despite the death of the NAWU and the organizing failures of AWOC, however, the reform coalition that had formed in opposition to the Bracero Program continued to demand changes to the program and its outright termination, and the synergy between reformers and the Department of Labor strengthened. At every turn, growers resisted reformers’ efforts to rein in the program and improve farmworker conditions, but the growing coalition of labor, liberals, and Catholic and Mexican American activists had elevated the farmworker question and the Bracero Program’s role in defining the
parameters of that question to a place in the national discussion. With the arrival of the Kennedy Administration, termination of the program became a matter of time as the Department of Labor, led first by Secretary Arthur Goldberg and then his successor W. Willard Wirtz, built on Secretary Mitchell’s reforms. Eventually, the historic Eighty-eighth United States Congress voted in 1963 to end the Bracero Program after several contentious renewal battles that revealed both the reformers’ strength and the congressional farm bloc’s declining interest in continuing a program growers now regarded as over-regulated, counterproductive, and detrimental to their public image. With the fall of the Bracero Program, one of the most significant stumbling blocks to farmworker organization had been removed.

The epilogue, “The Stepchildren of Labor,” evaluates the efforts of the STFU/NFLU/NAWU in opposing the program and examines organized labor’s relationship to farmworkers. It also examines the challenges inherent in organizing farmworkers and situates the Bracero Program in the broader history of twentieth-century agricultural labor. In the face of a grower-controlled guestworker program that encouraged both documented and undocumented workers to compete with American farmworkers, the prospects for organizing postwar agricultural labor were dim indeed. The Bracero Program held that organizing at bay between World War II and 1964, but the program’s excesses and abuses ultimately helped prepare the way for the unprecedented unionization of the United Farm Workers by moving the question of farmworker justice to center stage and creating a reform network dedicated toward supporting the cause. The STFU/NFLU/NAWU compiled the data, mobilized the allies, and kept the embers of farmworkers unionism burning during the mid-twentieth century; the future belonged to new movements.
Yet, even later, post-Bracero Program efforts found that building durable farmworker labor organizations was no easy task, and many of the same structural barriers that bedeviled the union’s efforts in the 1940s and 1950s remained in place after the Bracero Program was gone. Although the United Farm Workers rose to lead a farmworker movement, growers rapidly returned to employing undocumented workers who continued to drive down wages in the fields, harvest mechanization eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs, and growers found ways to reinvent the Bracero Program under other guestworker guises. In many ways, the problems facing farmworkers have changed little since the creation of the Bracero Program in 1942.
Chapter 1: The Rise of Farmworker Unionism and Its Wartime Decline: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union, 1934-1947

The train pulled into the station at Eloy, Arizona on February 8, 1943 and unloaded its 338-person cargo. This human mass was arriving from Stafford, Arizona, where roughly 750 men, women, and children from the mid-South had recently finished a five-week stint picking cotton. They were working under contracts arranged through the Farm Security Administration to meet critical wartime labor shortages in agriculture. Many of the families were already upset because they had not found “what our contracts called for” in Stafford. What awaited them when they disembarked in Eloy transformed their malaise into outright indignation.33

When the Arkansans, Missourians, and Tennesseans got off the train, they immediately encountered “bitter cold” and “a fine mist of rain falling.” One of them—B.V. Zachary—sent his wife and three youngest children into a store to spare them from the cold and damp, but they found the local townspeople to be just as inhospitable as the weather. “The merchant asked them to get out on the streets,” Zachary recounted in a letter. “He only wanted customers inside.”34

The town’s cold shoulder might have been bearable, but the first truckload of men to lay eyes upon Jack Cobb’s cotton farm—the only farm under contract for government pickers—balked at what they saw and quickly returned to town to tell the others. Cobb only had work for 200 of the 338 people.35 Although the pickers’ contracts called for “decent living conditions,” Cobb provided only canvas “tents and no floor and standing in 2 inches of mud and water.”36

Even with these substandard housing conditions, “he couldn’t take care of any more than he had

34 Ibid.
35 Zachary to Mitchell, February 19, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
36 Ibid.
37 Zachary to Mitchell, February 10, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
asked for.” To make matters worse, if any pickers sought a better deal on another farm, they and their families would lose their government-guaranteed return fare back East.

For a day and a half, the families pondered their situation and tried to get by. Zachary and many others “found refuge in a nearby government camp” for $1.25 per week. Zachary thought the “living costs very high.” Others slept in box cars on the ground….Some didn’t sleep at all” and just stood around at the train station. By the time the rain stopped, five people had died. Eventually, most of the pickers skipped out on their contracts and went to work for other farmers, despite local Farm Security Administration officials’ warnings that they would lose their transportation. Others simply returned home on their own dime.

Zachary summarized the opinion of most of the sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and smallholders who traveled halfway across the United States to pick cotton for the war. They felt that what they had suffered was “just another crooked deal” perpetrated by the big growers who “don’t even realize we have a war going on.” He had “seen some hard times” and “been in some tough spots during my life time; but this is the first time to be dumped off in the streets with my wife and seven children (and three hundred other people) like a bunch of hogs.”

The conditions Zachary described applied to those farmworkers from the South fortunate enough to find work outside their home counties during World War II, a task made more difficult after 1943 by growers’ control over wartime labor importation programs and the local movement of labor. Aside from a very small window in 1942-1943, most spent the war as they had spent the

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38 Zachary to Mitchell, February 19, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
40 Zachary to Mitchell, February 19, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
41 Zachary to Mitchell, February 10, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
42 Zachary to Mitchell, February 19, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
Great Depression. They were captive and underemployed labor on cotton plantations owned by the big landlords of their states.

The wartime experiences of many Southern farmworkers took place in the broader context of the decline of sharecropping and the rise of farmworker migrancy. Many of the farmworkers who confronted the Bracero Program—part of the broader Emergency Farm Labor Program—in 1942 had been sharecroppers during the 1930s. In its effort to prop up prices, the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration displaced many of these sharecroppers and turned them into wage laborers. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) arose in the mid-South to fight this displacement, but a brief marriage in 1939 with the CIO’s United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America nearly destroyed the union when UCAPAWA leaders tried to marginalize STFU control over its affairs and dues. Nevertheless, the STFU established a racially progressive organizing strategy and critical fundraising abilities that would serve it well in future fights against the Bracero Program.

One of those fights came quickly with World War II. In the face of wartime manpower mobilization efforts, growers feared both labor scarcity and the potential for farmworker militancy after the unrest of the Depression era. They responded by securing a labor importation program that guaranteed them tractable foreign workers and the ability to threaten their existing employees. The STFU tried to cope with the new wartime reality by offering to supply workers for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which initially administered farm labor supply programs such as the Bracero Program. The union effectively turned its members into braceros, helping to organize labor migration by underemployed tenant farmers and sharecroppers to labor scarce regions of the Southwest, but B.V. Zachary’s experience showed the limitations of this approach. By 1943, however, Southern cotton growers demanded an end to this domestic labor
migration. Public Law 45 neutered the FSA and effectively froze farm laborers in their home counties for the war’s duration while expanding growers’ control over the operation of the foreign worker programs. The union attempted to work within and around this legislation, but without strong governmental allies and with national organized labor’s opposition limited thanks to the no-strike pledge, it found its efforts thwarted at almost every turn. In this climate, the union’s victories came only on issues peripheral to labor supply programs.

**The Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union**

In its effort to raise prices, the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration broke the cotton South’s land tenure system by retiring millions of acres from cultivation. Local implementation of the cotton program and weak safeguards for tenants and sharecroppers allowed landlords to benefit by retiring tenants’ acreages without reducing their own production. Historian David Conrad noted that “the 1933 cotton contract did not even mention tenants,” partly because the men who ran the Cotton Section believed landlords would treat them paternalistically. When reports of evictions reached Washington, the AAA changed the 1934 contract to include language suggesting landlords should maintain the same number of tenants and divide parity and rental payments according to a tenant’s stake in the land. Such weak language and the friendly relations between USDA Extension Service agents and landlords facilitated continued evictions.

The eviction trend struck the newer agricultural regions of the mid-South particularly hard. In eastern Arkansas, former timber barons-turned-absentee landlords had established an

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44 For an overview of cropper and tenant displacement, see Daniel, 94-106; Fite, 139-47; Foley, 163-82; Schulman 15-23; and Volanto, 125-41.
46 Conrad 59-60; 76. Conrad notes that under these rules, “the best a sharecropper could hope for was half of the parity payment,” while the landlord received all of the rental payment. Tenant farmers fared but slightly better.
47 Grubbs, 23.
intensive tenant regime where non-owners operated 80% of all farms. In 1935 one observer considered sharecropper conditions there “really tragic. I have never seen living conditions on lower standards, even in backward sections of Europe.” It was in this region that the powder keg of tenant and sharecropper discontent exploded into a new labor and protest movement.

The spark that ignited the sharecropper revolt came in 1934 when Hiram Norcross began evicting families from his 4500-acre Fairview Farms near Tyronza, Arkansas for overdrawing their credit at the plantation commissary. Responding to Norcross’s evictions, eleven white and seven black sharecroppers met at the plantation’s Sunnyside Schoolhouse in July to formulate a response. The men invited two local Socialist Party members who had always treated them fairly—local gas station owner Henry Clay East, and Tyronza’s dry cleaner and local supporter of poor people’s causes, Harry Leland (H.L. or “Mitch”) Mitchell.

H.L. Mitchell would soon become the driving force behind the sharecroppers’ movement. Born in 1906, Mitchell was something of an exception in the Jim Crow South. At age eleven, he was disgusted by the spectacle of a public lynching in Tennessee. After the calamitous 1919 cotton price collapse, the tenant-farming Mitchells relocated from Mississippi to Moscow, Tennessee. Young Harry became a socialist in Moscow after hearing a stump speech during the 1920 campaign. He soon subscribed to the Kansas socialist E. Haldeman-Julius’s *Little Blue Books*, short condensations of philosophy, science, and political economy. These supplemented his education, which had been interrupted frequently by cotton planting, chopping, and harvesting. At age nineteen, Mitchell married schoolteacher Dell Carmack. Matrimony was a strange choice for Mitchell, given his reputation as a ladies’ man. In fact, he honored the tradition of not seeing his bride before the wedding by breaking the news of his impending

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48 This number was 33% higher than the statewide average. Conrad, 83-5; Grubbs, 7-8.
marriage to his other girlfriend. Mitchell considered sharecropping with his parents in Tyronza after the wedding, but appalled by conditions there, he decided to enter the dry cleaning and laundry business instead.50

During the early 1930s, Mitchell and East organized for the Socialist Party in Arkansas, where they created Party locals in some of the towns of the northeast. As AAA policies started to displace sharecroppers, Norman Thomas visited the area to investigate conditions and speak to farmers. While dining with the two men at East’s house, Thomas suggested they form a sharecroppers’ labor union. When East and Mitchell arrived at the tenants’ meeting at Sunnyside Schoolhouse, they recommended this course of action to the group, which agreed unanimously. Mitchell was soon elected Executive Secretary.51

*The Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Action*

The foundation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was a remarkable development in the Depression-era mid-South. In the midst of the plantation’s Jim Crow social order, the STFU organized across racial lines, and its leadership included white and black officers. Many locals were biracial, and those that were segregated blurred the line by attending each other’s meetings as “visitors.” The STFU even held open-air mixed meetings despite the presence of armed riding bosses and planters. By the end of 1934, the union had over a thousand members.52

The rapid success derived from the STFU’s careful attention to the bounds of the sharecroppers’ and tenants’ world. Monthly dues were ten cents, which could be paid for the entire year after the harvest when members were most likely to have cash. Few were expelled for

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50 Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 1, 10-11, 15, 22-3.
52 Auerbach, 130; Conrad, 91-3; Grubbs, 64-7.
failure to pay.\textsuperscript{53} A more potent organizing aid came through the union’s reliance upon the cotton farmers’ religious culture. Meetings featured hymns familiar to members. “Give Me That Old Time Religion” became “It’s a Wonderful Union,” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” was always a standard.\textsuperscript{54} The union also utilized the services of black and white preachers to combine the social and moral uplift of the union flock.\textsuperscript{55} Rev. Howard Kester even wrote a “Ceremony of the Land” for the STFU in which the leader’s call for liberation from “being farmers without land and homes and the rights of free men” was answered by the collective response, “Land to the landless.”\textsuperscript{56}

Buoyed by this missionary zeal, the union pursued its goals through two major strategies. The first of these targeted the federal government’s agricultural policies that were driving sharecropper displacement. In January 1935, Mitchell and a carload of organizers drove to Washington and won a meeting with Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace. Wallace proved sympathetic and appointed Mary Connor Myers to investigate the charges of sharecropper displacement.\textsuperscript{57} The following year proved even more productive. The STFU’s point man in Washington—AAA staffer, philanthropist, and railroad heir Gardner “Pat” Jackson—arranged a meeting between Howard Kester and Senator Robert LaFollette, Jr. Kester’s account of civil rights violations in Arkansas contributed to the formation of the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee, which investigated employer intimidation of workers seeking to unionize between 1936 and 1941.\textsuperscript{58} At the White House, STFU officers met with Eleanor Roosevelt to discuss the plight of landless farmers facing eviction. The first lady promised to “relay her concern to her

\textsuperscript{53} Grubbs, 168.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{55} Conrad, 91-2; Grubbs, 65. White preachers involved in the union included Ward Rodgers, Howard Kester, and Claude Williams. The black ministers A.B. Brookins and E.B. McKinney were also heavily involved in union organizing.
\textsuperscript{56} Ceremony of the Land, n.d. 1942, STFU Papers, Reel 20.
\textsuperscript{57} Conrad, 103; Grubbs, 57; Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 57.
\textsuperscript{58} Conrad, 174-5; Grubbs, 97.
husband.” After his reelection, President Roosevelt followed through by appointing the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy, which included an STFU representative. The Committee’s minority report helped lead to the creation of the Farm Security Administration, which established some collective farms along the lines championed by the union.

Despite successes, however, USDA power struggles and the New Deal coalition’s political realities limited the union’s results. After Secretary Wallace’s warm reception of the STFU representatives, Cotton Section head Cully Cobb dismissed them as a bunch of “Reds.” Although Myers’ investigation substantiated many of the union’s claims, Wallace suppressed her report after he purged liberals from the AAA in 1935. Similarly, the importance of Arkansas Senator and Senate Majority Leader Joe Robinson to FDR’s agenda meant that LaFollette’s Civil Liberties Committee bypassed the state entirely. During the 1936 election, Roosevelt gave a speech in Arkansas supporting Robinson while his assistant skipped a scheduled meeting with the STFU. Finally, the union’s legislative proposals for collective farms were preempted by calls for home ownership, and Southern Democrats refused to extend collective bargaining rights to agricultural workers.

Perhaps because the STFU’s leaders realized the limits of lobbying, they turned to direct action to improve their members’ lot. In 1935, the union called a strike over reductions in that year’s cotton-picking rate in the region around Memphis, and it claimed success for raising the general rate from 40¢ to 75¢ per hundred pounds (cwt.). The strike was initially publicized in the Arkansas counties near Memphis, but Mitchell received reports of STFU-inspired strikes from Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas. After the strike, he claimed STFU membership of

59 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 100.
60 Ibid., 101; Grubbs, 141-42.
61 Conrad, 103-4.
62 Ibid., 158, 162; Grubbs, 49-52, 128-9, 142-3; Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 98-100.
some 25,000 people spread across Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Texas. In May of 1936, the union tried to replicate its success by demonstrating for cotton-chopping wage increases. This time planters were ready. Although roving picket lines succeeded in building union membership, planters and local authorities responded with violence, evictions, and the beating of Rev. Howard Kester and a young female companion. The beating was a national sensation and brought contributions from labor and liberal groups. However, despite the publicity and growth to 31,000 claimed members, the strike broke down as landlords refused to raise wages. The most lasting legacy of the 1936 strike was the inaugural “National Sharecroppers Week,” held annually thereafter in New York City to raise funds among the liberal, civil rights, and religious communities for the cash-strapped STFU.

*The CIO Debacle*

After the strike, the STFU’s leaders determined that it could improve its chances of success by joining what they regarded as the future of the labor movement—the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Gardner Jackson met with John L. Lewis to discuss affiliation, but Lewis had already approved Donald Henderson’s United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) to organize in California, and he was reluctant to issue another agricultural charter. With no other alternative, the STFU affiliated with UCAPAWA as a semi-autonomous department in 1937.

The marriage proved disastrous. Henderson was a Communist Party ideologue who adhered to the party’s strict class distinction between agricultural workers and tenant farmers.

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63 It is difficult to determine strike participation numbers. Scholars have generally accepted the union’s own accounts as trustworthy; however, Mitchell never estimated strike participation for the union’s early struggles. Instead, he provided membership numbers after the 1935 strike of 25,000, which he based on four “household” members per male individual who joined. Mitchell admitted that exact membership numbers were impossible to enumerate, since few members paid dues and many considered themselves members though they never officially joined. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 81-3; 86.
64 Ibid., 86-93, 136; Auerbach, 127-28; Auerbach, 164-67; Grubbs, 162-66.
Mitchell, who grew up crossing that boundary regularly, knew that Southern tenants were frequently wage workers in addition to managing their own acreages. Furthermore, relations between Communists and Socialists had never been warm ever since the Communists emerged from the Socialist Labor Party’s left wing in 1919. Finally, Mitchell’s personal experiences with Communists left him distrustful of all comrades. Mitchell had briefly considered coordinating STFU efforts with the Alabama Share Croppers Union, a Communist union of sharecroppers a few years older than the STFU. However, Mitchell considered Share Croppers Union leader Tom Burke a dramatically self-styled revolutionary completely in hock to the Communist Party.

Closer to home, Commonwealth College, founded by radicals in Mena, Arkansas in 1923 to train leaders for socioeconomic uplift in the South, offered a chance for the STFU to gain allies. But when Mitchell stopped by one evening in early 1936 to speak with a union organizer living on campus, the organizer, who had been recruited by the Communist Party, attempted to assassinate him.66

Ideology and past experiences aside, the real rub came from disputes over dues payments and union governance. At 50¢/month, Henderson eyed the STFU’s 35,000 members as financing for his California campaign, despite the fact that tenant farmers and sharecroppers saw cash only at the harvest “settling time”—if at all.67 Additionally, UCAPAWA headquarters sent packets of ledgers, receipt books, and instructions to STFU local secretaries, who according to Mitchell, “could just barely read and write.”68 In April, 1938, Mitchell protested first to UCAPAWA’s Executive Board and then to the CIO that Henderson was bypassing the STFU Memphis office. The two sides worked out a compromise, but the recriminations began again when STFU

67 Dyson, 246; Grubbs, 168.
68 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 168.
president J.R. Butler discovered papers outlining a Communist Party takeover of the STFU in the speaker-organizer Rev. Claude Williams’s jacket.\textsuperscript{69}

The joint UCAPAWA-STFU venture met its end between December 1938 and March 1939. At the December UCAPAWA convention, Henderson reduced STFU Executive Board representation from four to one—Henderson loyalist O.H. Whitfield. In January, Whitfield organized a roadside encampment of evicted sharecroppers in Missouri’s Bootheel, ordering Mitchell and STFU president Butler to stay out of the area. The demonstration failed, and the evicted families were resettled in an FSA camp only through the efforts of the STFU and local charitable groups. Henderson sparked an STFU rebellion in Arkansas in February, and in March he suspended the union’s officers and announced reorganization. Mitchell and Butler called a special convention, held on March 19, which voted for withdrawal from UCAPAWA.\textsuperscript{70}

In the end, the UCAPAWA debacle cost the STFU dearly. Mitchell noted that by the end of 1939, “there were only 40 local unions left functioning in the several states,” a mere fraction of the union’s height of 200.\textsuperscript{71} The members who remained were confused and disillusioned by the experience. Even Mitchell himself needed a break. In late 1940 and 1941, he worked for both the National Youth Administration and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union before returning to the STFU. By then, membership had dwindled to fewer than 1,000.\textsuperscript{72}

Still, on the eve of World War II and the Bracero Program, the STFU had set important precedents. Born of the disruptions caused by growers’ abuse of a federal program, Mitchell and the union knew the importance of organizing both on the ground and lobbying federal officials to combat growers’ control of the farm labor market, a lesson that would serve the union well in

\textsuperscript{69} Dyson, 248.
\textsuperscript{71} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 182.
\textsuperscript{72} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 186; Grubbs, 187-88.
coming years as growers strengthened their grip on that market. Second, the STFU’s willingness to organize across racial lines would serve it well in the coming years. Third, Mitchell’s fight with Donald Henderson made him into a firm anti-Communist, and he would be rewarded for this later by an affiliation with the AFL, while Henderson found himself expelled from the CIO in 1950.

Most importantly, the STFU learned how to fundraise and mobilize allies on behalf of farmworkers. National Sharecroppers Week became the National Sharecroppers Fund in 1943, providing year-round funding and raising awareness of the plight of the nation’s most exploited workers. Pat Jackson’s help in providing Mitchell with contacts at the ACLU, League for Industrial Democracy, and NAACP would prove essential to the union’s success in the future. And the union’s contacts among religious organizations helped publicize the displaced farmworkers’ conditions. All of these sources would later help fund and support a small and struggling union of the nation’s poorest people in the decades-long fight against the Bracero Program. 73

The Wartime Bracero Program and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union

The STFU’s leaders viewed U.S. entry into World War II as an opportunity. Union officials hoped to demonstrate loyalty by assisting with labor mobilization in exchange for the preservation or improvement of labor standards. However, agricultural workers enjoyed none of the benefits won by industrial workers during the 1930s. Those workers could count on the safeguards of the National Labor Relations Act or the National War Labor Board and the government’s acknowledgment of labor’s political clout. By contrast, the nation’s farmworkers faced the wartime mobilization effort unprotected by legislation and at the mercy of powerful growers bent on beating back the threat farmworker militancy had posed during the Depression, 73

Grubbs, 77-8; Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 146.
as well as securing the labor superabundance they had come to enjoy since World War I.\textsuperscript{74} As one Florida grower advocate put it, importing foreign workers “would force idle domestic labor to work also.”\textsuperscript{75}

When confronted with the Bracero Program during the war, the STFU sought to work with the government to improve its members’ lives. The union reacted to the program by trying to extend guarantees for Mexican workers to domestic farm laborers. It partially succeeded by acting as a labor contractor for the FSA, which administered the program during 1942. However, the union’s fortunes changed for the worse when the nation’s largest growers pushed Congress to transfer authority over wartime farm labor programs from the FSA to grower-friendly local officials. With farm labor effectively “frozen” in place after 1943, the STFU sought to get its members out of the South through a union labor exchange program in New Jersey and a homesteading plan in New Mexico. While these were partially successful, demobilization proved thornier. Although it helped save the residents of the FSA’s Delmo Labor Homes from eviction, it struggled to fight wage ceilings in cotton. Ultimately, the STFU emerged from World War II battered and keenly aware of its need to change for the future if it hoped to organize an increasingly migratory labor force after the war.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{The Wartime Bracero Program, 1942-1947}

As World War II began, large growers argued that wartime mobilization would deplete their labor market and threaten the nation’s supply of food and fiber, even though the war removed only 20% of workers from the region hit hardest by farmworker migration, the rural

\textsuperscript{74}Hahmovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 23.
\textsuperscript{75}Al French, as quoted in Hahmovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 33.
\textsuperscript{76}James N. Gregory, \textit{The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Transformed America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) is an excellent study of the out-migration of Southerners to other agricultural regions where they often became migratory laborers.
South.\textsuperscript{77} As early as 1941 Arizona and south Texas farmers requested the relaxation of immigration statutes to facilitate entry of Mexican farmworkers, and the powerful American Farm Bureau Federation lobbied for a national program to import workers.\textsuperscript{78} These pleas were ignored until after the attack on Pearl Harbor. By April 1942, the Bureau of Immigration had formed the Special Committee on Importation of Mexican Labor, an interagency committee composed of top officials from the Departments of Justice, Labor, State, Agriculture, and the War Manpower Commission to study the possibility of a Mexican contract labor program. The committee issued its recommendations the following month, laying the groundwork for the wartime Bracero Program.\textsuperscript{79}

After these preliminary explorations, Secretary of Agriculture Claude C. Wickard soon asked Attorney General Biddle to set aside the literacy test, head tax, and contract labor provisions of the 1917 Immigration Act. He also requested that Secretary of State Cordell Hull approach Mexico about the program.\textsuperscript{80} U.S. Ambassador George C. Messersmith met with Mexican Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla on June 6, 1942 to discuss terms, a process that culminated in the exchange of diplomatic notes on August 4 formalizing the Bracero Program.

Mexican officials bargained hard for worker guarantees, feeling confident in their position because of Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy and their awareness of U.S. labor needs. They determined to prevent discrimination against Mexican nationals in the U.S., which had most recently been demonstrated in the mass deportations of the Depression era.\textsuperscript{81} The most important guarantee named the U.S. government as the employer. As a result, the federal government had to provide round-trip transportation, housing, and subsistence to braceros en

\textsuperscript{77} Craig, 39; Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 23.
\textsuperscript{78} Kiser, 97-8.
\textsuperscript{79} Calavita, 19; Kiser, 103-04.
\textsuperscript{80} Kiser, 118.
\textsuperscript{81} Craig, 41-5; Kiser, 107-08; Garcia y Griego, 101-04.
route to the border. Growers also had to pay braceros prevailing wages (never less than $0.30 per hour) and $3 per day subsistence wages when braceros were unemployed for 25% or more of their contract. Braceros also secured the right to elect a representative to discuss complaints with growers. Finally, Mexico blacklisted all Texas farms because of past consular complaints of discrimination.  

Although the Bracero Program began operation under an executive agreement (EAS 278), Congress found ample reason to intervene. In October 1942, the Senate had responded to growers’ complaints about the program’s legal safeguards for workers by forming a special investigatory committee 1942. The committee heard testimony from scores of well-organized farmer representatives at hearings in Phoenix and Sacramento, but it invited only three individuals opposed to the program and omitted most of their testimony from the published record.

Growers blasted the Bracero Program’s administration by the hated FSA before the committee. From the moment of its inception in the Department of Agriculture in 1937, growers denounced the FSA as the Roosevelt administration’s attempt to transform rural labor relations. Their critique was accurate, since individuals who viewed agricultural labor relations as hopelessly backward and unjust ran the FSA. The FSA helped poor farmers by providing low-interest loans and establishing health clinics, educational facilities, and purchasing and marketing cooperatives. The FSA also operated some large collective farms and housed migrant workers in government-run camps. Growers considered the agency’s aims downright socialistic, and their animosity extended to the FSA’s role in the Bracero Program. The FSA only certified bracero

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82 Calavita, 21; Kiser, 110.
83 These individuals were concerned citizens opposed to the importation of foreign labor, and committee members repeatedly questioned their knowledge of agricultural conditions. No labor representatives appeared before the committee. Kiser, 113-14.
84 Hahamovitch, The Fruits of Their Labor, 9-11.
requests until it had ensured it could not provide domestic workers; as a result, only 4,203 braceros entered in 1942.\(^8\) Moreover, in signing labor contracts with the FSA, growers feared the program’s worker protections would be used as a wedge to force better treatment for domestic farmworkers nationwide.\(^8\)

Congress took up appropriations for the Bracero Program in April 1943, and the resulting Public Law 45, which governed labor supply programs, underscored the power of the Congressional farm bloc and its Southern Democratic wing. The law transferred administration of wartime labor programs away from the FSA and to the Department of Agriculture’s War Food Administration, which was dominated by Southern planter interests.\(^8\) In the House, Illinois Congressman Everett Dirksen introduced a bill written almost entirely by officials of the conservative American Farm Bureau Federation and California’s Associated Farmers.\(^8\) During debate, Congressmen lambasted the FSA, with Texan Martin Dies alleging the agency was staffed with “socialistic and crack-pot bureaucrats.”\(^8\) The debate centered on the same theme in the Senate, where the bill ultimately passed by a 2-1 margin. George Kiser has analyzed the Senate vote, finding strong support among rural areas and particularly strong support in the South and Southwest. The vote also indicated the strength of farm interests in the New Deal coalition. Among the Democratic Senators who voted on the measure, 98% voted in favor.\(^9\) Growers were pleased with the results in Public Law 45. The FSA was out of the picture, replaced by a more grower-friendly bureaucracy, and Texas growers secured a provision for unilateral recruitment at the border.\(^1\)

\(^{8}\) Calavita, 218, Appendix B: Mexican Foreign Workers Admitted Under the Bracero Program, 1942-1964.
\(^{8\text{a}}\) For more on grower antipathy toward the FSA, see Jungmeyer, 70-73; and Kiser, 120-22.
\(^{8\text{b}}\) Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 47.
\(^{8\text{c}}\) Ibid., 46; Kiser, 122.
\(^{8\text{d}}\) Kiser, 123.
\(^{9}\) Ibid., 126.
\(^{9\text{a}}\) Craig, 47; Majka and Majka, 142; Garcia y Griego, 117.
The major provisions of Public Law 45 governed the Bracero Program until 1948 along grower-dictated lines, ensuring that none of the benefits granted to foreign workers would be extended to American farmworkers, not even access to the jobs those workers were supposed to fill.\textsuperscript{92} The law’s Pace Amendment prohibited the use of program funds to transport domestic workers out of their home counties unless the local Department of Agriculture Extension Service agent gave his prior written consent. The amendment basically froze domestic labor in place for the war’s duration, especially in the cotton South where plantation owners sought to keep chronically underemployed tenants and sharecroppers near the fields. Growers also received new power over wage rates, since Public Law 45 replaced the USDA’s State Wage Boards with county-level ones where local landlords and farmers could exercise more influence, effectively approving their own bracero requests and determining prevailing wages to their satisfaction.\textsuperscript{93} The improved conditions for farm employers yielded increased bracero certifications. The number of braceros jumped to 52,098 in 1943 and peaked at 62,170 in 1944, declining to just over 49,000 in 1945.\textsuperscript{94}

Only Texas growers had reason to gripe about the program, since Mexico continued to blacklist the state over discrimination concerns, despite Texas officials’ efforts to address them. On May 11, 1943, the INS attempted to begin unilateral recruitment at El Paso under Public Law 45, but Mexico refused to issue visas and threatened to abrogate the entire international agreement. Three days later the INS discontinued its efforts in the face of State Department opposition, and the matter was dropped.\textsuperscript{95} In Austin, Texas Governor Coke Stevenson assumed the mantle of leadership for his state’s growers by establishing the Texas Good Neighbor

\textsuperscript{92} Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 46.
\textsuperscript{93} The amendment was named for Georgia Representative Stephen Pace. Jungmeyer, 85; 89-90.
\textsuperscript{94} These figures only include the number of braceros admitted in that fiscal year. Calavita, 218, Appendix B.
Commission to improve relations. In July 1943, Stevenson and Mexican Foreign Minister Padilla exchanged letters outlining the steps Texas had taken to combat discrimination and offering braceros in return. Nevertheless, Mexico continued its Texas ban until 1947.96

Union Members as Braceros

On January 8, 1942, exactly one month after the U.S. declared war on Japan, the STFU convention signaled that it supported the government’s war effort. The union’s first resolution pledged the “whole hearted cooperation of every member…to the President of the United States in our common effort to win the war.” The STFU also committed itself to “cooperate with the agricultural program and help maintain production quotas.”97 At the same time, though, Mitchell stressed the importance “that wages not be lowered by bringing” new workers into the fields.98

Mitchell’s fears were realized when American and Mexican diplomats agreed to the Bracero Program in August 1942.99 He wrote to national labor leaders seeking an explanation for the program’s creation at a time when STFU members wanted more work. The United Auto Workers’ Walter Reuther, who served on the War Manpower Commission during the war, replied that braceros “were to be resorted to only in case domestic labor was not available,” and he promised to bring up Mitchell’s underemployed members with the commission.100 Frank Fenton, the AFL’s Director of Organization, was more honest: “I attempted to get provisions to

96 Jungmeyer, 89-91.
97 STFU, 8th Annual Convention, Resolution No. 1, January 8, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 20.
98 STFU, Report of Secretary H.L. Mitchell to the 8th Annual Convention, January 7-10, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 20.
move these men from the Southern States,” he wrote, but “pressure was the type that if we did not agree, we were unpatriotic.”

Knowing they had little hope of turning back the program, STFU officials instead focused on securing the same wage benefits guaranteed to braceros through the hard work of Mexican negotiators. In early September, the union’s Cotton Picking Conference demanded $2.00 cwt, a rate union leaders regarded as equivalent to the 30¢ hourly wage guaranteed to braceros. The demand represented substantial increases over the 1941 rates reported by the delegates, which varied from 40¢ in Mississippi to $1.50 in Missouri. The union circulated handbills instructing cotton pickers to stay home unless they received $2.00 cwt. Members who followed the advice were arrested on vagrancy charges and forced back to the fields.

Having raised the cry, Mitchell traveled to Washington in hopes of winning a favorable administrative ruling on the 30¢ minimum or the vagrancy charges. Officials of the Department of Labor, Conciliation Service, War Manpower Commission, U.S. Employment Service, and the FSA expressed their sympathy but did nothing. All of them agreed, Mitchell reported, “that the plight of the cotton-pickers was not within their jurisdiction.” After this rebuff, the union channeled rank-and-file discontent. A Charleston, Missouri local petitioned President Roosevelt for the extension of “the conditions of employment guaranteed to Mexican workers,” including

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101 Frank Fenton to Mitchell, October 5, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
103 The demand for $2.00 per hundred would have earned an average picker $4.00 per day. Workdays during the picking season lasted from dawn to dusk, known as “can-to-can’t” among pickers because they worked from the time one can see in the morning to the time one cannot in the evening. STFU, Flier, September, n.d., 1942, STFU Papers reel 21.
104 Mitchell, Memorandum: A Plan to Utilize Agricultural Labor of the South,” October 6, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
housing standards, written contracts, and guaranteed employment.106 However, with agricultural workers excluded from national labor legislation and politically marginalized by migration and Jim Crow, nationalizing Bracero Program standards was a non-starter. Since the STFU could not extend bracero guarantees to all agricultural workers, it decided to do the next best thing: turn its own members into domestic braceros.

Along with many other New Deal welfare agencies, the FSA was threatened with budgetary elimination as the government geared up for manpower mobilization. Cindy Hahamovitch has noted that “growers’ fears of farm labor scarcity presented the FSA with an opportunity to save itself” by billing its Migratory Camp Program as a means to redistribute surplus agricultural labor.107 Under its labor supply program, the FSA transported workers to areas identified by the U.S. Employment Service as facing labor shortages, feeding and housing them along the way.108 The FSA was also responsible for operating the Bracero Program (at first), and it extended the program’s guarantees to workers in the domestic program, a decision that would cost it its authority over the program the following year.109 An FSA official who attended the Cotton Picking Conference touted the agency’s good intentions when he told delegates it was “trying to use the Mexican agreement as a stepping stone” to higher wages.110

Mitchell seized upon the FSA program as a way to both improve the lot of sharecroppers and rebuild the STFU membership. With braceros already working in California and Arizona, he suggested to union officers that they work out “a deal to send 1,000 or more laborers” and

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106 Charleston, Missouri Local, Petition to the President of the United States, October 26, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
107 The FSA’s strategy of billing itself as a labor supply tool began before the war, but as growers increasingly targeted the agency, the labor supply mission became an increasingly important mandate for administrators who used it to defend their bureaucratic priorities.
108 Hahamovitch, The Fruits of Their Labor, 166; Rasmussen, 27-8.
109 Hahamovitch, 168.
110 Mitchell to Eileen Fry, September 15, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 21.
“collect a year’s dues before anyone is placed.”111 Such a plan was attractive because the crops had not yet matured in the Southwest, whereas the picking season was “about half over” in the mid-South.112 With old and new members transferred elsewhere, those who stayed would enjoy an improved bargaining position for what little work remained. Sensing the opportunity, the STFU quickly moved to offer its services to suddenly responsive government officials. Mitchell contacted Fowler V. Harper, the War Manpower Commission’s Deputy Chairman, who forwarded his plan to the Employment Service.113 By mid-October, Mitchell promised Fowler “10,000 such workers for employment in areas where they are most needed,” a figure he believed the STFU could recruit in two weeks.114 By late November, Employment Service Director John Corson thanked Mitchell for “the splendid cooperation you have given.”115

Federal mobilization officials offered their praise because agricultural workers in areas of STFU influence responded enthusiastically to the union’s offer. The terms, negotiated by Mitchell and War Manpower Commission officials, probably seemed too good to be true to those who received the union’s form letter in late October. Workers would sign FSA contracts to work in Arizona long-staple cotton (used in military balloons and parachutes) at $4.00 per hundred pounds of cotton. The jobs would last between 60 and 90 days, and the government would provide round-trip railroad transportation for each picker’s entire family.116 Responses poured in from members, their friends, and extended family. Loyd Putnam, a middle aged Missourian,

112 Mitchell Memorandum: A Plan to Utilize Agricultural Labor of the South,” October 6, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
113 Fowler V. Harper to Mitchell, telegram, October 2, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
114 Mitchell to Fowler V. Harper, October 15, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
116 Mitchell to Roy Raley, F.R. Betton, Bill Johnson and J.F. Hynds, October 21, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22; STFU, form letter to members, October 24, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
wrote, “I am ready to go any time…so please rite [sic] me full details at once and tell me where to report for my ticket.”

The STFU capitalized on the interest of men and women like Putnam by organizing a “Migratory Agricultural Workers Union” to enroll members and serve those heading west. By November 22, the union had “sent out nearly 300 cotton pickers,” with an additional 600 “leaving from S.E. Missouri this next week and 500 more from Memphis.” Mitchell noted that 50 of the first 300 “were paid up members” and “upwards of 300 will be members from SE Mo.” Almost all cotton pickers in a third group were “paid up members from Arkansas and Mississippi.”

The STFU accomplished this task largely on its own. When the plan was hatched, Mitchell had hoped to win American Federation of Labor (AFL) support for the STFU after its bitter experience with the UCAPAWA and the CIO. In a letter to AFL Southern Director George Googe, Mitchell framed the moment as a critical juncture in the internecine conflict between the AFL and CIO, noting that the FSA might “co-operate with the C.I.O. Cannery and Agricultural Union headed by the CP man Henderson.” When he wrote to AFL president William Green requesting “advice and help,” though, Green simply acknowledged the letter and offered his moral support. The STFU would have to go it alone.

If the union recruits were excited by the prospect of good money and solid contracts, they soon discovered that Southwestern cotton growers were just as bad as their Southern counterparts and that the FSA offered little recourse. On December 8, Clarence Cranford wrote to STFU organizer Bill Johnson from his job in Hagerman, New Mexico. He stated that he and

117 Loyd Putnam to Mitchell, November 9, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
118 Mitchell to Odis Sweeden, November 22, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
119 Mitchell to George Googe, September 17, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
120 Mitchell to William Green, September 18, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 21.
his companions “got nothing like the contract calls for.” They were made to sleep on “a bale of hay for a bed,” noting that “it wasn’t so bad for the first week but now it has snowed and is awfully cold.” The FSA official in charge offered little relief: “The government man over us says we are in a house he has condemned but he hasn’t done anything about it yet.”

Sleeping on hay bales paled in comparison to the problems facing union members in McNary, Texas, about 60 miles down the Rio Grande from El Paso. On December 10, J.W. Maak wrote to H.L. Mitchell describing “heavy frost and ice every morning” that reduced the cotton to “the worst imaginable,” shortened the workweek to one day, and gave them “flue [sic] and colds.” The $4.00 rate was “no premium,” Maak wrote, since “very few can pick more than 100 pounds” of the pathetic crop. He wanted to strike, but the dispersal of STFU members at different camps made them “so badly divided that we can hardly do anything.” Mitchell badgered the FSA about the problems in McNary. He requested that FSA Administrator C.B. Baldwin investigate Maak’s report, as well as several members’ complaints that they lacked mattresses and cooking facilities.

Conditions had not improved by Christmas Eve, when Mitchell telegrammed Baldwin to inform him that Camp 90 was on strike. While the FSA’s social welfare tendencies failed to move the agency to address the grievances, its new labor supply imperative compelled a response. On the day after Christmas, a Saturday, FSA Labor Division Director N. Gregory Silvermaster phoned the Amarillo regional director and instructed him to dispatch a labor relations specialist to arbitrate the dispute. On January 4, Silvermaster informed Mitchell that the FSA, growers, and pickers had reached agreement on “all points.” The strikers won a 25¢

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121 Clarence Cranford to Bill Johnson, December 8, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
123 Mitchell to C.B. Baldwin, December 12, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
124 Mitchell to C.B. Baldwin, telegram, December 24, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
125 N. Gregory Silvermaster to Mitchell, December 26, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.
increase for the short-staple picking rate, an extension of the work contract, and the resolution of disputed commissary charges.\footnote{126}

Positive outcomes like the McNary strike were unheard of in Arizona. B.V. Zachary’s experience attested to the fact. He and 337 others disembarked at Eloy, Arizona in February 1943 to discover that the FSA could provide work at Jack Cobb’s farm for only 200 of them. Lodging at Cobb’s place consisted of mud-floored tents in standing water.\footnote{127} When Mitchell contacted Silvermaster about the wretched conditions, he forwarded the matter to a regional labor relations specialist based in San Francisco, more than 800 miles away by car.\footnote{128} Local FSA officials told the cotton pickers that “they could either work” for Cobb, “or they could go home and forfeit their contracts.” Zachary volunteered to organize for the STFU among the disenchanted families, but many of them returned east or worked for growers who did “not approve of the F.S.A.”\footnote{129} It is not clear which option Zachary chose. When Mitchell asked him for an update in March since he had not “heard anything from you,” he received no reply.\footnote{130}

The tough conditions facing workers in the Southwest indicated the schizophrenia of the FSA as it struggled to fulfill its rural social welfare mission while also acting as a labor contractor to the nation’s largest agricultural producers. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the agency’s reliance on the decentralized Employment Service to identify surplus labor supplies. The U.S. Employment Service had been created by the 1933 Wagner-Peyser Act, which established a nationwide network of federal and state Employment Service offices. The Employment Service relied on affiliated state employment services and their agencies to advertise job vacancies. U.S. Employment Service officials in Washington depended upon these
various state agencies to designate labor recruitment areas and approve workers’ availability.\footnote{Rasmussen, 24-6.}

It did not take long for the South’s cotton growers to take advantage.

No sooner had the first contingents of cotton pickers left Arkansas than the State Employment Service stepped in to halt the exodus. Late in November 1942, Mitchell telegrammed officials with the War Manpower Commission, U.S. Employment Service, and FSA to protest the Arkansas Employment Service director’s decision “to stop recruiting,” which left “150 workers stranded.”\footnote{Mitchell to Fowler Harper, John Corson, Van Hyning, and D.O. Rushing, November 23, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.} Mitchell’s phone call to the Arkansas official revealed strong planter opposition. Director Patterson stated, “Mitchell, everybody is afraid to plant for next year’s crop...since they know labor is moving about. They think there will not be enough labor to harvest their crops if they plant.” Patterson told him he would clear the workers, but Mitchell remained “quite confident that he was working under extreme pressure from Arkansas planters,” who were attending a Farm Bureau meeting in Little Rock.\footnote{Mitchell to Charles F. Miller, November 25, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.}

Problems with clearances made the STFU increasingly concerned about farm labor mobility, especially after the War Manpower Commission issued an order on November 30\textsuperscript{th} forbidding farmers and farm laborers from accepting nonfarm work.\footnote{Mitchell to Roy Raley, F.R. Betton, J.F. Hynds, and Bill Johnson, December 6, 1942, STFU Papers, reel 22.} This order went even further than the Selective Service Act’s Tydings Amendment, which exempted those who worked in agriculture from the draft. On December 4, Mitchell delivered a statement to the Labor and Management Committee of the War Manpower Commission. He feared the amendment and order would be “construed by local draft boards to permit cotton plantation
owners to force tenants, sharecroppers and farm laborers to remain on the same plantation and
dwell and work under conditions of peonage.”

The Employment Service and FSA continued to authorize and transport workers recruited
by the STFU in early 1943, but the union still encountered difficulty from state employment
service officials. In the first two weeks of January, union members living in the FSA’s Delmo
Labor Homes Project, built as housing for farmworker families in 1940-1941, were denied jobs.
The applicants believed “that the project managers were responsible” since they “did not want
the projects emptied.” When he confronted federal officials in Washington about the problem,
Mitchell was promised “speedy correction.” However, on March 24, FSA Regional Director
A.D. Stewart informed Mitchell that although joint FSA-Employment Service policy designated
areas “of relative farm labor surpluses…no counties in the Delta or counties with a considerable
acreage of alluvial land have been designated as recruitment counties.” Thus, housing erected
by the FSA to give farmworkers a measure of independence from their employers became just
another tool to keep them in their place—literally—as the FSA succumbed to growers’ political
machinations during the war. By then, however, such administrative slights paled in comparison
to the STFU’s bigger problems.

Struggling under Public Law 45

The Bracero Program and Emergency Farm Labor Program had been created by
administrative fiat because of immediate mobilization needs. When these measures were
replaced with the grower-dictated Public Law 45, the STFU found itself waging its battle on

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135 Mitchell, Statement to the War Manpower Commission Labor and Management Committee, December 4, 1942,
STFU Papers, reel 22.
January 11, 1943.
137 Mitchell to Roy Raley, F.R. Betton, and Bill Johnson, January 12, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23;
much rougher terrain. The union understood the threat represented in Public Law 45’s requirement that local Extension Service agents clear farmworkers for work outside their home counties. As the bill moved through Congress in March, Mitchell told the War Manpower Commission he was “sure that there isn’t a County Agent in my section of the South who would admit that there was a surplus of farm labor available in his county regardless of the number of people walking the highways looking for a place to work.” Instead of the Extension Service, he proposed that a Department of Agriculture board “composed of representatives of farmers’ organizations and farm labor organizations” decide all farm labor policies.\textsuperscript{139} Appearing before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Mitchell stressed that low wages drove farm labor shortages, and he argued that “now is the time to free these two million slaves of king cotton once and for all.”\textsuperscript{140}

The union also sought the assistance of national labor leaders in opposing the bill. Mitchell warned that Public Law 45 “will place the program for supplying farm labor needs in the hands of the State Agricultural Extension Services which are in turn controlled by the Farm Bureau.” If passed, “no farm workers will be transported to labor shortage areas,” he wrote, and the FSA migratory camps “shall be turned over to the State Extension Services.”\textsuperscript{141} All of organized labor responded positively to the request. At an April 23 meeting with Mitchell, the AFL, CIO, and Railroad Brotherhoods (difficult enough to assemble in one room) decided to oppose the bill and request a presidential veto, but although President Roosevelt “was cognizant at the time of certain objectionable features,” he felt that the “vital and pressing character” of the

\textsuperscript{139} Mitchell, Statement to the War Manpower Commission, March n.d., 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.

\textsuperscript{140} Mitchell, Statement submitted to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, March, n.d., 1943. STFU Papers, reel 23.

\textsuperscript{141} Mitchell to William Green, David Dubinsky, Phillip Murray, and Sidney Hillman, March 15, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
legislation “more than counterbalance[d] the objectionable features.”142 The bill became law on April 29, effectively ending the STFU’s efforts to turn sharecroppers into braceros.

The union viewed the recent turn of events with dismay, especially the wholesale assault on the FSA. The agency’s attempt to prove useful during war by supplying farm labor infuriated growers, who believed that FSA’s contracts and labor camps were dangerous meddling that emboldened their workers.143 The Department of Agriculture responded by removing the liberals who had survived the 1935 purge. In January 1943, Gardner Jackson told Mitchell “he had been asked to resign,” fearing it was “an indication of what might happen to others shortly.”144 When Congress convened hearings on the FSA in May, STFU organizer F.R. Betton declared, “the crash is on.”145 Mitchell argued before the investigating committee that the agency’s programs were “the only hope for little people on the land,” but appeals to save the agency fell on deaf ears.146 The FSA limped forward shorn of its mission and budget until 1946, when it became the Farmers Home Administration, dedicated to making landless farmers middle-class homeowners.

Facing a labor supply program without even the modest ally of the FSA, STFU leaders first considered a legal challenge to Public Law 45. Mitchell hoped that the law’s probable effect of freezing domestic labor in the South by requiring local Extension Service clearance might be interpreted as “bordering on peonage.”147 However, union attorney K.T. Sutton responded, “it would not be adviseable [sic] to make a test of the constitutionality of these provisions,” since the challenge would probably take longer than the war itself and past precedent supported broad

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144 Mitchell to Bruce Bliven, January 26, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 23.
wartime powers. 148 Mitchell relayed Sutton’s opinion to Prentice Thomas, assistant special
counsel to the NAACP, who had hoped to help “in carrying out whatever program you might
plan” to counteract the new farm labor law. 149

Deprived of the legal option, that program centered mostly on statements denouncing
Public Law 45. The first line of attack was sectional. While defending the FSA in May, Mitchell
claimed Public Law 45 was the handiwork of the “agricultural Junkers of the South” who wanted
“to maintain the huge surplus labor supply for exploitation on the cotton plantations.” 150
Publicly, the STFU argued that cotton interests controlled a congressional cabal of Southern
Democrats. The union linked Farm Bureau president Edward A. O’Neal to his “chief
lieutenants,” South Carolina Senator “Cotton Ed” Smith, who chaired the Committee on
Agriculture and Forestry, and Missouri Congressman Clarence Cannon, who chaired the House
Appropriations Committee. The union argued that this power constellation meant “the South
holds the whip hand in Congress for the first time since the Civil War.” 151

The STFU continued to denounce Public Law 45 throughout 1943 and sought to
influence subsequent legislation and appropriations for 1944. In November, the union took the
opportunity afforded by its tenth annual convention to condemn the fact that the law fostered a
“dictatorship of grass roots bureaucrats” who rendered labor immobile while allowing
“inexperienced, men, women, boys and girls from cities” to help harvest through service in the
Crop Corps. The STFU demanded, “no foreign workers be imported into the United States until
all American farm workers are fully used.” 152 Early in 1944, Mitchell called the Bracero Program

149 Prentice Thomas to Mitchell, May 4, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24; Mitchell to Prentice Thomas, May 5, 1943,
STFU Papers, reel 24.
152 STFU, 10th Annual Southern Tenant Farmers Union convention Resolution on Public Law 45, November 10,
1943, STFU Papers, reel 25.
“unnecessary,” since there were plenty of domestic workers available.\textsuperscript{153} He expressed that sentiment to the Senate Appropriations Committee, claiming that under Public Law 45, “not a single farm worker in any area where we have organization was provided transportation by the government out of his home county.”\textsuperscript{154}

Such statements held little cathartic value for Mitchell, who suffered daily frustrations in trying to make the union’s 1942 labor supply program work under the new law. As he predicted, the crux of the problem was local implementation by the Extension Service. On May 1, 1944, the STFU sent letters to 1,385 families (596 of whom had worked previously with the FSA) instructing them “to apply to the county agent…for written permission to accept transportation to other areas for employment.”\textsuperscript{155} Members reported the same response everywhere. In Forrest City, Arkansas, an Extension Service agent told Willie Reeves that he and his family were to “work in this county and not out of the county.” Elsewhere, an agent told Eugene Jeffers “he could not and just would not sign.” And a Lexington, Tennessee agent offered J.R. Hatchett “a job on a farm here at $1.50 a day for 12 hours labor” because, as the agent explained, “his friends would not like for labor to be sent out of this county.”\textsuperscript{156}

Faced with the united opposition of Extension Service county agents everywhere, the union tried to pressure federal officials to let its members help the war effort. Shortly after the rebuffs of early May, Mitchell sent an offer to supply workers to Chester Davis, head of the War Food Administration and thus the top official overseeing the new program. Davis, however, simply forwarded the information to the Extension Service, which had been responsible for the

\textsuperscript{154} The claim was not entirely true (some workers had been transported under Public Law 45), but it was close. Mitchell, Statement of H.L. Mitchell, January n.d., 1944, STFU Papers, reel 26.
\textsuperscript{156} Mitchell, Memorandum: The effect in the mid-South of legislation appropriating funds to supply and distribute farm labor,” May, n.d., 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
problem in the first place. In July, Mitchell tried a different tack when he claimed county agents violated workers’ civil rights by refusing to let them leave. Assistant Attorney General Wendell Berge downplayed that concern by noting, “Many persons have misunderstood these laws.” He referred the matter to the War Food Administration. The union tried again in early August when it enlisted the help of the Southern Workers Defense League. Together, the two organizations asked the Justice Department to investigate planters’ promises of “draft-deferment to their sharecroppers if they would sign a yellow-dog contract agreeing to stay on the planters’ farm for at least 5 years.” The department declined.

By September 1943, only 3,500 domestic workers had been transported for work, while 57,489 foreign workers from Mexico, Jamaica, and the Bahamas entered to work on U.S. farms. If they could not leave to work elsewhere, at least STFU members knew they could find work locally. But even that scarce job security came under attack as planters turned to prisoners of war to depress wages. In August, Mississippi planter E.J. Mullens used 60 Italian POWs to chop cotton at a total cost of $1.45/day when other planters were offering $3.00 to local workers. By July 22, the prevailing rate had fallen to $1.50, which Mullens argued was “due entirely to the fact that the first chopping is always much more expensive.” When Mitchell asked the War Manpower Commission’s Bureau of Placement for clarification on POW policies, Director Nickerson assured him, “all supplies of labor…must be exhausted” before POWs were

157 Chester Davis to Mitchell, May 21, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
160 For more on the wartime labor program for Jamaicans and Bahamians, see Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, Chapters 2-4. Mitchell to Sen. William Langer, October 4, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 25.
161 Rasmussen, 96-9.
162 80¢ went to the POW with the remainder going to the War Food Administration and War Department.
certified.\textsuperscript{164} Those supplies must have been diminishing quickly: the 41,000 POWs employed in 1943 mushroomed to 122,000 in 1945.\textsuperscript{165}

Since the union got nowhere by either opposing or trying to work within the provisions of Public Law 45, and since its members were now threatened in its own backyard, the STFU’s leaders decided to try another approach altogether. They would get their members out of the South by working around the wartime measures that kept agricultural workers where they were. The idea was the brainchild of Leon Schachter, business agent for Local 56 of the AFL’s Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America. Local 56 recently had organized the largest New Jersey canneries, including H.J. Heinz and Seabrook Farms. At Seabrook, year-round workers were union members and enjoyed a contract, but the huge seasonal harvest labor force represented a potential threat, especially since the contract stipulated dues checkoff for such workers, even if they had volunteered for the work through the Crop Corps. To solve the problem, Schachter hatched a plan late in 1943 that would provide Seabrook with seasonal workers who would already be full union members. He would get them from the STFU.\textsuperscript{166}

As Cindy Hahamovitch has explained, the plan avoided Public Law 45’s restrictions on agricultural workers by transferring STFU members into the Amalgamated, where they would be eligible for job placement by the War Manpower Commission.\textsuperscript{167} Mitchell was enthusiastic about the plan, since it would “force these S.O.B.s in the local WMC set up to have to deal” with him.\textsuperscript{168} In addition to STFU members, the union also arranged for female students at some of the South’s black colleges to take the summer jobs. Mitchell thought exposing students to the

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\textsuperscript{164} Albert Nickerson to Mitchell, August 20, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.  \\
\textsuperscript{165} Hahamovitch, \textit{The Fruits of Their Labor}, 178; and \textit{No Man’s Land}, 79-80.  \\
\textsuperscript{166} Hahamovitch, \textit{The Fruits of Their Labor}, 183-86.  \\
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 186.  \\
\textsuperscript{168} Mitchell to Leon Schachter, May 1, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 26.  
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experience would be helpful since they were “future leaders of their race and many come from rural areas where they will be in a position to help organize their people.” Mitchell wrote to Schachter telling him that when the workers and students arrived, they should form grievance committees to ensure the program’s success by “taking up job grievances through your representatives, shop stewards, or the Company officials.” The union exchange program worked to the satisfaction of the canneries and both unions, successfully transferring over 1,047 workers in its first year.

In the end, however, the program never amounted to more than “a drop in the sea” of farm labor supply programs. Hahamovitch argues “the STFU could not live up to its end of the bargain” because of its small staff and the difficulty of the task, a task made more difficult after 1942 when the union lost its FSA ally and encountered the unyielding opposition of local officials and the indifference of federal ones. Despite War Manpower Commission Vice Chairman Clinton Golden’s view that the program was “most commendable,” and his assistant’s efforts “to clear the way for the effective placement of your members,” Mitchell complained, “We have not received any cooperation from the local employment service.” In August 1944, Arkansas Employment Service official C.W. Baskin forced Sam James and Anderson Johnson—two black STFU organizers—to turn their four trucks filled with New

169 Mitchell to Dave Burgess, June 13, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27; Hahamovitch, 196.
170 Mitchell to Leon Schachter, June 3, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
172 Hahamovitch, The Fruits of Their Labor, 197.
173 Golden was an ally of Philip Murray of the United Steelworkers and organized labor more broadly, indicated by his amenable tone with Mitchell.
174 Clinton Golden to Mitchell, June 8, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27; Nelson Cruikshank to Mitchell, June 29, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27; Mitchell to Clinton Golden, June 3, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
Jersey-bound workers around. When they arrived back in Cotton Plant, the two organizers were arrested on the charge “enticing of labor.”

As local obstruction continued into 1945, Mitchell contacted the War Manpower Commission, but although the Commission told him it “can well appreciate the feeling of frustration,” it advised him to contact state and local officials “so that you may acquaint them with the work of your organization.” Such officials were already well aware; that was the problem. When Mitchell “pointed out the inadequate facilities of the U.S. Employment Service in the rural areas where our members reside,” the Commission once again referred him to state officials. In April, Nelson Cruikshank, the STFU’s ally on the Commission, told Mitchell his “little scheme” to get the Labor Management Policy Committee “to back up your arrangements with the amalgamated went awry” when Farm Bureau lobbyist W.R. Ogg attended a meeting and, as Southern growers’ official representative, “threatened to stop the arrangement” entirely. According to Ogg, “Anyone who knows anything about the situation knows the County Agents have done a magnificent job.”

Aside from the usual obstructionism, the union also faced renewed conflicts with its old nemesis UCAPAWA, which in 1944 had become the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers (FTA). The FTA had a contract with the Campbell Soup Company, but like its competitors, Campbell turned to Local 56 to supply seasonal workers in 1944. On July 26, 1945, Campbell Employment Manager J.E. Heap Jr. cancelled his order for 300 workers because the FTA “threatened to strike the plant if any members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union

175 STFU, “News from the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” August 14, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
176 Ross Mathis to Mitchell, August 11, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
177 Clinton Golden to Mitchell, January 9, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 28.
179 Nelson Cruikshank to Mitchell, April 5, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29.
were employed.”

When the union tried to supply workers to Campbell again in 1946, the FTA repeated its threat in hopes of securing a closed-shop contract, and it succeeded in halting further recruitment. Mitchell thought the FTA was using his union “to pull chestnuts out of the fire for agents of the Communist Party.” Ultimately, however, the atomic bomb did more damage than Don Henderson. RJ Ritter Company’s personnel director summarized the problem neatly for Mitchell when he cancelled his 1945 order: “As you know, V-J Day brought with it many cutbacks and this caused a temporary flood of female labor on the local labor market.”

Given that STFU leaders expected the opposition of local government officials and the limited impact its labor exchange program would have, it was no surprise that the union pursued alternatives to help its members while growers exerted their control over their labor supply. As a supplement to the labor supply and exchange efforts, the union explored the possibility of moving some of its black members onto farms of their own in New Mexico. The idea came from Rev. J.E. Clayton, a Texas preacher who had helped settle black farmers on railroad companies’ vacant lands throughout the Southwest. Because of this activity, Clayton enjoyed free passage on all trans-Mississippi railroads, which he used to organize on behalf of the STFU.

In August 1943, Clayton wrote to Mitchell describing the plight of black homesteaders in Doña Ana County, New Mexico. They had settled there in 1926 and had received patents on the land, but the county’s largest ranchers, fearing the loss of their cheaply rented federal grazing land, pressured “the agricultural college and the Department of Agriculture to declare this valley sub-marginal land.” Clayton had recently met with the farmers’ leader G.W. Holsome, who hoped the union could pressure the government to “open up this land to homesteaders again” so

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182 Mitchell, Confidential Memorandum, July 26, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
183 Mitchell to Ed Yeomans, August 6, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32.
184 Earl McCormick to Mitchell, August 21, 1945.
185 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 183.
the “Union can put several hundred families” on it.ⁱ⁸⁶ Although the Interior Department responded that some of the disputed land was within the purview of the Grazing Service, it would consider releasing its claims if the union and Holsome could arrange for enough patent holders to sell their unimproved acreage to prospective farmers.ⁱ⁸⁷

Although they both held out hope for a deal, Mitchell and Holsome quickly disagreed on terms. When Holsome asked $10/acre, Mitchell responded by saying, “It seems to me that if these people really want help they ought to agree to sell for about $5.”ⁱ⁸⁸ Holsome took the counteroffer personally, claiming the homesteaders’ semiarid land was worth “between twenty-five and forty dollars.” The $10 offer was “just about as great a sacrifice as we could make.”ⁱ⁸⁹

The price wrangling continued when Holsome offered a contract to “lease land to the prospective [sic] settlers for 5 (five) or more years,” in a rent-to-own scheme, provided they improve the land.ⁱ⁹⁰ However, when Rev. Clayton and F.R. Betton reported on their investigation into the land titles to the STFU Executive Committee, Mitchell regretted that “the irregularity and encumbrance against titles of some of the lands” prevented the STFU from entering “into any sort of leasing or option contract.”ⁱ⁹¹

Clayton continued to work the New Mexicans throughout 1944, asking Holsome and others to locate less legally cumbersome land for sale. On September 3, Holsome reported that most of the homesteaders preferred to sit tight and “waiight [sic] until after the war are [sic] over.”ⁱ⁹² Two weeks later, however, he told Mitchell that they were “ancious [sic] to do binness [sic] as soon as we can.” According to Holsome, the farmers were tired of the conflicting

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ⁱ⁸⁶ J.E. Clayton to Mitchell, August 26, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
ⁱ⁸⁷ Abe Fortas to Mitchell, September 8, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
ⁱ⁸⁸ Mitchell to F.R. Betton, September 18, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
ⁱ⁸⁹ G.W. Holsome to Mitchell, September 27, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
ⁱ⁹⁰ G.W. Holsome to Mitchell, January 6, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 26.
ⁱ⁹¹ Mitchell to G.W. Holsome, January 18, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 26.
ⁱ⁹² G.W. Holsome to J.E. Clayton, September 3, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
messages from Clayton and Mitchell. After trying for more than a year to get some of the union’s members permanently away from the local officials and plantation owners who held them in near-bondage, Mitchell had had enough. He confessed that although he did “not give up hope of people doing something for themselves,” he agreed with Rev. Clayton, who had “worked with so many people that he just knows they would rather starve in a desert than to walk over into the promised land.”

By year’s end, the two groups ceased communicating.

Demobilization

After the effort to establish members on farms out West came to naught, the residents of Missouri’s 595 Delmo Labor Homes called upon the STFU for help. They had received word in March 1945 that the FSA planned to sell their homes out from under them to comply with congressional directives, yet another example of the determination of the nation’s growers to liquidate any potential source of farmworkers’ independence. The agency advised them “to obtain houses elsewhere as soon as possible” since “they would be forced to vacate by May 1.”

Many of the residents were veterans of the 1939 Missouri roadside demonstration that came on the eve of the UCAPAWA-STFU split. The STFU and local charitable groups had played a vital role in resettling the evicted sharecroppers in the Delmo Homes, and many had stayed with the union throughout the war. Threatened with eviction once more, the residents turned to the STFU for help.

The battle to save the Delmo Homes would produce the STFU’s only unqualified victory of the war era, and it was no coincidence that the union succeeded at Delmo in a battle least

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193 G.W. Holsome to Mitchell, September 17, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
194 Mitchell to G.W. Holsome, September 19, 1944, STFU Papers, reel 27.
195 Public Law 52, passed by the 79th Congress, directed the FSA to liquidate its resettlement program assets.
related to labor supply. Rev. David Burgess and his wife Alice served as the STFU’s primary contacts at Delmo during the conflict. Burgess had followed the union since 1934, and he even applied for a summer organizing job before he entered Union Theological Seminary in 1939.

After graduating, Burgess worked for the Home Missions Board of the Congregational Christian Churches among migrant laborers in New Jersey, where he reconnected with the STFU and aided in the labor exchange program. The experience taught Burgess to be “a social worker, a negotiator, minister, counselor and friend” to migrant workers and union members. In 1944, the Burgesses moved to Memphis to work for the union. When the STFU learned of the threatened sale, Burgess relocated to Wardell, Missouri to work with STFU organizer Bill Johnson and the Delmo residents.198

Burgess and Johnson quickly mobilized the threatened Delmo tenants by organizing an Independent Tenants Committee while Mitchell secured funds from the National Sharecroppers Fund.199 On March 20, 1945, the Tenants Committee gathered the signatures of 606 residents to petition officials at the FSA and War Food Administration “to use your good offices to save our homes.”200 The Committee stressed that Missouri’s planters wanted them out of the homes and “back again in the sharecropper shacks.”201 By the end of the month, Burgess had not only gone to Washington, where Gardner Jackson (now at the National Farmers Union) helped him contact sympathetic members of Congress, but he also had trained and sent a busload of Delmo residents to speak to officials and Congressmen.202

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199 Mitchell to Evelyn Munro, March 13, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29; Mitchell to Norman Thomas, March 19, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29.
200 Tenants Committee, Petition to Frank Hancock, Marvin Jones, and Congress, March 20, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29.
202 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 205-06; Burgess, 64.
The FSA’s director of project sales promised that the agency “would consider any proposal for the purchase of Delmo Labor Homes by the present tenants,” but the requirement of 20% down with the balance to be paid over 5 years—all while refusing to close the sales to the public—offered little hope, even with the union matching the tenants’ donations. Matters seemed desperate in April when new camp managers restricted the use of laundry facilities, impounded residents’ furniture, and even disconnected one camp’s water supply.

Fortunately, by then David Burgess had won two converts on Capitol Hill. House Agriculture Committee member Frank Hook and Senate Agriculture Committee member William Langer introduced legislation to restrict the sale to current residents, delaying further action. Seeking to sway his colleagues, Hook read a statement before his own committee that articulated the justice of the tenants’ cause. The planters and growers, he said, had “managed to so alter the character of the FSA that it is no longer…an agency to protect and foster the interest of the small farmer and farm worker.” Selling the homes on the open market “automatically excludes the people for whom the homes were originally built.” To do that would force a resident to “join the trek of wandering, homeless migrant laborers…without roots in the soil.”

Although President Truman sent Hook a letter reminding him that existing legislation already required the projects’ sale to the highest bidder, he wanted the “Delmo residents to be able to retain their homes.” He delayed the sale until October, by which time they might have raised enough money to purchase them at market prices.

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203 Tenants Committee, Report of the Washington Delegation, March 30, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29; Frank Hancock to Orville Zimmerman, April 10, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29; Tenants Committee, Minutes, March 20, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29.
204 Mitchell to Stephen Hughes, April 12, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 29.
205 Frank Hook, Statement on HR 3071, July 10, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
206 Truman to Hook, as quoted in Roll, 413; Burgess, 66.
The legislative intervention accomplished, Burgess turned to fundraising for the residents. To help purchase the homes, Burgess assembled prominent St. Louis religious leaders, unionists, and public citizens into what would become the Delmo Housing Corporation.\textsuperscript{207} By August 7, the group had over $19,000 on hand. Two weeks later it reported a balance of over $31,000 ready to finance 313 applications for purchase, plus an additional $16,100 in promissory notes for 161 other applications.\textsuperscript{208} In early September, the FSA offered to sell nine of the ten camps for $385,000. Burgess considered it “a clean $70,000 overcharge.”\textsuperscript{209} Burgess worked through an intermediary to haggle with the FSA until late November, when the agency finally agreed to sell to the Delmo Housing Corporation for $287,000, or about $800 per home.\textsuperscript{210} Residents would have eight years to pay back their loans to the nonprofit.\textsuperscript{211} It was one of the STFU’s few successes during the entire war, though growers were able to purchase entire FSA labor camps at the fire-sale price of one dollar.

Still, it did not take long after V-J Day for the STFU to encounter its first problem of the postwar era. As industrial workers grew restive and economists worried about declining factory orders, agricultural workers faced a new threat: the local wage ceiling conference.\textsuperscript{212} On August 23, 1945 Mitchell received a copy of a Department of Agriculture document outlining instructions to county-level committees for conducting referendums to determine wage ceilings for cotton picking. Local Extension Service agents would recommend the committee

\textsuperscript{208} Charles Wilson to Prospective Buyers of Delmo Homes, August 21, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
\textsuperscript{209} David Burgess to Mitchell, September 11, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
\textsuperscript{210} Burgess, 67.
\textsuperscript{211} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 207; Mitchell to STFU members, November 11, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
members.\textsuperscript{213} Such proceedings were made possible under the 1942 Stabilization Act, but the union had never dealt with them before now.

The STFU protested immediately. Mitchell telegraphed Agriculture Secretary Clinton P. Anderson objecting to the 44 referendums scheduled for September 1 in Mississippi and Arkansas. Since all those engaged in cotton production were entitled to a vote in the proceedings, Mitchell demanded they be postponed so cotton pickers would have a chance to “participate in line with normal democratic procedure on which this government was founded.” He also questioned the need for ceilings entirely, since most of the region’s farmworkers made less than $400 annually.\textsuperscript{214} Mitchell received support from AFL President William Green, who telegraphed Secretary Anderson on August 24 urging him to “give favorable consideration to this protest” against “indefensibly low” wages.\textsuperscript{215}

The referendums continued regardless. On August 29, David Burgess attended one as a representative of the STFU. He called what he saw a “preview of American fascism.” The Department of Agriculture’s State Wage Board chairman opened the hearings by assuring the 200 assembled planters that the “Board wants to make a decision in line with what the growers think.” However, Rev. Burgess was far more disgusted by the testimony of Oscar Johnston, president of the National Cotton Council. Johnston claimed that the wage ceiling was necessary for his tenants. It protected them from the “city workers [who] come out and prey upon the sharecroppers on my farm by demanding too high wages.” Johnston continued, “The wage hands are ne’er do wells, rolling stones that gather no moss,” despite the fact that many of his tenants

\textsuperscript{213} Department of Agriculture, Missouri USDA Wage Board Form No. 4, August, n.d. 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
\textsuperscript{214} Mitchell to Clinton Anderson, telegram, August 23, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
\textsuperscript{215} William Green to Clinton Anderson, telegram, August 24, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
worked for wages during the harvest season.\textsuperscript{216} Johnston’s 516 sharecroppers evidently agreed out of fear of their powerful landlord. All but one voted in favor of the $2.00 ceiling; the one who voted against did so because he thought it was too high.\textsuperscript{217} In the end, no planter proposed more than $2.00 per hundred for the ceiling, far below the $3.50 demanded by the STFU at its July wage conference.\textsuperscript{218}

As hearing after hearing voted overwhelmingly for a wage ceiling, the union continued its vocal opposition before the Department of Agriculture. On September 10, Mitchell submitted a statement to Secretary Anderson accusing the hearings of violating “the basic principles of American democracy,” since they were dominated by “plantation owners who represent less than 10 per cent of the producers.” The STFU leader reported that in Lincoln County, Arkansas, a group of black smallholders, tenants, and sharecroppers waited all day to cast their ballots at the appointed place, but no one ever showed. He likened the Mississippi vote (22,193 in favor and 313 opposed) to a “totalitarian plebiscite.”\textsuperscript{219} Finally, Mitchell cited the Department of Agriculture’s own statistics demonstrating wartime trends toward better wages in the South to argue that, “it is an absurdity for the Secretary of Agriculture to impose a ceiling on wages.”\textsuperscript{220} Nevertheless, by September 15, Mitchell felt that growers’ ability to control the referendum process would lead to the federal government’s imposition of the $2.10 rate.\textsuperscript{221}

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid. In 1940, Mississippi pickers averaged $1.15/day; by 1945 they averaged $2.50. In 1940, Arkansas pickers averaged $1.55/day; by 1945 they averaged $3.05. In 1940, Missouri pickers averaged $2.00/day; by 1945 they averaged $3.90.
\textsuperscript{221} Mitchell to Lewis Henderson, September 18, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
The union then turned to defeating the wage ceiling through a legal challenge. After delivering his statement to Secretary Anderson, Mitchell wrote to STFU counsel K.T. Sutton to argue that President Truman’s executive order of August 21, 1945 modifying wartime wage and price controls effectively cancelled the secretary’s regulatory authority to set ceilings. Accordingly, Sutton should seek an injunction against the Arkansas Wage Board, Mitchell argued.222 As STFU locals sent in petitions against the wage ceiling, Mitchell had Sutton add their names to the suit.223

Sutton filed the petition for injunction on October 10, contending that the 10% participation of cotton producers and the executive order invalidated the referendums. Furthermore, the attorney argued that the wage ceiling was patently un-American, especially given the war just concluded. The petition stated, “Government of the people by directive orders is contrary to the Constitution of the United States and in violation of the peoples’ rights.”224 Sutton was optimistic about the union’s chances. He had been talking to Little Rock lawyers who expressed plenty of “sentiment against Government by directives” and gave him “a great deal of encouragement.”225 Sutton’s optimism was misplaced. Federal judge Thomas Trimble dismissed the petition on the grounds that the secretary of agriculture was “an indispensable party to the suit,” and he could not be served in Arkansas unless he visited the state. Sutton wanted the union to file the motion in the District of Columbia, but Mitchell lacked the necessary funds and knew the likely outcome.226

223 Mitchell to O.L. Bogart, October 1, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
The union’s efforts against wage ceilings enjoyed better success in 1946. The cotton pickers themselves pointed the way forward by simply staying home. As early as November 1945, the Memphis *Press-Scimitar* reported the unusually low numbers of Memphis residents heading out of the city to pick cotton.\(^{227}\) As growers began planting the 1946 crop, the union cited crop losses as a reason to discontinue the ceilings and raise wages instead. Mitchell cited “thousands of bales of cotton rotting in the fields” in his protests to Secretary Anderson.\(^{228}\) At a March meeting of the Mississippi Wage Board, Mitchell demanded a $5 day for farm labor, and the union circulated 50,000 fliers throughout the Delta advising its members to stay home if a new ceiling was enacted.\(^{229}\) The strategy worked. The Mississippi Wage Board declined to recommend a ceiling to the Department of Agriculture over the strong objections of the planters. According to Mitchell, the union had ended planters’ attempts to use the demobilization “power of the U.S. government to set sub-standard wages for farm labor.”\(^{230}\) The union had won another victory, though one once again unrelated to labor supply concerns.

**Conclusion: Legacies for the Future**

Although the union defeated the planters’ wage ceiling in 1946, it was a pyrrhic victory. By then, many of the people who filled the union’s ranks in the 1930s no longer sharecropped. Congressman Hook had indicated as much at the Delmo Labor Homes hearings. Removing government housing assistance was unthinkable, for without it, “the only place for them to go, is down the road…. If we make it impossible for the farm worker to carve a permanent niche for himself, [we] strengthen the hold of the big farm and land owners. We add impetus to the trend

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\(^{228}\) Mitchell to Anderson, January 29, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32.
away from the individual-owned farm, the trend toward corporation farming. The STFU had been born of that same trend when the AAA cast sharecroppers off plantations. As it strengthened and the union’s members joined the migrant farmworker stream, the STFU matured and changed its mission to match the nation’s new agricultural economy. At the union’s annual conference in December 1945, the STFU changed its name to the National Farm Labor Union, acknowledging that many of the sharecroppers it first organized in 1934 had become part of a growing wage labor force that harvested the nation’s crops.

Born of the dislocations of the Great Depression and the AAA, the STFU was one of the most remarkable vehicles for social protest during the 1930s. Its audacity in organizing white and black workers in the Jim Crow South proved to be one of its most valuable assets and left a lasting commitment to organize across racial lines, one that would serve it well as it began a move to California where workers of Mexican descent would be added to the mix. Similarly, the union’s ability to open the checkbooks of liberal, religious, and civil rights organizations helped it pay the bills when the dues collected from the nation’s poorest and least stable workers could not. And the union’s understanding that problems created by government policy required lobbying that government helped it in its future fight against the Bracero Program.

However, the STFU’s experience in World War II served as an important lesson on the limits of reliance on government allies whose mission could change with a new Congress and the difficulties of fighting for improvements in domestic farmworkers’ conditions in the face of a government-run guestworker program controlled by the nation’s largest growers. The union struggled mightily during World War II in an effort to help its members find work, but even when it succeeded in 1942, it still encountered an FSA that had become more labor contractor

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231 Frank Hook, Statement on HR 3071, July 10, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 30.
232 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 212.
than protector of the nation’s poorest farmers. Any hope that the FSA might fulfill its original mission disappeared entirely in 1943 when growers secured Public Law 45, administered by the grower-friendly Extension Service. Even the War Manpower Commission-approved labor union exchange program with the Amalgamated encountered opposition when growers fought back against it.

Ultimately, the union failed to fight wartime agricultural labor mobilization programs effectively during World War II because the nation’s farmworkers had been left in the dust by the New Deal. Programs designed to help prop up commodity prices actively pushed sharecroppers off their land, but even though they became wage laborers, the National Labor Relations Act took no account of them. The union attempted to enlist the support of organized labor against the worst aspects of the labor supply programs, but labor’s opposition was mostly rhetorical given its wartime no-strike pledge. That the union managed to accomplish anything during the war served as a testament to the tenacity of its members and leaders. The fact that its only real victories came on matters relatively peripheral to labor supply programs indicated the difficulty of fighting for farmworkers in the midst of the Bracero Program.

By 1946, any vestiges of the New Deal’s reformism had disappeared for the union. The triumphant Delmo victory had come about only because the FSA had been staffed by “politicians ordered to completely destroy” the welfare agency, creating a rallying point for an opposition movement interested in keeping the residents’ in their homes.233 The bitterest irony of all came with Public Law 76 in May 1947. In addition to extending the Bracero Program, the law ordered the secretary of agriculture to sell all FSA migrant camps at a “reasonable price” to any person or

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233 Roll, 407.
group pledging to house farmworkers. Almost all of them went to growers’ associations for the supremely “reasonable” price of one dollar.

By that time, Mitchell and his union had come to the realization that the success or failure of organizing the nation’s farmworkers would come to rest on both the structure of the agricultural labor market and the government policies—like Public Law 45—that shaped the operation of that market. The sharecropping and tenant farming economy of the rural South that birthed the STFU had been dealt a body blow during the New Deal; Mitchell understood that fact and what it meant for farmworkers when he reformulated the union for the postwar world as the National Farm Labor Union. The new agricultural economy seemed to be modeled on western agriculture, and no state better embodied it than California, with its factory farms, migrant workers, and heavy use of braceros during the war. To Mitchell, it soon became clear that California would have to be ground zero for any effort to organize farmworkers and their labor markets in postwar America.

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234 Hahamovitch, The Fruits of Their Labor, 197; Rasmussen, 55.
Chapter 2: California Nightmare: The National Farm Labor Union’s Failure to Organize
Postwar Agricultural Workers and Growers’ Dominance of the Bracero Program, 1946-1951

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union had transformed itself into the National Farm Labor Union in 1945, reflecting H.L. Mitchell’s opinion that the union’s mission of organizing the nation’s poorest land workers now meant turning its attention from sharecroppers to a labor force of increasingly impoverished and migratory workers. The agricultural labor markets of the United States had changed, and the union’s tactics and goals had to change with it. Federal policies had driven some of that change. The New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration had displaced sharecroppers and tenant farmers, sending them into the migrant labor force. During World War II, the Bracero Program and other wartime measures had made it impossible for the union to organize in the context of a labor mobilization that otherwise would have produced the labor scarcity necessary to facilitate militancy in the fields.

If NFLU leaders hoped that postwar agricultural labor policy would somehow swing back toward farmworkers’ favor and enable the union to organize effectively, they would soon be disabused of that notion. Wartime farm labor programs were extended until 1947, and matters only grew worse after that. The nation’s largest growers secured a new Bracero Program that allowed them to recruit Mexican farmworkers directly. In this new formulation of the program, the federal government’s role in labor contracting was almost entirely eliminated. Between 1947 and 1951, growers enjoyed direct bracero recruitment with even less oversight or enforcement of the minimal domestic farmworker and bracero safeguards that had accompanied the wartime program. They also benefitted from a growing migration of undocumented Mexican workers who came north encouraged by the Bracero Program’s promise of available jobs in the United
States and who were discouraged from participating in the guestworker program by its lax oversight and the repeated breakdowns in bilateral relations between the U.S. and Mexico during the period. Although organized labor opposed the program by lobbying the Department of Labor and Congress, and although the components of an anti-Bracero Program coalition began to form as various groups opposed it before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, the nation’s largest farmers successfully dominated the Bracero Program during the period.

Amid these inauspicious circumstances, the NFLU took on the impossible task to which it had dedicated itself. In 1947, the union set up shop in California, where it planned to concentrate on the state’s largest growers. Those growers not only employed the majority of seasonal domestic farmworkers, but they also were instrumental in securing the continuation of the Bracero Program and employed a disproportionate share of braceros. NFLU organizers hoped to use plain and simple unionism to force such growers to the bargaining table in a bid to improve farmworkers’ lives. The union waged a long and bitter strike against the Di Giorgio Fruit Company, but that strike clearly illustrated that growers who had the political clout to secure foreign guestworkers also had the resources and influence necessary to defeat labor organization, in part by using the very guestworkers they had secured to break strikes. Given growers’ financial and political power, organizing farmworkers in postwar America would require more than traditional organizing tactics, especially for workers who were excluded from national labor law and forced to compete with captive, deportable, foreign labor. After World War II, the NFLU came to realize that it would have to deal squarely with the problems presented by the Bracero Program if it hoped to unionize American agriculture, but it was a lesson the union learned the hard way.
Gearing Up for Postwar Agriculture and the Bracero Program Adrift, 1946-1951

As the World War II era gave way to the postwar age, many former sharecroppers and tenant farmers joined the steady stream of migrant laborers who followed the crops as the harvest progressed. The STFU had been born of that basic trend when the AAA cast sharecroppers off plantations. Now, as the trend strengthened and many of the union’s members found themselves farmworkers instead of working shares, the STFU took notice. As early as 1944, the union’s Executive Council noted that between 1930 and 1940, the number of sharecroppers had declined from 716,000 to 541,000 nationally. The trend continued over the next decade. In the Missouri Bootheel, for example—site of the Delmo Labor Homes—the rural population declined by 22% between 1940 and 1950.

The STFU had been pondering its future for some time, and by the end of the World War II era, it had embraced the long-term structural change in American agriculture by changing its mission from organizing sharecroppers to organizing a permanent class of agricultural wageworkers. The union had been moving in this direction since the war began. In 1942 it had established the Migratory Agricultural Workers Union as a special division of the STFU to serve members working with the FSA-run labor supply program. Ultimately, that division of the union had promised more than it could deliver given the FSA’s wartime mandate to provide growers with compliant workers. Still, STFU leaders knew the future of its organizing mission lay with migrant workers. The union acknowledged as much in 1944 when its members’ dispersal prompted it to declare, “The STFU is now a national farm labor union.” In December

237 Roll, 416.
1945, at the STFU annual conference, the union fully embraced the change, changing its name to
the National Farm Labor Union. The new name acknowledged the fact that the future of
agricultural labor organizing depended upon grappling with the increasingly migratory labor
force on the nation’s largest farms.\textsuperscript{240} The conference was momentous on the civil rights front as
well. The NFLU, which already had a strong civil rights record on race, extended its progressive
bona fides by electing a woman, Dorothy Dowe, to serve as its sitting secretary-treasurer,
becoming only the second union to do so. She had joined the union during the war as Mitchell’s
special assistant, and she would later become his second wife.\textsuperscript{241}

The new NFLU hoped to draw on the strength of the broader labor movement in its effort
to help the nation’s farmworkers. In 1943, the STFU unsuccessfully “sounded out several
officials of the A.F. of L. in reference to the establishment of a National Agricultural Workers
Union in which the STFU might take a leading role.”\textsuperscript{242} Mitchell tried again in May 1946, this
time fanning the flames of conflict between the AFL and CIO and dredging up his bitter
memories of the union’s disastrous CIO experience in the late 1930s in an effort to entice AFL
support. In his letter to President Green of the AFL, Mitchell stated, “We anticipate that the
communist led organization affiliated with the CIO [the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied
Workers]…will eventually turn its attention to this field.”\textsuperscript{243} This time the AFL proved more
receptive and requested an application for a charter, which the NFLU submitted on August 14.
At the meeting to review the application, the union claimed 204 locals with a paid-up
membership of 6,151.\textsuperscript{244} The AFL accepted the NFLU later that day, marking the union’s return

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{241} Dowe joined Bernice Heffner of the American Federation of Government Employees as a secretary-treasurer.
Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 212.
\textsuperscript{242} Mitchell, Report to the Executive Council, June 26, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
\textsuperscript{243} Mitchell to Green, May 1, 1943, STFU Papers, reel 24.
\textsuperscript{244} NFLU, Statement to the AFL, August 14, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32; Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This
Land}, 216.
to a national labor federation seven years after the UCAPAWA merger.\textsuperscript{245} The biracial union’s inclusion in the AFL helped bolster the national federation’s questionable civil rights reputation. When the AFL held its convention in Chicago later that year, the NFLU delegation’s presence doubled the number of black delegates in attendance, as F.R. Betton and J.E. Clayton joined the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters officers A. Phillip Randolph and Milton Webster.\textsuperscript{246}

As it sought to become part of the broader national labor movement, the NFLU articulated a wider vision for postwar American agriculture. The union’s December 1945 convention was a defining moment in this nationalization of its goals. That convention noted that the increasing use of cotton picking machines “will do the same to the sharecropper and the small farmer of the South as the atomic bomb did to Hiroshima.”\textsuperscript{247} The union hoped to ease the displacement of “hundreds of thousands of farm people,” by forming a Washington-based “Farm Labor Lobby” to advocate for government resettlement of displaced farmers and the extension of the Wagner Act, Social Security Act, and other social welfare legislation to farmworkers. The convention also called for a $5 day minimum wage in agriculture that would enable farmworkers to earn no less than $625 annually.\textsuperscript{248} And it challenged President Truman “to enact in the South the same legislation that Gen. McArthur has ordered in Japan to abolish tenancy and absentee ownership.”\textsuperscript{249}

Once it secured AFL support, the NFLU continued to make broad demands and began to organize outside of its mid-South regional base. After affiliation in 1946, the union planned to move its headquarters to Washington as a small counterweight to the grower lobby, called once again for farmworkers’ inclusion in national labor and social welfare legislation, and argued for a

\textsuperscript{245} NFLU, Press release, August 14, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\textsuperscript{246} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in This Land}, 218.
\textsuperscript{247} STFU, Report of the Executive Council, December 11-13, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
\textsuperscript{248} STFU, Convention resolution no. 1 and no. 3, December 13, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
\textsuperscript{249} Mitchell (by order of the convention) to President Truman, December 11, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, and the abolition of the poll tax. More important, however, was the material support of the AFL, which subsidized an expansion of the NFLU organizing staff. The union considered this support “the most valuable asset” it “could secure in building a nation-wide organization.”

The help seemed to be working, too. In addition to its southern locals, the union counted new growth in Florida, New Mexico, and Texas. By July 1947, the NFLU had more than doubled its membership to 15,000, earning it high praise from William Green. Green was encouraged that some of the gains resulted from new organizing drives in Florida citrus groves and the upper Rio Grande Valley of Texas. However, the union’s organizing effort in Texas illustrated the problems it would face elsewhere; one of the AFL-paid organizers noted the difficulty of organizing in a state and industry so reliant on foreign workers. Those workers would not be leaving anytime soon.

The Program in Flux

World War II ended in 1945, but the wartime Bracero Program did not, despite repeated cries that the existence of the labor importation scheme undermined American farmworkers’ standards. The NFLU blasted growers’ arguments that they required foreign workers while domestic ones suffered increasing migrancy, underemployment, and poverty and instead argued that farmworkers needed the benefits of protective legislation enjoyed by industrial workers. The union sought legislation that would extend Social Security and Fair Labor Standards Act benefits to farmworkers, re-open migratory labor camps, provide health and educational services for migrant workers’ children, and grant collective bargaining rights to workers on the nation’s Class I farms, the largest in the country. Although such farms represented only 2% of the total

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252 Mitchell to Hazel Whitman, January 6, 1949; Mitchell, Memorandum, February 1, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
number in 1945, they employed more than half of all farm wage labor.253 Mitchell urged labor leaders to help secure the legislation he proposed by extending their political education efforts to “the rural areas” where “the present Dixiecrat-Republican coalition has its base.” 254 Despite the prodding, however, Congress failed to extend old-age and survivors’ benefits to the nation’s farmworkers until 1954, and then only to year-round farm employees.255

The more immediate concern, though, was growers’ drive to continue the Bracero Program that had so undermined NFLU activity during the war. Mexican officials were concerned that the rapid return of its workers would disrupt Mexico’s economy and politics. Meanwhile, American officials feared the effects of demobilization on labor markets. With wartime justifications removed, growers claimed they needed braceros to continue working, since many of their workers had supposedly moved to the cities or joined the armed forces during the war and had not returned.

The NFLU opposed the extension of the Bracero Program vociferously, emboldened by allies who were willing to speak out on behalf of farmworkers. In December 1945, Gardner Jackson informed H.L. Mitchell that the Department of Agriculture had requested a $14 million deficiency appropriation for the Bracero Program. Jackson noted that Msgr. John O’Grady, head of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and Ernesto Galarza at the Pan American Union, were trying to mobilize opposition to the appropriation request. Jackson was optimistic that “we ought to be able to kick up quite a fuss about it.” 256 Earlier in the month, the NFLU had anticipated the move and passed a resolution opposing the Bracero Program’s extension. As part of its broader set of demands for justice for postwar agricultural workers, the union also urged

253 Mitchell, Statement to Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, April 14, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
254 NFLU, Press release, July 14, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
255 The extension covered farmworkers making more than $100 from a single employer in a given tax year. National Sharecroppers Fund, Farm Workers in 1954, December 30, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
256 Jackson to Mitchell, December 18, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.
passage of minimum wage legislation for all farm labor. It further called on Congress to “provide transportation for migratory American workers and to set up a housing program and sanitary facilities where such workers are employed” instead of importing foreign workers.\textsuperscript{257} Regardless of the opposition, however, the farm lobby prevailed; on December 28, Congress extended the Bracero Program through 1946 via Public Law 269.\textsuperscript{258}

The struggle over the Bracero Program continued throughout 1946, with the NFLU arguing against the program while growers sought its extension and a more permanent foundation for the guestworker program. While the NFLU battled cotton wage ceilings in the South throughout 1946, 32,043 Mexican contract workers tilled American soil.\textsuperscript{259} After Congress extended the program through June 1947 with Public Law 521 in July—despite rising unemployment and over the objections of organized labor—farm lobby groups began drafting legislation to make the program permanent.\textsuperscript{260} In a November 1946 press release, the NFLU denounced the proposed legislation. The union had secured copies of minutes from meetings of a “secret committee” composed of the Farm Bureau, National Grange, and the Associated Farmers of California that showed the nation’s largest growers intended to use $30 million dollars from “the American tax payers…to subsidize commercialized farming.” According to the NFLU, the legislation represented nothing less than a “conspiracy on the part of large scale industrialized farm interests.”\textsuperscript{261}

If this failed to make the point, the union hoped to stoke national security fears by focusing on the fact that the Bracero Program was stimulating undocumented immigration from Mexico. Mitchell had recently learned that “U.S. immigration authorities are winking at the

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257 STFU, Convention resolution no. 5, December 13, 1945, STFU Papers, reel 31.  
258 Jungmeyer, 100; Rasmussen, 50-2.  
259 Calavita, 218, Appendix B.  
260 Jungmeyer, 108; Kiser, 77; Rasmussen, 52.  
261 NFLU, Press release, November 25, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32.  
\end{flushright}
illegal entry of thousands of ‘Wet Backs’” into Texas.²⁶² These undocumented workers pushed native Mexican-American residents out of their homes in search of work. In fact, the NFLU had already organized some of the Mexican Americans who had “come to the mid-South on a promise of high wages.” The promises had come in Spanish-language handbills distributed by none other than the Arkansas, Mississippi, and Missouri State Agricultural Extension Services.²⁶³

Mitchell received even more evidence of this labor displacement when an Alpine, Texas Border Patrol officer wrote to him anonymously after 100 families were displaced from Fabens, Texas. The writer cited wages for undocumented workers of $1 or $2 per day. If workers complained, “they just tell him that they will turn him over to the Border Patrol….It almost amounts to slavery.” When Border Patrol officers attempted to do their jobs, their superiors often dragged their feet until the harvest was complete: “As to the charge of ‘winking’ at the entry of ‘wet backs,’ they don’t even bother to wink any more,” he wrote.²⁶⁴

In 1947, Congress refused to pass appropriations for the Bracero Program beyond December, forcing the U.S. and Mexico to negotiate a new international agreement for the program to continue. The new Republican Congress ignored growers’ demands that they needed the program to meet Marshall Plan production goals and discounted their complaints that “our farming operations will be in very bad shape” without braceros.²⁶⁵ Congressional inaction thus forced Mexico and the United States back to the negotiating table. In a series of meetings in January and February of 1947, U.S. and Mexican representatives discussed the growing problem of undocumented Mexican workers. In these meetings U.S. delegates confronted a new Mexican government headed by Miguel Alemán Valdés, who had assumed power the previous December.

²⁶² Ibid.
²⁶³ NFLU, Press release, October 1, 1946, STFU Papers, reel 32.
²⁶⁵ G.A. Pickering to Carl Hayden, September 4, 1947, Box 91, Folder 12, Carl Hayden Papers, Arizona State University Special Collections, Tempe, Arizona; Kiser, 129.
Alemán’s representatives sought to preserve existing bracero standards by legalizing undocumented Mexican workers in the United States. The two countries exchanged diplomatic notes in March stipulating that braceros who had overstayed their contracts or who had entered without documentation would be sent to border processing centers. From there, growers could contract them directly without the United States becoming a formal party to the contract.  

That agreement set the tone for the formal negotiations held in November and December as the wartime program neared its end. In the interim, the differences between the U.S. and Mexican positions became clear. Throughout 1947, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), State Department, and farm bloc congressmen sought the recommendations of grower organizations. When Mexican representatives agreed to meet at El Paso, they stipulated that an agreement should name the United States as the employer, bar the interstate movement of braceros, and prevent bracero use in areas where consular officials had received discrimination complaints. U.S. officials demanded direct employer contracting, freeing growers from the bureaucracy (and regulation) of the wartime program, and the talks deadlocked.

The breakthrough came from Mexican concessions that revealed the growing problem Mexico was having in controlling its northern border. On February 17, 1948, Mexican negotiators consented to direct employer-bracero contracting through grower associations formed during the war to contract foreign workers, some 400 of which existed by the late 1940s, but it managed to retain many of the guarantees from the 1943 agreement. The new agreement also provided for one-year limits on contracts. However, recognizing that the Bracero Program was stimulating a larger migration of undocumented workers, the postwar agreement preserved recruitment in the Mexican interior to prevent massing at the border, and, more importantly,

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266 Garcia y Griego, 126-30.
267 Garcia y Griego, 147.
268 Garcia y Griego, 153; Jungmeyer, 110.
provided for the legalization of undocumented workers and their conversion into bracero
guestworkers. 269 Reflecting U.S. growers’ new dominance over the labor recruitment scheme,
braceros lost minimum wage guarantees and unemployment insurance. 270 Mexico acceded to the
agreement because without it, undocumented immigration threatened to discredit Mexican
claims of economic progress since the Mexican Revolution, and to encourage unrest at the border.

Under the new agreement, the United States limited its involvement to certifying labor
shortages and prevailing wages through the Department of Labor and issuing visas through the
INS. As before, growers found it easy to bend the program to their will. 271 The Labor
Department’s Bureau of Employment Security used the U.S. Employment Service for these
functions, and the service in turn relied on decentralized administration through the various state
employment services, which usually rubber-stamped growers’ demands. Growers frequently
skirted effective regulation by simply advertising wages or piece rates for their jobs with their
local and state employment service offices that local farmworkers would reject out of hand.
When no workers came forward for the job offer, growers argued that there was a labor shortage,
an argument that was given the imprimatur of bureaucrats with the local and state offices and
then certified by the Department of Labor. 272

The new agreement was short-lived. Mexico continued the Texas blacklist despite the
thousands of Mexicans crowding the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso border in October 1948 in response
to the labor recruitment efforts of growers associations. 273 Besieged by grower requests, the

269 Garcia y Griego, 158; Hahmovitch, No Man’s Land, 94; Jungmeyer, 111; Kiser, 132.
270 Craig, 54.
271 Calavita, 27.
272 The Department of Labor’s administration of the program depended upon the decentralized U.S. Employment
Service, which was established by the 1933 Wagner-Peyser Act. That act created the nationwide network of state
and federal employment service offices, overseen by the department’s Bureau of Employment Security.
273 Jungmeyer, 113.
Truman Administration simply opened the border on October 16 and 17. The illegal entrants were placed under arrest, processed, and then immediately paroled to growers who trucked them to cotton and beet fields in New Mexico and West Texas.\textsuperscript{274} The process was called “drying out the wetbacks\textsuperscript{+},” and the INS made frequent use of it in the late 1940s and early 1950s to legalize as braceros those workers apprehended in the United States. Mexican officials blasted the Truman Administration’s action at the border and declared that the U.S. had unilaterally abrogated the agreement. In response, the State Department issued a diplomatic note to the Mexican Embassy stressing U.S. officials’ deep “regret that these irregularities have occurred.”\textsuperscript{275}

Following the El Paso incident, the Bracero Program functioned without any formal international agreement until August 1949, though the administrative drift illustrated just how integrated the two nation’s agricultural labor markets had become and how the Bracero Program functioned as a means of regulating what was in reality a wide-open border. During this period, no new braceros entered the United States. However, Mexico permitted those whose contracts had expired to be recontracted, and the INS continued to turn undocumented workers into official braceros by “drying them out.” In fact, whenever Texas growers (who were blacklisted until 1949) decided they would rather employ braceros instead of undocumented workers, they could simply truck their workers to the nearest Border Patrol or INS official who often legalized them on the spot without bothering to go through the official process of taking them to the border, making them place a toe over the boundary line, and then arresting them as they

\textsuperscript{274} Calavita, 30; Kiser, 133; Ngai, 153.
\textsuperscript{275} Lovett to de la Colina, Oct. 22, 1948, as quoted in Garcia y Griego, 170.

\textsuperscript{+} The term “wetback” was widely used to describe illegal immigrants who crossed the Rio Grande to enter the United States, initially to Texas. It derived from the Spanish-language term \textit{espaldas mojadas}, literally “wet backs” as a descriptor for those who had just made the Rio Grande crossing. The term rapidly acquired racial connotations of inferiority, leading to the modern terms “illegal immigrant” and “undocumented worker.” The term came into use in the early twentieth century, appearing in \textit{The New York Times} for the first time in June 1920.
“reentered” the United States. Without an official program, prospective braceros themselves found this “drying out” process useful as well. If they wished to become contracted braceros in the absence of a functioning guestworker program, they had no alternative than to cross illegally and surrender to the INS to obtain a contract.276

Both Mexico and the United States found this administrative drifting of the program unsatisfactory, so representatives of both nations met in January and February 1949 to work out a deal. Once again, however, U.S. negotiators refused to budge on their demand for border recruitment and their insistence that Texas growers gain access to braceros. Mexico held fast on its requirement for government-to-government contracting, and the talks deadlocked.277 When both sides reconvened in March, Mexico agreed to remove the blanket hold from Texas in exchange for retaining interior recruiting, but the conference failed to reach full agreement. With growers champing at the bit, Congress decided to call Mexico’s bluff in July. New Mexico Senator Clinton P. Anderson introduced S. 272, a bill to legalize unilateral border recruitment.278 The following month Mexican officials caved.

The 1949 agreement, formalized on August 1, neatly summarized the postwar power equation between the United States and Mexico. Reflecting Mexico’s weakness as well as the power of U.S. growers, it retained the 1948 agreement’s direct employer-bracero contracting. The U.S. Employment Service would continue to certify labor shortages and approve prevailing wages, but in practice it failed to enforce vigorously the domestic farmworker protections by relying on state employment service agencies dominated by growers. The agreement specified locations for future recruitment centers in areas closer to the border than Mexico had previously

276 Calavita, 28; Ngai, 153.
277 Garcia y Griego, 177-79; Jungmeyer, 115.
278 Garcia y Griego, 185.
preferred.\textsuperscript{279} Reflecting the total collapse of the Mexican bargaining position, determination of areas of discrimination (the blacklist) would now occur jointly between Mexican consular officials and U.S. Employment Service officials. This allowed Texas cotton growers to begin entering the program in large numbers, and the state rapidly became one of the largest bracero destinations.\textsuperscript{280}

Only one provision from the 1949 agreement grew out of Mexican requests, and it was no small irony that it came from the very condition that so undermined Mexico’s position. The provision formalized the practice of “drying out the wetbacks” that had arisen during the preceding nadir of international negotiations. In a bid to control its emigration problem, Mexico argued for undocumented workers’ preference in bracero contracting.\textsuperscript{281} Mexican officials argued for this provision because they wanted to ensure that undocumented workers would not undermine bracero standards. They also needed the provision to strengthen their own bargaining position. During the negotiations from 1947 to 1949, the United States repeatedly pressured its southern neighbor simply by failing to enforce its own immigration laws.\textsuperscript{282}

Still, the “drying out” system only weakened Mexico’s control over the program in the interim years between the wartime agreement and passage of Public Law 78 in 1951 because it officially sanctioned illegal immigration. If they wished to become braceros, Mexican farmworkers found it much simpler to cross the border illegally, surrender to the INS, then obtain a bracero contract rather than go through the corrupt bureaucratic process of bracero recruitment in the Mexican interior, which often required bribing officials at every turn to secure

\textsuperscript{279} These were Monterrey, Chihuahua, and Hermosillo.

\textsuperscript{280} Texas and California were the states that used the most braceros over the program’s history, with Texas often leading California throughout the 1950s. Garcia y Griego, 190-92.

\textsuperscript{281} Garcia y Griego, 191; Calavita, 28; Ngai, 152-53.

\textsuperscript{282} Garcia y Griego, 189.
In addition, there was strong demand for undocumented immigration by border cotton growers, who preferred not to deal with bracero legalisms. One New Mexico grower called the bracero contracts “absurd and unworkable” and claimed, “unless we can use Mexican wetbacks farmers will lose hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

Indeed, illegal immigration was booming. Kitty Calavita has noted that shrinking INS appropriations during these years as well as the legalization of undocumented workers encouraged Mexican immigration. Between 1947 and 1949, 74,600 braceros entered the U.S., but the INS apprehended 142,000 undocumented Mexicans. Overall, for the decade 1942-52, 818,545 bracero contracts were eclipsed by over 2 million INS apprehensions. The INS itself seemed to wink at the problem. In 1947, INS Commissioner Watson Miller stated on record before the House Committee on Agriculture that it was the agency’s duty to “protect valuable and necessary crops” by relaxing the enforcement of immigration statutes during harvests.

Lobbying Against the Bracero Program

The specter of porous borders at the dawn of the Cold War, the obvious grower dominance of the postwar Bracero Program, and rising unemployment all presented openings for the program’s opponents in the United States. AFL President William Green accused growers of encouraging illegal entry. Meanwhile, the NFLU criticized the Bracero Program for displacing

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285 For data on bracero contracts and INS apprehensions in this period, see Chapter 4, Table 4.1. Calavita, 28-32.
286 INS Commissioner Watson Miller, as quoted in Calavita, 34.
287 Kiser, 134-35.
domestic workers, with union officers repeatedly offering their opposition by testifying before congressional committees.\(^{288}\)

More broadly, program opponents could take heart from growing attention to farmworker migrancy and poverty. Officials with the U.S. Employment Service and Bureau of Agricultural Economics (as well as other agencies) had taken notice that migrancy was on the rise in American agriculture. With the approval of President Truman, those officials formed the Federal Interagency Committee on Migrant Labor in 1947, which concluded that agricultural laborers’ exclusion from American labor law and general standards of living was “almost unbelievable.” Reformers may have taken heart from that statement, but their hopes were dashed when the committee argued that the Bracero Program and other foreign guestworker programs should be expanded as a means of using their regulatory power to improve domestic farmworker conditions.\(^{289}\) Such a conclusion ignored the fact that such programs were contributing to the problem. Still, the increased attention was promising for farmworker advocates, who seemed to be winning greater publicity for the cause. In 1949, *The New York Times* highlighted the deaths of six migrant farmworker children who died of malnutrition in California.\(^{290}\) It seemed that the time was right to launch a campaign to improve farmworkers’ lives.

The NFLU, with its new mission to organize workers in the postwar agricultural economy, led the charge by throwing itself fully into the fight against the Bracero Program, which it recognized as a key barrier to both improving labor conditions in agriculture and organizing the nation’s largest farms. Amid spiking postwar unemployment, Congress had refused to extend the program beyond 1947. However, it passed supplemental appropriations for the interim agreement between the U.S. and Mexico in March while the two countries negotiated

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\(^{288}\) Kiser, 134-35; Majka and Majka, 146-48.

\(^{289}\) Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land*, 93.

\(^{290}\) *New York Times*, November 6, 1949.
a more permanent arrangement. The interim program allowed braceros overstaying their contracts and undocumented workers who had been apprehended to sign new contracts. Under this program, 19,632 braceros were re-contracted, while approximately 55,000 undocumented workers became braceros.291

The NFLU strategy to combat the program as it entered a period of administrative drift focused on substituting its members for braceros, a strategy it had tried during the war with limited success. Bereft of any governmental allies in charge of administering the program, however, the union was reduced to merely registering its protests against the failure of government officials to ensure domestic farmworkers were employed. In a letter to INS Commissioner Ugo Carusi, Mitchell argued, “There is a sufficient supply of farm labor in the United States at the present time if it is properly recruited and transferred.” Citing a Texas grower’s recent request (which sought to undermine Mexico’s blacklist of the state) for 4,000 braceros, Mitchell noted that the state’s own labor commissioner recently admitted that over 32,000 farmworkers had been recruited and transported out of the state in 1946. Furthermore, the NFLU representative in San Antonio advised him that there were at least 16,000 workers available in that city.292 Not only was there no labor shortage nationally, but there was also none deep in the heart of Texas.

In July, Mitchell went over Carusi’s head, writing directly to Attorney General Tom Clark. Mitchell declared, “the Immigration and Naturalization authorities have not carried out the terms of the agreement made with the Republic of Mexico in respect to determining the available American labor supply and the prevailing wages.”293 When there was no substantive response, the union pressed the undocumented worker problem again. George Webber, one of the NFLU’s

291 Calavita, 218, Appendix B.
292 Mitchell to Carusi, April 17, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
293 Mitchell to Clark, July 15, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
AFL-subsidized organizers then working in the Rio Grande Valley, wrote a memorandum that Mitchell forwarded to the INS in August. In it, Webber reported seeing “numerous large land owners grow rich, powerful and arrogant on the slave wages which they pay to… illegal wet labor from Mexico.” At a time when the national minimum wage was 40¢/hour, hourly wages on farms there were as low as 25¢, with growers pledging to “close the farms” and advocating “shooting strikers” before they would increase rates.²⁹⁴ INS Assistant Commissioner Joseph Savoretti simply brushed the concerns aside and stated the Service was doing its job.²⁹⁵ The fruitless exchanges over conditions in Texas continued until October, when events in California focused the NFLU’s attention elsewhere.

When Truman authorized unilateral recruitment in 1948, Mitchell sent him a telegram blasting the action, which he said, “borders on peonage for Mexican nationals.”²⁹⁶ AFL President William Green echoed the sentiment in a similar letter to Attorney General Tom Clark, calling it “involuntary servitude.”²⁹⁷ As the dust settled in 1949, the NFLU kept up its lobbying, extending its efforts to Mexico’s Ambassador Rafael de la Colina. In March, Mitchell sent the ambassador a copy of a paycheck to Bonifacio Ramirez Servín, a bracero who had earned $1.53 for a week’s wages, after deductions.²⁹⁸

Ultimately, the Department of Labor proved a more inviting target for NFLU lobbying, its only potential ally in a period when growers had successfully privatized the Bracero Program through direct recruitment with minimal oversight. In pressuring the department, the union pursued the same strategy it had during World War II: attempting to replace braceros with domestic workers. In March 1950, Mitchell accompanied NFLU organizers to a meeting with

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²⁹⁵ Savoretti to Mitchell, July 31, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
²⁹⁶ Mitchell to Truman, telegram, October 17, 1948, STFU Papers reel 33.
²⁹⁷ Green to Clark, October 21, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
²⁹⁸ Mitchell to Rafael de la Colina, March 21, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
Robert Goodwin, director of the U.S. Employment Service, as well as Ralph Wright and John Gibson, both assistant secretaries of labor. At the meeting, the Labor Department officials agreed to notify the union “of all orders for farm workers placed with the Local Employment Service office” where the union had “substantial membership.”

Yet growers easily skirted government officials’ promises, and the union found its lobbying efforts frustrated by the decentralized operation of the program. Despite Goodwin’s assurances that the department discouraged the “employment of foreign labor,” Mitchell found it necessary to write to Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin in April to protest the fact that “local employment offices…are ignoring the expressed desire of your Department to give American citizens available jobs.” As he had during the war, Mitchell offered to “assist in supplying American workers,” but the union’s California organizers repeatedly found that local officials “advised them that the employers who had requested Mexican nationals refused to hire American workers” because they were unreliable. Overall, growers found it easy to avoid the minimal legal protections of the Bracero Program in an era when they exercised outsized influence over its implementation through local and state officials who deferred to their judgment. By the summer of 1950, when William Green protested, “there is no need for the importation of thousands of Mexican workers,” labor’s lobbying had become pro forma.

West Coast Blues: The NFLU Moves West

As it became increasingly obvious that the Bracero Program was not going to disappear with other wartime programs, the NFLU moved west, prospecting for organizational

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299 Mitchell to Hank Hasiwar, et al., March 30, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 34.
300 Goodwin to Mitchell, January 17, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 34; Mitchell to Tobin, April 21, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
301 Mitchell, Memo to USES, ND, April 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35; Mitchell to Goodwin, June 6, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
302 Green to Dean Acheson, August 17, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
opportunities along the way. If the union, now backed with AFL support, hoped to organize agricultural workers in the postwar economy, it would need to focus on the largest farms. Although such farms only made up a small fraction of the total in the United States, they employed a majority of the seasonal labor force most in need of organization. They were also run by the growers most interested in guestworker programs, dependent as they were on huge labor forces that they needed for only short periods of time. In November 1947, Mitchell accompanied AFL-paid organizer George Webber on a tour of the Southwest to conduct “a survey of organization of agricultural workers” on such farms. Although they considered methods to organize workers in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, the NFLU ultimately focused on California, where the state’s large consolidated farms and history of what Carey McWilliams called “factories in the field” offered a more targeted approach to organizing.303

Go West, and Suffer

In setting up the NFLU’s California operation, Mitchell chose two men to chart the strategy. The first was Hank Hasiwar, the Bronx-born son of German social democratic immigrants. Hasiwar attended Columbia University for two years in the mid-1930s until he was expelled for leading student activists in a picket in support of striking university service workers. When Hasiwar left Columbia, Local 94 of the International Union of Operating Engineers hired him as an organizer. After Pearl Harbor, he joined the army and served in the Pacific and postwar Japan until, according to Mitchell’s account, he publicly accused General Douglas MacArthur of selling out Japanese workers. Hasiwar was introduced to Mitchell at the 1946 AFL convention, and, ever the champion of underdogs, he accepted a job with the union.304

304 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in this Land, 247-50.
The second man Mitchell chose was Ernesto Galarza, someone who would come to play a critical role in the union and its fight against the Bracero Program. Galarza was born in Jalcocotán, Nayarit, near the Pacific Ocean in central Mexico. His family came north to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, eventually settling in Sacramento’s barrio. As a teenager, he earned money in the fields each summer until he was fired for contacting a state immigration and housing inspector when field workers became ill after drinking contaminated irrigation water—the only source available to them. Galarza finished high school, graduated from Occidental College with honors, earned a master’s degree from Stanford in 1929, and in 1944 received a Ph.D. from Columbia after a three-year stint working as a principal on Long Island. He also worked for the Pan American Union as director of Labor and Social Information between 1939 and 1946, where he first became interested in the Bracero Program. In 1947, Galarza addressed the NFLU’s January convention and challenged the union to organize the Mexican American farmworkers who suffered disproportionately from bracero competition. Mitchell asked him to work as the union’s research director, and he eagerly agreed.\(^{305}\)

Once in California, the NFLU did not have to wait long before farmworkers came looking for it, and the result would become the longest agricultural strike in the nation’s history and the first major agricultural labor dispute since the upheavals of the Great Depression. On May 5, 1947, Bob Whatley, a labor organizer formerly of Oklahoma, sent a letter to the union’s Washington office. Residents of Lamont and Arvin had been discussing conditions at the Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation, and Whatley requested that the union send “a good speaker and some literature.”\(^{306}\) Sensing the organizing opportunity they had been waiting for in California,


\(^{306}\) Whatley to Mitchell, as quoted in Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 101.
Mitchell and Hasiwar toured the state, with Hasiwar staying behind in Bakersfield to organize.\textsuperscript{307}

By August Hasiwar and Whatley had enrolled 1,200 workers in the newly formed Kern County Farm Labor Union Local 218-NFLU. Of those, 858 worked for Di Giorgio, many of them having made their way west from Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma during the Depression and World War II. Jim Price, a Di Giorgio packing shed foreman, was elected president of the local.\textsuperscript{308}

There was perhaps no better example of the large growers the NFLU hoped to force to the bargaining table in its bid to organize postwar agriculture than Joseph Di Giorgio. His Di Giorgio Fruit Corporation operated two major agricultural enterprises in California, the Sierra Vista ranch near Delano, and the 11,000-acre Di Giorgio Farms near Arvin, where Di Giorgio lived and personally oversaw his massive farm. In addition to employing over 1,300 farmworkers whom he paid between 80¢ and 85¢ hourly, Di Giorgio also employed braceros, both to supplement his labor force and as an implicit threat to his workers. The corporation controlled distribution networks for its produce in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and New York, raising its annual sales to $18 million in 1946. Di Giorgio Fruit was also well connected. Joseph Di Giorgio had extensive business ties through his nephew Robert Di Giorgio, who served on the boards of Bank of America and the Union Oil Company. If the NFLU could force a deal with the powerful Di Giorgio, perhaps it could force other major California producers to follow suit and thus unleash an organizing drive among the nation’s poorest workers.\textsuperscript{309}

On September 22, Hasiwar sent Di Giorgio a letter stating that a majority of his 1,345 employees had designated Local 218 as their bargaining representative. He requested a meeting with Di Giorgio to discuss wages, working conditions, and union recognition. Specifically, the

\textsuperscript{307} Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 101.
\textsuperscript{308} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 98-101; Majka and Majka, 146-47.
union sought a 10¢ hourly raise, seniority rights to protect long-serving workers from layoffs during slack periods, and a grievance procedure. Di Giorgio flatly refused and remained uninterested when Hasiwar offered to submit the employees’ authorization cards to a third-party arbiter. On September 30, Local 218 held a meeting and voted to strike. The next day, supported by the Kern County Central Labor Union and Teamsters Local 87, which had a contract with Di Giorgio in Bakersfield, the union instituted what it called “the world’s largest picket line,” a caravan of cars and trucks carrying strikers that stretched for nineteen miles.310

The strikers’ spirits ran high, buoyed by their sense of common purpose. On the picket line, they joined together in singing the “Ballad of the Di Giorgio Strikers,” written by Galarza, which gave voice to their migrant heritage of dislocation and injustice. In it, a “lonesome stranger” approached the picket line and identified himself as “Joad,” a reference to the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. As the song continued, Joad stood up at a strike meeting and declared “with a voice like Resurrection,”

> There’s a fence around Creation,  
> There’s a mortgage on the sun,  
> They have put electric meters  
> Where the rivers used to run.  
>  
> God Almighty made the valley  
> For a land of milk and honey,  
> But a corporation’s got it  
> For to turn it into money.311

The first day of the strike reduced Di Giorgio’s labor force by two-thirds as most of the white farmworkers came out, severely impeding the farm’s activity. Most of those who remained in the fields and packing sheds were braceros, Filipino-Americans, and Mexican-Americans who

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lived on company property.\textsuperscript{312} Realizing that this skeleton crew could keep the farm operating at a bare minimum, Hasiwar recruited Louis De Anda (whose sister Hasiwar later married), a Mexican-American and former Air Force officer, to persuade the braceros and Mexican-Americans to turn out with the strikers. De Anda succeeded; Di Giorgio’s Mexican-American workers and braceros either stayed in their housing or joined the picket line.\textsuperscript{313}

The braceros did not stay out for long, however, illustrating both growers’ control over foreign guestworkers as well as agricultural employers’ ability to undercut labor organization by employing them. At Di Giorgio’s request on October 2, local Department of Agriculture official Norman Lepper persuaded the 130 Mexican nationals to return to work by threatening them with deportation for breaking their contract, even though that contract specifically forbade their employment during labor disputes. According to Hasiwar, the braceros were offered “the alternative of acting as strikebreakers or being sent back to Mexico immediately.”\textsuperscript{314} The NFLU denounced this grower-bureaucrat collusion from its Washington headquarters, declaring that the federal government had forced the guestworkers “to become strike breakers.”\textsuperscript{315} Nevertheless, citing Mexican consular officials’ reports that the braceros were happy to have the work, the Department of Agriculture and State Department both refused to remove the braceros.\textsuperscript{316} Under pressure from the AFL, administrators eventually removed braceros on November 10, but the six-week interim allowed Di Giorgio more than enough time to hire strikebreakers, some of them through the Bakersfield office of the California Farm Placement Service, a division of the California Employment Service and affiliate of the U.S. Employment Service.\textsuperscript{317}

\textsuperscript{312} Majka and Majka, 147.
\textsuperscript{313} Ibid.; Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in this Land}, 253-54.
\textsuperscript{314} Hasiwar, Press Release, October 2, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\textsuperscript{315} NFLU, Press Release, October 20, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\textsuperscript{316} Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 104.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 105; NFLU, Press Release, November 10, 1947.
When the union began stationing pickets at Farm Placement Service offices to inform applicants that a strike was in progress, Di Giorgio turned to its own recruitment efforts and continued to avoid dealing with the union. In a mid-November strike bulletin, Hasiwar cited rumors “that workers of Japanese ancestry are being recruited” in addition to “workers of Mexican descent, from as far off as El Paso…to break the picket line.” In response, the union began circulating leaflets throughout nearby towns to notify farmworkers of the strike.

Nevertheless, Di Giorgio continued to recruit Mexican-American workers from El Paso, some of whom reported, “They were not told that a strike is going on.” Upon their arrival at the farm’s company housing, they found that “the mattresses have lice, the food is poor and inadequate, and the camp is dirty…[with] no hot water.”

By the end of 1947, the Di Giorgio strike had won national attention. On Thanksgiving Day former Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, who had resigned from the Truman Administration over what he considered Truman’s abandonment of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal principles, wrote a syndicated column sympathizing with migrant farmworkers and citing the Di Giorgio strike as an example of poor agricultural labor relations. In response, local businessmen and growers formed the Kern County Special Citizens Committee to denounce Ickes’s column and accuse the strike leaders of being “outsiders,” who threatened “the pioneers who built Kern County.” The committee’s “outsider” characterization resulted from union donations from around the country to help the strikers. The California State Federation of Labor channeled

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320 Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 7, December 12, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
321 Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 8, December 20, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
322 Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 106.
323 Kern County Special Citizens Committee, “A Community Aroused”, as quoted in Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 107.
support to the Bakersfield Central Labor Council’s Di Giorgio Strike Fund Committee.\(^{324}\) This assistance proved critical to the strike’s longevity, since Local 218 quickly exhausted its treasury, and the NFLU had only $2,512 on hand by the end of the November.\(^{325}\)

As the strike continued into 1948, organized labor in California and across the nation kept sending its support. By April 1949, the strike fund had disbursed $87,749 and distributed over $20,000 in supplies.\(^{326}\) On the publicity front, in 1948 the AFL’s Hollywood Film Council produced *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*, a short film that documented local farmworker conditions and explained the strikers’ demands; it was screened in union halls to solicit donations.\(^{327}\) Screenings of the film allowed the strike fund to collect and disburse over $250,000 by the time the union called off the strike in 1950.\(^{328}\)

Regardless of the support, Di Giorgio maintained the upper hand. The union did not strike during the busiest harvest season, giving Joseph Di Giorgio enough time to recruit strikebreakers. He also mobilized local law enforcement to evict workers who lived on company housing and arrest strikers on trumped-up charges.\(^{329}\) Red-baiting state politicians also attacked the union. In February, Mitchell and Hasiwar appeared before the California Senate Fact-finding Committee on Unamerican Activities to answer charges that the strike was “led or backed by the communists.”\(^{330}\) Mitchell, with his seething hatred for Communists dating to the days of the STFU-UCAPAWA merger, simply noted that the NFLU constitution forbade Communist Party members from joining.\(^{331}\)

\(^{324}\) California State Federation of Labor, Weekly Newsletter, October 29, 1947, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\(^{325}\) Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 107.
\(^{326}\) Ibid., 108.
\(^{327}\) Ernesto Galarza, “Report on Activities for the NFLU”, January 6, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
\(^{328}\) Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land*, 255.
\(^{329}\) Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 10, January 12, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\(^{330}\) Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 15, February 15, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
\(^{331}\) Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land*, 259.
As the protracted strike dragged on, the NFLU tried to press the company on one infraction where it felt it could gain traction: Di Giorgio’s employment of undocumented workers alongside braceros, a clear violation of the Bracero Program and a perfect example of growers’ abuse of the program as they sought to keep their fields union-free. After repeated protests by the union, on April 1 INS officers raided the Di Giorgio farm and arrested thirty Mexican citizens. A strike bulletin reported that union members engaged in their own vigilante justice, helping “corner the illegal ‘wetback’ Mexicans when they ran down the road.”

Although such raids seemed to offer hope to the strikers, Ernesto Galarza noted that after a few days “they re-appear at the ranch.” He continued, “They are, in short, perfect strike breakers.”

Although Di Giorgio managed to keep the farm running, the company experienced difficulty moving and selling its produce, a fact that buoyed NFLU hopes for its do-or-die strike. The AFL had placed its products on a list of “unfair goods,” and pickets reported that Di Giorgio asparagus was rotting in the company dump since Teamsters refused to transport it and unionized grocery clerks around the nation refused to stock it. The strike leaders remained hopeful. In April Hasiwar reported that the Di Giorgio strike had spread word of the union throughout the state. Organizers were canvassing workers around Fresno and Stockton, as well as in the Salinas Valley south of San Jose. He believed “organization is showing progress.” In a few months, the union “should be able to enter into relations with growers in the various areas,” Hasiwar wrote, even if the strike failed.

On the evening of May 17, 1948, the Di Giorgio strike committee members gathered to decide what to do next. For all intents and purposes, they knew they had lost their strike against

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332 Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 22, April 3, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
334 Kern County NFLU, Strike Bulletin No. 24, April 18, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
Di Giorgio, but the organizers felt certain that they were making progress on their broader goal of spreading the union gospel in California fields by using the picket as a focal point for the injustice perpetrated by the nation’s largest growers. The strike committee assembled in the home of Hattie Shadowens—a 30-year-old Di Giorgio packing shed worker who started her day with a bottle of beer. Shadowens and her husband welcomed Hasiwar; William Swearingen, an NFLU organizer, and his wife; Riley Watson, an Oklahoma Indian active in Local 218, and his wife, a local strike leader; and Jim Price, president of the local, into their home for the meeting.

The tone of the meeting alternated between despair and hope. Hasiwar later stated, “We all knew the strike was lost.” But the strike committee remained upbeat as it tried to determine how to move forward. Strikers who had left in search of other work were spreading word of the union throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Perhaps the Di Giorgio diaspora could lead to an organizing drive throughout the state’s agricultural valleys, forcing the powerful California growers to deal fairly with a united labor force.336

At 9:30 P.M. that hopeful conversation was abruptly cut short. Five shots rang out from an automatic rifle aimed at the Shadowens’ living room. One of the bullets flew through an open window and struck an iron bar behind the sofa where Hasiwar—the likely target—was seated. Three others missed their marks. The last, however, tore through Jim Price’s face, entering his right cheek and exiting through his left ear. As they prepared to rush him to the hospital eighteen miles away in Bakersfield, the strike committee summoned Dr. D.D. Schmidt to administer first aid. Schmidt, who served as Di Giorgio’s company doctor, said he could not get involved. Price nearly bled to death on the drive to Bakersfield, and he lived the rest of his life permanently disfigured. Despite Gov. Earl Warren’s announcement of a $5,000 reward and his promise to “promptly undertake the investigation of the attempted assassination,” no arrests were ever

336 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in this Land, 257.
made. The assassination attempt had made clear that by the eighth month, the strike’s stakes had risen considerably. It would only take another month for the strike to enter its long, slow decline.

*Taft-Hartley’s Bitter Irony for Farmworkers*

On June 27, Ernesto Galarza wrote to Dorothy Dowe Mitchell at the NFLU’s Washington office to deliver the news. The union was about to be “enjoined from inducing members of other unions from refusing to handle Di Giorgio’s produce.” Di Giorgio had filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board against the NFLU under the Taft-Hartley Act, which did not cover agricultural workers. Galarza noted that the injunction paradoxically determined the union “to be a labor organization under the meaning of the act” without defining the strikers as “‘employees’ under the meaning of the act, which specifically exempts us.” The following day, NFLU attorney Alexander Schullman filed a motion to dismiss “on the grounds that the NLRB is seeking to invoke a law that specifically excludes all agricultural laborers.”

In effect, Di Giorgio had managed to secure a ruling that punished the NFLU for unfair labor practices even though the people it represented disqualified the union from being considered a labor organization under the act. As Galarza later noted in his book, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, Di Giorgio took a “tantalizing risk” by seeking the injunction against the union’s secondary boycott. The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, like the Wagner Act before it, specifically excluded agricultural workers. If upheld and extended, Di Giorgio’s complaint

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338 Galarza to Dorothy Dowel Mitchell, June 27, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 261.
could have invoked coverage for all agricultural workers even though it sought to penalize NFLU members specifically. Galarza later summarized the contradiction well: “Of immediate advantage to the corporation, this would have undercut what the industry as a whole regarded as an inviolable principle.”

The injunction, issued by Judge Pierson Hall of the Federal District Court in Los Angeles, was delivered to Hasiwar on July 4, 1948. In addition to Local 218, the union’s Winery Workers locals as well as the Teamsters were named as defendants. Immediately, the NFLU sought to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the injunction. Schullman advised Hasiwar to file anti-Communist affidavits and financial statements to qualify as a labor organization under Taft-Hartley, then instructed him to file both an unfair labor practice charge for “refusal to bargain and with discrimination,” as well as a petition for an NLRB representation election. By the end of the month, NLRB Acting Regional Director Charles K. Hackler responded to the petition, declaring, “no employees within the meaning of the Act are involved in this proceeding. I am, therefore, refusing to issue complaint in this matter.”

Schullman was furious. In a hearing before the NLRB on August 3, he denounced the decision, and he notified the hearing examiner that he was appealing it. He also filed a petition for an injunction against the Board “until such time as you either agree to hear unfair labor practice charges against the company or the court decides your procedure is unconstitutional.” By the end of October, the appeal had failed; the NLRB’s general counsel agreed that according to the act, “no employees” were involved. The NFLU’s attempt to test the constitutionality of

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341 Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 112.
342 Ibid., 112; Hasiwar to Mitchell, July 4, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
343 Schullman to Hasiwar, July 6, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
344 Hackler to Kern County Farm Labor Union, Local 218, July 29, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
345 Schullman, Opening Statement before the National Labor Relations Board in the Matter of *Di Giorgio Wine Company et al. v. Kern County Farm Labor Union Local 218 et al.*, August 3, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
346 Joseph G. Wells to Kern County Farm Labor Union Local 218, October 27, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
the Taft-Hartley Act for punishing workers who were “exempted from all benefits that can possibly accrue from the law” continued into 1949.\textsuperscript{347} On January 3, the Board sustained a regional director’s decision to dismiss one of the NFLU’s certification election petitions for failing to register with the Labor Department and submit non-Communist affidavits.\textsuperscript{348} Hasiwar had already filed the documents in question months before on Schullman’s advice. In a letter to NLRB Assistant Executive Secretary Louis Becker, Schullman demanded that if the Board wanted to deny the petition, it should do so “on the true basis that agricultural workers are exempt from the Act.” “Why doesn’t the Board and why don’t you have the courage to say so?” he asked.\textsuperscript{349}

By April, Schullman told Mitchell that the NLRB appeals process was a dead end. Instead, he favored an appeal “through the Courts” and all the way “to the United States Supreme Court” if necessary. He believed the NFLU stood a chance of “making historic law,” equal to the 1937 \textit{Jones & Laughlin} case that paved the way for steelworker organizing by upholding the Wagner Act. The union, Schullman thought, could give “the legal impetus necessary for the organization of agricultural workers in this country.”\textsuperscript{350} The opportunity never came. By November 1949 the NLRB realized that it was taking its own “tantalizing risk” and held that Local 218 “should not be penalized and at the same time denied any rights under the Taft-Hartley Act.”\textsuperscript{351} This effectively left the door open to later farmworker organization efforts under the United Farm Workers in the 1960s, which emphasized boycotts.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{347} Kern County Farm Labor Union, Strike Bulletin, August 17, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{348} Schullman to Hasiwar, January 3, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{349} Schullman to Becker, January 3, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{350} Schullman to Mitchell, April 1, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{351} NFLU, Press Release, November 21, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
\end{itemize}
Endgame

While the procedural legalism of the nation’s labor law ran its course, the Di Giorgio strike continued, though Hasiwar later admitted that Di Giorgio’s use of braceros, undocumented workers, and replacement workers made it clear as early as May 1948 that the union could not force the company to the table. Nevertheless, Mitchell advised Hasiwar to maintain a reduced picket line at the farm “as a symbol from here on out.” Rather than admit defeat, Hasiwar should “just say it’s at a stalemate,” Mitchell wrote. As long as Local 218 continued to picket, “we can raise money and get publicity,” he argued, “so keep that line on whatever else you do.” Never flush with cash, the NFLU needed all the help it could get. By December 1948, Mitchell informed the union’s Memphis office that the NFLU was furloughing organizers and discontinuing its paper because it had “hit the bottom financially,” though donations continued to trickle in from sources like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and Mitchell’s friends at the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, as well as the National Sharecroppers Fund. The union turned its attention to making organizing contacts among farmworkers in other parts of the San Joaquin Valley.

The focus returned to Di Giorgio late in 1949 when the House Education and Labor Committee instructed a subcommittee to investigate the strike. The hearings began in Bakersfield on November 12, 1949. Representative Cleveland Bailey chaired the hearings, with Tom Steed and Richard Nixon rounding out the quorum. Despite his presence as a minority Republican member on the subcommittee, Nixon dominated the hearings. Halfway between his performance...

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352 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in this Land, 257.
353 Mitchell to Hasiwar, September 1, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
354 Mitchell to Arthur Churchill, December 6, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33; Mitchell to David Dubinsky, February 11, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34; Mitchell to Pat Gorman, April 13, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34; Gorman to Mitchell, May 26, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
355 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 109, 113.
356 Ernesto Galarza, Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field (Notre Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1970), 41-42.
in the Alger Hiss case and his defeat of Senator Helen Gahagan Douglas, Nixon played to his audience of growers and their allies by leading union witnesses. He asked Jim Price what he earned when he came to work for Di Giorgio in 1939. “I believe it was twenty-five cents,” Price replied. Nixon asked him what he made when the strike began, to which Price answered, “Eighty cents.” In a show of loyalty to his state’s powerful growers, Nixon declared, “That’s a little more than three times as much.”

Audience members from the agribusiness community were impressed.

When the time came for the Di Giorgio Corporation to offer its testimony, Robert Di Giorgio focused all of his efforts on an attack against the film Poverty in the Valley of the Plenty, which had been released to help raise money for the strike in 1948. He announced that the company had recently filed a $2 million libel suit against the union and the AFL Hollywood Film Council. Di Giorgio claimed that the union misrepresented company housing by failing to announce in the film that farmworkers’ shacks depicted on the reels were not located on Di Giorgio’s farm. Bailey closed the hearings on November 13, promising to issue a report upon due study and consideration of all the testimony.

It was ultimately Nixon who authored the report that Thomas Werdell, the Republican representative for Di Giorgio’s district, inserted into the Congressional Record. Masquerading as the majority report, it denounced the union, declared that there was no strike, and called the film a “shocking collection of falsehoods almost wholly unrelieved by any regard for the truth.” Meanwhile, with a massive libel suit facing the NFLU and no funds to contest it, Mitchell followed the advice of the California State Federation of Labor to settle out of court. In exchange

357 Ibid., 45.
358 Ibid., 47-48.
359 Ibid., 53.
for Di Giorgio reducing the damages claim to one dollar, the union agreed to recall the film.\textsuperscript{360}

The final part of the deal came on May 9, 1950, more than two years and seven months after the strike began, when Mitchell announced “the ending of the longest agricultural strike in labor history.”\textsuperscript{361}

\textit{Beyond Di Giorgio}

Reflecting on the Di Giorgio strike at the end of November 1948, Mitchell wrote to Hank Hasiwar advising a more deliberate organizing strategy if the union hoped to succeed in fighting the powerful growers who used their money, power, and braceros and undocumented workers against the union and its strikes. He wanted Hasiwar to “build a solid core” of farmworker “leadership capable of doing a job when we eventually tackle some of the large corporation farms.” He noted that the union’s executive council did “not believe that in the foreseeable future we can take on another Di Giorgio.” Mitchell closed by telling Hasiwar that he hoped to move Ernesto Galarza from research work to organization. Indeed, had the NFLU had Galarza in the field, “we might have known not to take on Di Giorgio when we did.” He could also offer better contacts with the Mexican-American communities of California’s agricultural towns.\textsuperscript{362} Galarza dove into his new assignment. He met with Hasiwar soon after the latter received Mitchell’s letter, and the two decided that Galarza would have to perform “a roving job of tying in Mexicans and helping to set up local leadership and then following it up until it is well integrated into the local.”\textsuperscript{363} As the bracero, Mexican-American, and undocumented strikebreakers had revealed, this was absolutely essential to the union’s future success. By the end of December,

\textsuperscript{361} NFLU, Press Release, May 9, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\textsuperscript{362} Mitchell to Hasiwar, November 26, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
\textsuperscript{363} Galarza to Mitchell, December 1, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
Galarza had concluded a statewide survey of Mexican-American communities, and he had a plan.

As representatives from the United States and Mexico prepared to discuss the coming 1949 Bracero Program agreement, Galarza recommended that Mitchell issue “a statement in Spanish addressed to the Mexicans” about the Bracero Program as a potential rallying point.364 Such a statement was necessary, Galarza through, if the union hoped to fully combat the advantages California growers enjoyed. That statement found expression in a flier issued by the Sindicato Americano Nacional de Trabajadores Agricolas—the Spanish-language equivalent of the NFLU’s name. It denounced the program’s attempt to invite braceros to “share the misery of your fellows” and defined the union’s goals as “decent wages, good living conditions, and dignified treatment” for farmworkers.365

Galarza continued to stress the central importance of the Bracero Program in organizing California farmworkers. It was, he emphasized, “an acute issue among the resident farm workers, especially the Mexicans, and should be used as one of the major points in organizing.” Moreover, he argued the program had a direct impact on the earnings of farmworkers. He noted that California cotton growers had reduced the 1949 picking wage from $3.00 to $2.50 cwt. Galarza continued, “It happened, however, that the Mexican and American negotiators in Mexico City had agreed to precisely the same rate” as the minimum for braceros employed in cotton.366 By the end of August (the same month Mexico and the United States formalized a new agreement), the union had turned the program “into a regular organizing campaign,” which brought Galarza “the biggest Mexican turnouts yet.”367

364 Galarza to Mitchell, December 27, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
365 SANTA, Flier, January 21, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
366 Galarza to Mitchell, August 15, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
367 Galarza to Mitchell, August 25, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
Having spread the word among the San Joaquin Valley farmworkers, the NFLU made a move in September. Hasiwar, Galarza, and other union activists had attended a grower-organized cotton wage conference at the beginning of the month, submitting “10,000 ballots signed by cotton pickers.” The NFLU representatives demanded $3.50 cwt for picking, although the ballots indicated that farmworkers would settle for $3.00.\(^{368}\) The grower representatives jeered them.\(^{369}\) Within days, cotton pickers simply refused to go into the fields, and Local 218 assumed leadership of the spontaneous strike. By September 21, Galarza reported that cotton ginning was down by 80%. Four caravans of strikers traversed the local roads, calling out workers over loudspeakers; some 20,000 were already out.\(^{370}\) In response, Tulare County “hurriedly adopted an ordinance prohibiting the use of loudspeakers,” while local authorities kept the caravans from stopping on the side of the road so organizers could speak with workers, and they arrested some of the picketers.\(^{371}\)

By the end of the month, Hasiwar requested State Conciliation Service mediation. The service declined, but advised the union that many growers—especially smaller ones who bristled at the large growers’ control of credit—were meeting the $3.00 rate. The last holdout was the San Joaquin Valley Agricultural Labor Bureau, which Galarza characterized as “the stronghold of the corporation farms and the cottonseed distributors.”\(^{372}\) However, as increasing numbers of small- and medium-sized farms offered $3.00, many of the larger operators quietly followed suit.\(^{373}\) The NFLU declared the strike finished on October 18. On a crop of almost one million

\(^{368}\) According to Galarza’s book, the ballots indicated farmworkers “would stand on a demand for three dollars.” NFLU Press Release, September 2, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34; Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 123.

\(^{369}\) NFLU Press Release, September 3, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.

\(^{370}\) Galarza to Mitchell, September 21, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.


\(^{372}\) Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 125.

\(^{373}\) Ibid., 126.
acres that employed tens of thousands, Hasiwar estimated that the strike brought farmworkers $5 million more than they would have earned otherwise. However, the victory revealed the limits of the NFLU’s success. While the union prevented a rate cut, it gained neither vast new members nor contracts. And while Di Giorgio strikers helped spread the word about the union throughout the San Joaquin Valley, the fact that they had moved on to other work illustrated the union’s tenuous base of organization. How could the union organize migrant workers into durable unions when those workers had to move around to make a living?

The migrancy problem—a problem that was only accelerating in postwar agriculture—plagued the union’s efforts throughout 1949 and 1950. After the cotton strike, Galarza suggested that “the problem of tying our locals down” could be accomplished by “building them on permanents” whom the union would assist in finding work locally. He thought eight locals could be established on a permanent basis in the four central counties of the valley. From those locals, the union could “build up a base and a supply of trained leadership from the ranks.” Mitchell disagreed, claiming that the union needed “more extension and less concentration,” though he acknowledged that local leadership had to be strong enough to run locals “without constant attention by organizers.” Mitchell went on in the letter to suggest that two organizers could handle the territory “from Fresno to Bakersfield,” while Hasiwar and Galarza dealt with the Imperial Valley, Salinas, and Stockton. Essentially, he was suggesting that four men cover the entire southern half of the third-largest state in the Union.

They made a valiant attempt. In the first six months of 1950, Hasiwar, Galarza, Bill Becker, and Bill Swearingen collectively organized 10 locals, processed 2,091 membership

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374 Galarza to Mitchell, telegram, September 30, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34; Galarza, Farm Workers and Agribusiness in California, 126.
375 Galarza to Mitchell, October 20, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
376 Galarza, Supplement to Report, December 17, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
377 Mitchell to Galarza, March 3, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 34.
applications, and attended 222 local union meetings. \( ^{378} \) Nevertheless, Galarza wrote to Mitchell in June that “Our locals fold up. The executive boards disintegrate.” Organizers, he stated, “run around in a circle.” \( ^{379} \) He continued the refrain in October. “We have pushed untrained organizers far too fast,” he wrote, and “We are all stale from too much strain.” To do the job properly would require “a period of three or four years with an investment of $50,000 a year.” \( ^{380} \) The NFLU simply could not afford it, and to make matters worse, the AFL was beginning to tire of supporting the NFLU’s organizing staff. By the end of 1950, AFL president William Green informed Mitchell that he could not continue to employ “this large number of organizers…for a continued and indefinite period of time.” \( ^{381} \) Apparently the handful of organizers it had subsidized was more than the AFL could spare for the workers who most needed organization. The National Sharecroppers Fund offered to help pick up the slack, but Mitchell had little faith in the fund, since even it had difficulty meeting its monthly commitments to the NFLU during the Di Giorgio strike. \( ^{382} \) Still, the NFLU had learned important lessons. For one, it would have to focus more on organizing California’s resident Mexican American populations moving forward. More to the point, however, it would need to bring greater attention to the ways in which the Bracero Program undercut both farmworkers’ wages and working conditions as well as their ability to organize into unions to challenge their employers.

**The Truman Commission**

The summer of 1950 offered a major opportunity for labor, liberals, and other reformers to begin to do just that as an anti-Bracero Program coalition began to form by attacking the program before the executive branch. In June 1950, President Truman created the President’s

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\( ^{378} \) NFLU, “Summary of Organizers’ Reports,” June 1, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\( ^{379} \) Galarza to Mitchell, June 9, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\( ^{380} \) Galarza to Mitchell, October 24, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\( ^{381} \) Green to Mitchell, December 21, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\( ^{382} \) Beth Biderman, Memorandum to NSF Board Members, December 6, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
Commission on Migratory Labor, which he established in the wake of a confidential investigation into Mexican officials’ complaints about the program and INS claims that it was creating an undocumented immigration problem in the Southwest. The commissioners were William Leiserson, former chairman of the National Mediation Board; Robert Lucey, the Catholic Church’s Archbishop of San Antonio, active in the Bishops Committee for the Spanish-Speaking, and a man who would become keenly interested in farmworker conditions over time; Peter Odegard, a professor at the University of California; and Maurice Van Hecke, a law professor at the University of North Carolina. The Truman Commission held twelve hearings across the nation to gather information on the migrant problem and its relation to foreign workers.383

Unionists blasted the Bracero Program’s effects on domestic farmworkers at the hearings. The Arizona State Federation of Labor and the Arizona Congress of Industrial Organizations criticized the program for “flooding the labor market with alien labor,” giving Southwestern growers “an advantage and control over the labor market that would deny the individual his rights as a citizen of the United States.”384 Referring to migrant poverty, CIO national representative John C. Monarch declared, “sooner or later we must all pay a severe penalty as we realize that a cancerous growth which we permit to take root in any part of our society must eventually weaken the entire structure of our American way of life.”385

In a fifteen-page statement, AFL President William Green called the program “detrimental” to both Americans and Mexicans, since many of the latter entered illegally without

384 Arizona State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, “A Report to President Truman’s Commission on Migrant & Alien Labor,” August 7-9, 1950, Folder 11, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
385 John C. Monarch, “Statement to the President’s Committee to Investigate Conditions on Migratory Labor,” August 23, 1950, Folder 13, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
the program’s protections. Green attacked the Labor Department’s determinations of prevailing wages, which he said were “set at a level far lower than that which most farm workers receive.” He also noted the irony of the program’s legal protections for braceros while domestic farmworkers labored completely unprotected by federal law. If the department enforced the contracts effectively, “it would represent the first instance” of fair treatment for the nation’s farmworkers, but under current administration, “the net effect has been not only intolerable conditions for the Mexican workers,” he said, but also “lower wages for and a depressed standard of living for the American workers with whom they compete.” Green recommended farmworker inclusion under the Fair Labor Standards and Social Security Acts, federal licensing of farmworker contractors, housing and education programs, and higher standards and stricter enforcement of the Bracero Program. Green’s testimony contained many of the same points that H.L. Mitchell made when he testified before the commission on July 13.

Union leaders were not the only witnesses to call for improvements in migrant workers’ conditions; civil rights, liberal, and religious groups also piled on. The NAACP noted, “Most of the plans for meeting the nation’s manpower needs in agriculture are geared solely to meet the requirements of the farmers.” The National Consumers League hoped the commission would “define the areas of responsibility for the needed legislation to set standards and correct conditions” among domestic farmworkers left impoverished by “low wages, unemployment, bad housing, and child labor.” Coming at the question from a religious angle, Rev. William J.

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386 William Green, “Statement to the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor,” July 13, 1950, Folder 14, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
387 H.L. Mitchell, “Statement to the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor,” July 13, 1950, Folder 9, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
388 Clarence Mitchell, “Statement before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor,” July 13, 1950, Folder 9, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
389 Elizabeth Magee, “Statement on behalf of the National Consumers League Submitted to the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor,” July 13, 1950, Folder 9, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
Gibbons of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference noted that the “spiritual and material welfare” of migrant farmworkers required “considerably more regulation and supervision…than has heretofore been customary.” He called for minimum wages and full employment programs for farmworkers, as well as the extension of the right “to organize and bargain collectively.”

The testimony influenced the commission’s final report, issued on March 26, 1951, just after Congress had taken up Public Law 78, the authorizing legislation for a new Bracero Program that would govern Mexican farm labor importation until 1964. The commission noted numerous problems in sections on the Bracero Program and undocumented immigration. The report documented concrete evidence of the program’s adverse effects on domestic farmworkers. Between 1940 and 1945, average cotton picking wages nationwide rose 211%, but only 136% in California, which received 63% of the wartime braceros. As braceros shifted to Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas between 1947 and 1949, California cotton wages increased 15%, but wages declined by 11% and 4% in Texas and New Mexico, respectively (Arkansas increased 2% while the nationwide average stayed flat).

This evidence verified the trends the NFLU had been observing on the ground.

Similarly, the commission affirmed unionists’ claims that prevailing wage determinations amounted to growers simply setting wages so low that domestic workers would balk, paving the way for state employment service officials to authorize braceros who would be paid at the low rate. Department of Labor officials were simply ratifying the affiliated state agencies’ findings, facilitating grower control. The report quoted the president of the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau on the growers’ approach: “We have a meeting at the beginning of the

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390 Rev. William J. Gibbons, “Statement before the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor,” July 13, 1950, Folder 9, Box 1, Student Research File (B File) Migratory Farm Labor 37a, Truman Library.
season…and they determine, roughly, what they are going to pay.” The commission noted that this wage “is accepted by the public employment services as the going wage until the season opens and employment actually gets under way.” Under the system, “the arbitrary wage rate…inevitably tends to set the pattern of wages in the locality.” The report continued, “At the low rate initially offered, it is quite conceivable that insufficient domestic labor is attracted; therefore, a ‘labor shortage’ can be said to exist—at that price.” Thus the prevailing wage was little more than the wage growers wanted to prevail.

The report’s negative assessments continued when it turned to a discussion of undocumented immigration. The commission argued that if the system of legalizing undocumented workers by contracting them as braceros continued, “the wetbacks will almost certainly be encouraged to enter illegally.” Furthermore, lack of effective labor dispute conciliation procedures for braceros meant that “the Mexican contract worker simply takes flight from a situation which he finds unsatisfactory or intolerable,” contributing to the undocumented problem. These were serious problems, but in the commission’s opinion the worst were the low farm wages in border states where growers actively encouraged undocumented migration. In 1950, when the federal minimum wage (which did not apply to farmworkers) was 75¢, average hourly farm wages in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California were 54¢, 54¢, 64¢, and 88¢, respectively. However, these figures obscured data from areas immediately adjacent to the border. In southern California’s Imperial Valley, the average was 50¢; in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, common hand labor brought between 15¢ and 25¢ hourly.

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392 Ibid., 59-60.
393 Ibid., 61.
394 Ibid., 53.
395 Ibid., 45.
396 Ibid., 79.
Yet, according to the Truman Commission, the solution to the problem of low farmworker wages, demonstrably made worse by bracero competition, was not to eliminate guestworker programs but strengthen oversight of them. The commission’s report recommended that the federal government should resume contracting braceros instead of continuing the direct employer contracting system that took shape after the war. Furthermore, it called for tighter illegal immigration enforcement, the end of legalizing undocumented workers, and the establishment of “clear statutory penalties for harboring, concealing, or transporting illegal aliens,” as well as employing them. Most significantly, the report demanded that prevailing wages “be ascertained by public authority after a hearing” and that “no certification of shortage of domestic labor should be made unless and until continental domestic labor has been offered the same terms and conditions of employment as are offered to foreign workers.” To facilitate employment of domestic farmworkers, the commission proposed a raft of programs to help recruit, transport, house, feed, and educate them. The report also recommended that Congress extend the National Labor Relations Act of 1947 (Taft-Hartley) to cover farmworkers on the nation’s largest farms, in effect advocating collective bargaining for farmworkers.

Ultimately, however, the Truman Commission’s findings and recommendations failed to influence the Bracero Program significantly. The administration released the report after Congress had begun debating Public Law 78, which ended the direct grower recruitment system. Whatever impact the report might have made was limited by growers, who had once again raised the alarm about wartime production and labor scarcity in the context of the Korean War.

397 Ibid., 66; Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 114.
399 Ibid., 66-67.
400 Ibid., 103-04, 134-136, 159-60, 171-72.
401 Ibid., 118.
Although they would gripe loudly about the administrative controls about to be established for the program’s future, growers successfully dominated both the program and the debate between 1947 and 1951. In California, the NFLU had experienced the worst of this grower control in the Di Giorgio strike and other organizing campaigns. In the future, it would come to focus increasingly on the Bracero Program as the biggest barrier to farmworker justice and the organization of American agricultural labor.

**Conclusion: NFLU Lessons, 1946-1951**

After World War II, H.L. Mitchell changed the mission of his sharecroppers union and committed the labor organization to an almost impossible goal: organizing the nation’s farmworkers into a National Farm Labor Union. There was no doubt that such workers needed help at a time when the postwar agricultural labor market was coming to be dominated by large growers who employed an increasingly migratory and seasonal labor force, and who used foreign workers to hold down wages. The union moved west to California and waged a lengthy and impressive strike against a poster child for such growers in the person of Joseph Di Giorgio, but its first major foray onto postwar terrain failed, beaten by an employer who used braceros to force down wages and continue his harvest when workers went on strike.

The NFLU found itself on the receiving end of Di Giorgio’s corporate might, Taft-Hartley’s punitive provisions, and Richard Nixon’s dirty tricks. Organizers tried to bridge the divides between Okie, Mexican-American, black, and Filipino farmworkers by rallying them against the Bracero Program, but they were powerless to stop growers from contracting Mexican nationals or hiring undocumented workers. While the union led several successful strikes—such as the 1949 cotton strike, a follow-up cotton strike in 1950, and a 1950 tomato strike near Tracy—locals of migrant farmworkers continued to disperse, and the union’s meager finances
could not keep pace with the task of organizing in the face of barriers both domestic and foreign in nature.

Moreover, growers like Di Giorgio were increasing their use of braceros. Since they could so easily obtain them with the help of compliant local officials, they would have no need to fear labor disputes if they replaced domestic farmworkers with foreign guestworkers in the future. In this context of powerful growers who set the national standard for large-scale agricultural production, competition from foreign workers (both braceros and undocumented labor), and the perverse use of labor legislation against them when they were not even covered by it, traditional organizing campaigns held little promise, a fact the NFLU was beginning to realize. The task of farmworker organizing was thus inextricably tied to the problems inherent in the Bracero Program. Indeed, the union’s ability to successfully organize farmworkers would hinge on its ability to deal with the program.

The Commission on Migratory Labor offered a golden opportunity for labor, liberals, and religious and civil rights organizations to oppose that program and expose its adverse effects on domestic farmworkers, but the commission’s report and recommendations were issued too late to significantly influence debate over the legislation that would govern bracero employment until 1964. And even the commissioners themselves argued that rather than end the Bracero Program, it simply required better regulation and implementation. Still, the commission illustrated the basis for future mobilizations against the program that would bring together labor, liberals, and religious and civil rights activists who would increasingly work together in opposition.

That possibility for cooperation offered little solace to NFLU organizers pondering the challenge of organizing farmworkers in the face of the guestworker program. Ernesto Galarza later reflected that by 1951, “a frustrating pattern” had emerged. In each spasm of farmworker
militancy, “the flame of unionism was applied to the frozen structures of power, but it was like trying to melt an iceberg with a candle.” However, he felt that the important thing “was that a system was being revealed in the specific manifestations of its power where agri-business had set up its domains.” The NFLU helped spur a “spreading resistance to that power,” which, once unleashed, carried the union along “by the momentum it had helped to create.”

Building on its successes and learning from its mistakes, the union next turned its attention to the Imperial Valley of southern California, where the problems inherent in the Bracero Program were on clear display. As it focused its efforts there, however, the NFLU faced the continuing difficulty of both fighting to organize farmworkers while simultaneously opposing a Bracero Program that, by 1951, was there to stay.

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402 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 146.
Chapter 3: “No Forts to Hold:” Public Law 78 and Labor’s Continuing Struggles against the Bracero Program, 1951-1954

Having failed in its first major attempt to organize California farmworkers in the Di Giorgio strike, the NFLU had come to understand that unionizing farmworkers would depend on its ability to confront both the Bracero Program and the large growers who used it to extend their control over farmworkers. That was a tall order to fill. In 1951 the Bracero Program was institutionalized through a new international agreement and Public Law 78, the legislation that authorized the program in the United States. That law would govern the terms of bracero employment until 1964, despite reformers’ arguments that there was no need for guestworkers because American farmworkers were increasingly impoverished and forced to migrate seasonally for work. If the NFLU hoped to succeed in its goal of organizing farmworkers in the postwar agricultural economy, it would have to find a way to deal with a Bracero Program that seemed to be here to stay.

At least reformers could take heart from the fact that Public Law 78 seemed to represent an improvement over the grower-dominated postwar program. Congress gave the Department of Labor broader regulatory authority over bracero employment, and the program seemed to be on the road toward lasting stability after several years of diplomatic lows over undocumented migration. These advances came partly from the publicity surrounding the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, but most of the improvements derived from Mexico’s stronger bargaining position as the U.S. mobilized for the Korean War. Although growers complained loudly about what they considered new restrictions on their ability to control their contract labor force, organized labor and other reformers found that the Department of Labor’s new authority did little to alleviate the problems they had been documenting with the program for a decade.
In this context, the NFLU—renamed the National Agricultural Workers Union in 1952—tried valiantly to organize farmworkers by squarely confronting the Bracero Program between 1951 and 1954. However, victories were few and far between in California as a result of the fact that the union was unable to prevent the use of braceros during labor disputes and that growers were increasingly relying on braceros as they operated under the new law. Rather than an improvement, then, the union could hardly tell the difference between the new and old programs. Grower associations continued to dominate its local and state administrative machinery, and their members discriminated against domestic farmworkers with impunity in favor of braceros and undocumented workers.

Retrenching after the Di Giorgio strike, the NFLU turned its attention to southern California’s Imperial Valley, where growers’ easy access to both braceros and undocumented workers offered the perfect venue to showcase the Bracero Program’s effects on American farmworkers. Despite Galarza’s gradual refinement of an organizational strategy and some successes in the Imperial and the Salinas Valleys, though, by the end of 1954, the union had failed to surmount its financial troubles, high membership turnover, and recalcitrant government officials who moved too slowly (if at all) to enforce the program. By the end of the period it was clear that rising bracero numbers combined with their use in defeating the union’s organizing to form a dagger pointed at the heart of the union’s project.

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403 The name change occurred at the union’s annual conference in 1951, though it appears to have used the NFLU name into 1952, probably so the chronically cash-strapped organization could use up its existing stock of letterhead. Some of the rationale for the name change came from the similarity of the NFLU name to the National Farmers Union, an organization of small farmers. The rest came as the result of the union’s abortive effort to organize small dairy farmers in Pennsylvania and New York, a move that led George Meany to accuse the NFLU of organizing business owners (management) in contravention of AFL policy. The new National Agricultural Workers Union name helped clarify the union’s organizing mission.

404 I would like to thank Joe McCartin for suggesting this imagery.
Public Law 78 and the Institutionalization of the Bracero Program

In order to understand farm unionists’ frustrations in the early 1950s, it is first necessary to examine how the Bracero Program was institutionalized through Public Law 78 and a new international agreement after the period of grower dominance. When combined with the expiration of the existing program in July 1951, the manpower mobilization of the Korean War prompted U.S. delegates to approach Mexico regarding a new Bracero Program. In January and February 1951, Louisiana Senator Allen Ellender, Texas Representative William R. Poage, and U.S. Consul General Carl Storm sat down at the negotiating table with Mexican officials in Mexico City.\textsuperscript{405} The choice of Ellender and Poage as negotiators anticipated the need for new authorizing legislation in the U.S.; the two men chaired the congressional agriculture committees.

Richard Craig, Manuel Garcia y Griego, and Ellis Hawley have noted that the Korean War strengthened Mexico’s bargaining position after the grower-dominated period between 1947 and 1951. Mexico capitalized on this opportunity and resurrected the direct government-to-government contracting system crafted during World War II.\textsuperscript{406} The Mexican Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores made several demands. First, authorizing legislation in the U.S. should penalize employers of illegal immigrants. Second, Mexico would only clear braceros who were unneeded in domestic agricultural production.\textsuperscript{407} Third, employers would have to pay for

\textsuperscript{405} Craig, 70-1; Jungmeyer, 130.
\textsuperscript{406} Craig, 78, 82-3; Garcia y Griego, 239; Ellis W. Hawley, “The Politics of the Mexican Labor Issue, 1950-1965,” \textit{Agricultural History}, 40, no. 3. (July 1966): 159.
\textsuperscript{407} Garcia y Griego notes that this second point was an astute manipulation of domestic Mexican politics. By tacitly admitting that some braceros sought to emigrate despite job opportunities at home, Mexican officials referenced the domestic opposition to the program that stated bracero emigration worked against the Mexican national interest. By using this point in negotiations, Mexican officials employed domestic opposition as a means to extract concessions from the U.S. negotiators.Garcia y Griego, 243-45.
transportation, food, and medical costs to and from the recruitment centers. Finally, recruitment centers would remain in the interior, though closer to the border than during World War II.408

Mexico’s insistence on a stronger, less grower-controlled program required Congressional action in the United States. Senator Ellender and Representative Poage led the initiative in their respective chambers. Upon returning to the U.S., Ellender held a press conference emphasizing to growers the superiority of the new Bracero Program proposals contained in his bill (S. 984) over those currently in force. He noted that under his legislation, the federal government would cover bracero transportation costs to the border, a cost growers had shouldered since 1947 during the direct grower-contracting phase of the program. In the House, Poage courted growers’ favor by stripping penalties against employing undocumented workers from his H.R. 4283.409 The two men essentially argued that although Mexico was making new demands after a period of grower control over the program, such demands either worked to growers’ benefits (transportation costs) or could be avoided by watering down penalties (reducing penalties in the U.S. against undocumented employment).

The Poage-Ellender bill created a new Bracero Program by adding Title V to the Agricultural Act of 1949; the result worked in growers’ favor.410 The bill met with opposition both in Congress and from the Truman administration. The Senate’s liberal and pro-labor Democrats balked at the bill amid increased attention to farmworkers’ plight following the report of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor. For all their displeasure, though, liberals’ proposals went nowhere. California freshman Senator Sam Yorty, a Democrat and reformer, proposed an alternate bill to improve American farmworker standards by establishing federal

408 The recruiting centers were to be established at Monterrey, Chihuahua City, and Hermosillo. Garcia y Griego, 246-48.
409 Garcia y Griego, 252; 259.
410 Ibid., 253; Kiser, 167.
programs to recruit, house, and transport agricultural workers, but the bill had no chance of passing.\textsuperscript{411} Herbert Lehman of New York argued that the law should extend prevailing wage guarantees to domestic farmworkers, but Ellender retorted that the Senate had always refused to set agricultural minimum wages.\textsuperscript{412} New Mexico’s Dennis Chávez offered eleven amendments to Poage-Ellender,—one of which would have made the employment of undocumented workers a felony punishable by imprisonment—but they were all defeated.\textsuperscript{413} And Illinois’s Paul Douglas managed to secure a weak amendment against the employment of illegal immigrants, but this provision died in conference committee.\textsuperscript{414} This last defeat was in keeping with broader congressional trends that growers’ pushed in their effort to secure access to cheap labor. President Truman had requested a $6.5 million supplemental appropriation to help enforce the border, but it was eliminated entirely.\textsuperscript{415}

For its part, the Truman administration responded inconsistently to the Poage-Ellender Bill. The Truman Commission’s recommendations to reform the program came after Congress had already taken up the bracero measure. The grower lobby ensured that the commission’s recommendations were drowned out by bracero users’ demands. Lobbyists condemned the finding that the nation should better utilize domestic farm labor before importing braceros as a vestige of the FSA’s social experimentation.\textsuperscript{416} In hearings on the various bracero proposals, some higher-level administration officials drew upon the Truman Commission’s recommendation to make better use of American farmworkers to oppose the bill. Assistant Secretary of Labor Robert Creasey proposed a measure to facilitate the use of domestic workers

\textsuperscript{411} Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 115.  
\textsuperscript{412} Ibid., 256-57.  
\textsuperscript{413} Garcia y Griego, 256; Hawley, 160.  
\textsuperscript{414} Ibid., 257.  
\textsuperscript{415} Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 114.  
\textsuperscript{416} Hawley, 159-60.
instead of braceros.\textsuperscript{417} However, U.S. Employment Service chief Robert C. Goodwin undercut Creasey’s testimony by stressing agriculture’s pressing manpower needs in the face of the Korean War effort, backing the grower lobby and muddying the administration’s position.\textsuperscript{418}

Predictably, the Poage-Ellender bill passed by wide margins. The Senate dispensed with the roll call and adopted the bill by voice vote on May 7, 1951. The House approved the measure by a vote of 240-139 on June 27.\textsuperscript{419} The vote reflected what had become bipartisan support for the farm bloc and the Bracero Program. Kiser has noted that in the vote on Poage-Ellender, 74\% of voting Republicans voted in favor with support from 54\% of the Democrats (northern, urban, and industrial Democratic representatives tended to vote against it).\textsuperscript{420} Kiser attributes the shift to increasing labor-liberal opposition in 1951 and declining right-wing opposition, but a broader view suggests the growing unity of a “Dixie-GOP” coalition created from the farm bloc unity between Midwestern grain and Southern/Southwestern cotton interests.\textsuperscript{421} After it passed, President Truman signed the bill on July 13 as Public Law 78. In his message to Congress, the president noted that he hoped to see supplemental measures to curb the employment of undocumented workers.

Despite the fact that growers got much of what they wanted, Public Law 78 expanded the authority of the Department of Labor over the Bracero Program after the period of deregulated direct grower contracting. Under Public Law 78, the secretary of labor recruited Mexican workers directly, established and operated bracero reception centers at the border, provided transportation to and from these centers (including food and medical care), and assisted in the

\textsuperscript{417} García y Griego, 253-54.  
\textsuperscript{418} Ibid., 254.  
\textsuperscript{419} Kiser, 153.  
\textsuperscript{420} Ibid.  
negotiation of labor contracts. In a gesture toward Mexican demands, the Labor Department guaranteed employer compliance with the contracts. In provisions meant to protect American farmworkers, the secretary certified labor shortages before he authorized braceros. Like previous international agreements, Public Law 78 stipulated that the secretary could not certify braceros where their employment created “adverse effects” on domestic workers or where braceros were offered less than the “prevailing wage.” Furthermore, the secretary would not issue certifications where American farmworkers were willing and able to do the work, and he would revoke certifications if braceros were being used as strikebreakers. Lastly, employers had to make good faith efforts to attract domestic farmworkers before requesting braceros. To achieve these worker protections, however, the Department of Labor continued to rely on the Bureau of Employment Security’s U.S. Employment Service, which coordinated the decentralized network of state employment services ultimately responsible for making decisions at the local level, decisions that growers found easy to influence.422

Employers incurred other obligations beyond their good faith. Growers indemnified the United States for any losses incurred as guarantor of the contracts. They reimbursed some of the government’s administrative expenses from transporting braceros to the border centers and processing them when they arrived. In cases where braceros “skipped” their contracts and were not returned to the border centers, employers paid a penalty fee for allowing braceros to become undocumented workers. Finally, employers were barred from bracero eligibility if they had broken previous contracts, employed illegal immigrants, contracted braceros and later loaned them to ineligible employers, or failed to meet minimum housing and sanitation requirements.423

422 The U.S. Employment Service was established by the 1933 Wagner-Peyser Act. It created the nationwide network of state and federal employment service offices, overseen by the Bureau of Employment Security. Craig, 72-5.
423 Ibid., 73, 79.
Contesting Public Law 78

Despite their pleasure at securing a stable Mexican contract labor framework, many growers were none too excited about what they viewed as the federal government’s intrusion onto their farms after a period of relative freedom from government oversight, especially when it came to what they regarded as restrictions on their ability to hire undocumented workers. Once again, those farmers closest to the border vociferously denounced the agreement because they feared the loss of their undocumented immigrant labor supply. The president of the Yuma Producers Cooperative Association in Arizona admitted that employers “cannot expect to get everything.” Still, he requested that Senator Carl Hayden—frequent acting chairman of the Appropriations Committee and a consummate cloakroom operator—secure a provision “that would allow the contracting of illegals whenever and wherever they are found,” a continuation of the INS’s “drying out” system.424 Similarly, one grower in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas wrote to Senate Majority Whip Lyndon B. Johnson urging him to “vote for a free wet back,” since they “by far, make better labor for the dollar.”425 And in a letter to President Truman, one grower’s wife went so far as to compare undocumented workers to supplicants beseeching Americans for Christian charity. Alleging that the Poage-Ellender bill amounted to “socialistic, appeasing tactics,” Beatrice Willoughby declared to President Truman, “If the Lord will be good enough to guide some starving wet Mexican our way, I will domicile him…give

424 G.A. Pickering to Sen. Carl Hayden, February 19, 1951, Box 91, Folder 10, Carl Hayden Papers. Hayden often acted as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee during the 81st and 82nd Congresses because chairman Kenneth McKellar suffered from frequent health problems.
him milk and honor his desire to earn a honest living.” She went on to say that her altruism even compelled her to offer the “starving wet” access to her modern bathroom.\textsuperscript{426}

While growers near the border objected to the program in the abstract, most complaints focused on the agreement’s specific provisions. Arizona growers were particularly concerned about the fact that the agreement failed to provide for an Arizona bracero reception center. E.S. McSweeny, executive secretary of the Arizona Cotton Growers Association, worried that Arizonans’ tax dollars “will be used to finance movement of workers into Texas,” where the nearest center was located.\textsuperscript{427} The association was so concerned that by the following year, it had constructed its own 14,000 square foot reception center in Nogales for use by the Department of Labor and grower associations.\textsuperscript{428}

Ultimately, however, it was the Department of Labor’s role in administering Public Law 78 that most infuriated growers. When Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin asked the AFL and CIO for nominations to a Labor Advisory Committee for the program, one angry grower claimed that “farmers cannot and will not live, or cooperate” with the supposedly union-dominated department.\textsuperscript{429} A Texas grower was even more pointed in his criticism. Couching his concerns in a Cold War context, he alleged that the Department of Labor’s close contacts with the labor movement “kept the red fires burning” and would “force the establishment of regimenting

\textsuperscript{427} E.S. McSweeny to Sen. Carl Hayden, August 31, 1951, Box 91, Folder 8, Carl Hayden Papers.
\textsuperscript{429} Dean Stawley to Sens. Carl Hayden and Ernest McFarland, November 26, 1951, Box 91, Folder 8, Carl Hayden Papers.
bureaus” that would make employers “submit to the Moscovitian [sic] system of controlled labor.”

Organized labor refused to let growers have the last word. Unionists strenuously opposed the legislation as it moved through Congress, exasperated as they were by repeated renewals of what was originally designed as a temporary wartime program and alarmed at its institutionalization through Public Law 78, which threatened to continue undermining farmworker organizing campaigns. The CIO’s Legislative Department Director Nathan Cowan demanded that Congress “put first things first by providing an adequate program for the recruitment, transportation, and employment at fair wages…of American farm workers.” At the local level in Arizona, labor unions struggling against employers’ use of undocumented workers at substandard wages demanded that their Congressmen support the Chavez amendment “against indiscriminate and unlimited importation” of Mexican labor. As the amendment’s death in conference committee suggested, their appeals fell on deaf ears.

From his Washington headquarters, H.L. Mitchell attacked the Bracero Program for its effects on domestic farmworkers’ ability to form unions, something the union had suffered already. Mitchell registered his displeasure with the newly codified Bracero Program in July 1951, demanding better enforcement in the future. “If there is a strike or lockout, the Mexican worker must be removed,” he wrote. On behalf of U.S. farmworkers, Mitchell proclaimed, “if the Union wants the employer to, e.g., increase wages,” then “the employer can defeat this demand

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431 Nathan Cowan to Sen. Ernest McFarland, April 24, 1951, Box 91, Folder 9, Carl Hayden Papers.
432 Mason Warren to Sen. Carl Hayden, April 29, 1951, Box 91, Folder 9, Carl Hayden Papers.
by bringing in Mexican workers.”\textsuperscript{433} The program’s adverse effects were clear enough for the NFLU, which had suffered its members’ replacement with braceros during the Di Giorgio Strike.

As Public Law 78 moved closer to passage, organized labor at the national level appealed to the president as the last line of defense. AFL President William Green sought Truman’s veto because the bill “discriminates against American workers,” and “provides no means of setting standards of wages or working conditions for our own citizens.”\textsuperscript{434} Worried that the bill’s vague definition of agricultural employment might allow employers to use braceros in canning and processing plants where labor hoped to organize further, CIO President Philip Murray urged Truman to block the legislation. Overall, Murray claimed that Public Law 78 would “encourage backward-looking employers to continue substandard wages and other conditions which are far below the American standard of living.”\textsuperscript{435} Similarly, the United Labor Policy Committee, composed of the AFL, CIO, Railway Labor Executives Association, and International Association of Machinists called the bill “an unwarranted subsidy” for growers that contained “special advantages for Mexican nationals…without guaranteeing any constructive living and working standards for Americans.”\textsuperscript{436} Despite their efforts, however, national labor leaders came up short against the administration’s desire to place the Bracero Program on firm footing.

Richard Craig’s interest-group analysis best summarizes the winners and losers of the 1951 law. Mexico benefitted the most from the new Bracero Program by obtaining direct government-to-government contracting guaranteed by the U.S. government, though in practice regulators failed to enforce bracero protections. Mexico preferred stronger blacklisting powers,

\textsuperscript{433} H.L. Mitchell, Memorandum on proposed labor disputes article, July 24, 1951, file 29, box 35, RG21-001, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.
\textsuperscript{434} William Green to Harry Truman, July 3, 1951, Truman Papers, White House Central File, Official File, Box 1234, Folder 407-D An Act re: recruitment of agricultural workers from Mexico.
\textsuperscript{435} Philip Murray to Harry Truman, July 5, 1951, Truman Papers, White House Central File, Official File, Box 1234, Folder 407-D An Act re: recruitment of agricultural workers from Mexico.
\textsuperscript{436} United Labor Policy Committee to Truman, July 10, 1951, Truman Papers, White House Central File, Official File, Box 1234, Folder 407-D An Act re: recruitment of agricultural workers from Mexico.
but the international agreement’s provisions for joint determinations of discrimination differed little from the 1949 agreement. The United States fared well in the negotiations, achieving a system with greater stability than the one that had functioned after 1947. Growers complained about bracero guarantees and the Department of Labor’s regulatory authority, but they gained a more predictable system and could still access undocumented workers with impunity. That fact alone prevented the Bracero Program from restricting their authority.

Organized labor and domestic farmworkers were the real losers in the process, failing first to defeat the Bracero Program, then failing to secure penalties against the employment of undocumented workers. Beyond that, the Department of Labor’s decentralized administration of the program though the Employment Service system virtually guaranteed growers’ continued control at the local level over the program’s administration. Still, Craig noted that placing more authority in the Department of Labor gave organized labor somewhat greater access to oppose the program through the federal government than it had during the three previous years of direct grower contracting. With these winners and losers, Public Law 78, the 1951 international agreement, and the standard work contract established between growers and braceros became the foundational basis for the Bracero Program until its dissolution in 1964. Despite the new basis, however, it would take several years to iron out diplomatic tensions over the international migration of Mexican guestworkers.

Renewed Unilateralism on the Road to Bracero Program Institutionalization

Mexico’s attempt to press its advantage during the Korean War generated disputes that threatened to upend the new Bracero Program just as it began. In July 1952—just one month after the two nations signed a new international agreement—officials at the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores instructed its consuls not to authorize bracero contracts unless they

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437 Ibid., 81-9.
specified a minimum hourly rate of 50¢. This came despite the fact that the U.S. Secretary of Labor had sole authority for making wage determinations. The Department of Labor accused Mexico of ignoring the international agreement and argued that raising rates would only promote undocumented employment. Mexican officials denied the charge and responded with additional wage demands for braceros employed in cotton picking. The dispute dragged on until July, when Mexico dropped its demands in exchange for more regular U.S. Employment Service-issued wage findings, despite the fact that such findings were invariably dictated by the growers requesting foreign workers.

The rising acrimony between the United States and Mexico poisoned the waters as both Public Law 78 and the international agreement came up for renewal in 1953 under changed political contexts. New presidents headed both nations. In the U.S., the Eisenhower Administration prepared to take a hard line with Mexico at the same moment that Mexico’s new president, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, sought to stand firm on Mexican demands. Congressional renewal of Public Law 78 revealed the new administration’s position. Under Secretary of Labor Lloyd Mashburn felt Mexico would continue its intransigent stance. Meanwhile, grower representatives clamored for border recruitment, a long-term extension of the program, and the simplification of administrative procedures. In the Senate debate over Public Law 78 in March, even Senator Ellender, the architect of the 1951 bill, stated that unless Mexico was more cooperative, “I would be almost willing to abandon this method.” The final bill extended Public Law 78 without amendment for two years, expiring December 31, 1955.

438 García y Griego, 416-18.
439 Ibid., 420-22. Mexico demanded a minimum of $2.50 cwt, which was the most common prevailing wage in areas outside of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas and the Imperial Valley in California, where the rate was usually $2.00 cwt.
440 Ibid., 430-31.
441 Craig, 103-05.
442 Ellender, as quoted in Craig, 104.
With authorizing legislation passed in Washington, U.S. negotiators prepared for hard bargaining in September. The Eisenhower Administration took a firm stand on items it deemed critical to renewal. The three most important were the location of recruitment centers, the reopening of the Monterrey center, and Mexico’s acceptance that the U.S. Department of Labor did not unilaterally determine prevailing wages—it only determined them based on its surveys. Negotiations deadlocked almost immediately, and as talks dragged from October into December, the U.S. began to threaten a revival of unilateral recruitment. As the 1951 agreement neared expiration, Mexican officials agreed to a two-week extension hoping to reach a settlement, but the interim only stiffened U.S. officials’ resolve. On January 15, the State, Labor, and Justice Departments announced that unilateral recruitment would commence in three days.

The diplomatic fiasco of unilateral recruitment actually began on January 22, 1954. As prospective braceros massed in the border cities, the U.S. paid little heed to Mexican officials’ protests. When 700 braceros illegally crossed the border in El Centro, California, Mexico posted armed guards. The heightened tension caused riots between January 23 and February 5 as Mexican workers rushed the gates only to be repelled by clubs, water hoses, and guns directed against them by Mexican police officers. If a Mexican worker made it across, INS required him to place one foot on Mexican soil before detaining and processing him as a bracero. The absurdity of it all was captured in a photograph that showed Mexican and U.S. border officers playing tug-of-war with a bracero astride the border.

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443 Mexico had shuttered the Monterrey center during the previous year.
444 U.S. negotiators also wanted clarification on bracero subsistence payments, employers’ provision of nonoccupational insurance, and expansion of bracero wage withholding to prevent “skips”—braceros who became undocumented workers. Craig, 105-06.
445 Ibid., 107-09.
446 Ibid., 111-13.
447 Hahmovitch, No Man’s Land, 125.
On February 2, the Comptroller General put an end to the episode by informing the Secretary of Labor that Public Law 78 funds appropriated for a bilateral program could not be used for unilateral recruitment. Three days later the program concluded, but not before Congress began hearings on a measure authorizing unilateral action when diplomatic agreement proved elusive. On February 10, Eisenhower announced that Mexico had gotten the message: Ambassador Manuel Tello requested that negotiations resume. Congress moved forward anyway, passing the legislation the first week of March as an implicit threat to Mexico whenever its officials thought about bargaining hard.448

The new international agreement, concluded March 10, extended the Bracero Program to the end of December 1955; it embodied Mexican concessions and recognized grower control over the program. The Secretary of Labor’s authority in determining (but not setting) prevailing wages was reaffirmed. Mexican officials could dispute wage determinations and request reviews, but bracero recruitment would continue at the determined wage until the matter was resolved. The agreement also reaffirmed joint determination of employers to be blacklisted. A new border recruitment center would open at Mexicali, the Monterrey and Chihuahua centers would reopen, and those at Durango, Irapuato, and Guadalajara would continue operation. The only U.S. concession came in its willingness to include a nonoccupational insurance benefit in the standard work contract.449 The unilateral recruitment maneuver by the United States had forced Mexico to abandon many of its demands and ended its strong bargaining position. Henceforth, Mexico would follow the U.S. lead on the program as a means of controlling the emigration of its citizen-workers.

The Labor Lobbying Effort

448 Calavita, 66; Craig, 114; 118.
449 Craig, 122-23.
As the Bracero Program began to operate on Public Law 78’s new legislative basis between 1952 and 1955, organized labor continued to lobby against it. Unionists argued that the Bracero Program lacked sufficient mechanisms to empower the Department of Labor to determine prevailing wages, thus creating the very adverse effect on American farmworkers the department was supposed to prevent. Labor’s response to this fundamental shortcoming rested on calls to strengthen the Labor Department’s hand in monitoring the program as well as pressuring the department through its Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor.

According to Public Law 78’s Section 503, growers could only use braceros where their employment would “not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers.” Furthermore, the law and its accompanying international agreements mandated that braceros receive the “prevailing wage rate” paid in a given area. Because of the Department of Labor depended on the decentralized Employment Service to determine adverse effect and prevailing wages, both these terms proved significantly vague in practice. This allowed growers to abuse the program by establishing cozy relations with their local and state officials. Clearer but just as easily evaded by employers was an additional measure preventing braceros’ use as strikebreakers. These oft-ignored provisions gave organized labor plenty to complain about.

The majority of labor’s political lobbying coincided with Public Law 78’s renewals, for it was on these occasions that the program received the most congressional attention. When agribusiness interests pushed for a longer-term bracero program in 1953, congressional hearings presented an opportunity for organized labor’s representatives to express their views. AFL National Legislative Representative Walter Mason testified before the House Committee on

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450 Public Law 78, Section 503.
451 Ibid., Article 15.
Agriculture on March 24, highlighting labor’s criticisms. He stated, “There can be no doubt that the provisions of the law have assured an adequate supply of farm labor.” “However,” he continued, “there are other questions. They concern the status and living standards of America’s farm workers.” Noting general conditions among farm hands, Mason said, “For the average migratory worker in the fields employment is at best intermittent, pay is low, hours are long, [and] housing substandard.” Turning his attention to the Bracero Program, Mason asked the “Committee to face up to the fact” that the “flow of Mexican workers across the border…serves to depress American standards, to take jobs from American workers, and to keep wages…abnormally low.”

Mason went on to focus on Public Law 78’s inadequacies. The Department of Labor’s statutory obligation to ensure bracero employment did not adversely affect domestic farmworkers had “not proved effective,” perhaps because it had “received insufficient attention from the Department.” Mason charged, “there has never been a truly equitable procedure for determining what constitutes ‘the prevailing wage rate.’” Most often, it “was simply the rate which employers” were “willing to pay imported Mexican workers.” During the first round of hearings to determine Public Law 78’s future, labor had already focused on the program’s prevailing wage and adverse effect components in mounting an opposition to bracero use. Unionists accused the law’s domestic labor protections of inadequacy, but international developments soon intervened, placing the bracero issue before Congress again in 1954.

When the U.S. abandoned the international agreement in favor of unilateral recruitment in January 1954, labor leaders once again took to the halls of Congress to denounce the latest abuse of Mexican labor. Once more, Mason found himself before the House Committee on

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453 Ibid.
Agriculture to inform Congress of labor’s views on House Joint Resolution 355, which proposed unilateral bracero recruitment. Mason was clear: “The American Federation of Labor does not approve of this unilateral program.” He chastised the Department of Labor for “recruiting Mexican labor…in defiance of Mexican government policy.” And again, he emphasized that the program depressed farm wages, urging the need for “every effort to be made to recruit unemployed American workers for jobs in agriculture.”

On February 26, AFL president George Meany backed Mason’s testimony. Meany had succeeded William Green as president of the AFL in 1952, though he had served in high AFL offices since 1939, when he was elected secretary-treasurer of the federation. In telegrams to House Speaker Joseph W. Martin, House Majority Leader Charles A. Halleck, and Democratic Whip John W. McCormack, Meany urged their “support to defeat H.J. Res. 355. “Grave damage to the standards of American workers and relations between this country and Mexico will be done by the enactment of this legislation,” Meany stated. A fanatical anti-Communist, Meany used the diplomatic angle as a way to stress Cold War concerns about U.S. alliances and national security. In this case, organized labor’s opposition to unilateral recruitment meshed with broader diplomatic concerns favoring resolution to the dispute, and the bilateral bracero program continued.

Congressional efforts notwithstanding, however, the majority of organized labor’s lobbying strategy focused on pressuring the Department of Labor to more vigorously enforce the Bracero Program’s domestic worker safeguards regarding bracero authorizations and prevailing wage determinations. Labor advocates had good reason to complain. Just days after Truman

456 Craig, 122-125.
signed Public Law 78, U.S. Employment Service Director Robert Goodwin, issued guidelines for field agents responsible for certifying braceros. Although Goodwin stressed that employers could not receive braceros unless domestic workers were unavailable, he noted that local officials could make their jobs simpler by “immediately obtaining from the employer all necessary information” about domestic farmworker availability and prevailing wage rates. Because local officials initiated their authorization requests with the state employment services affiliated with the department, growers rarely encountered resistance to their applications, and they complained whenever they did. For example, in June 1952, a new California Employment Service official sent to “clean up” the local office found that his efforts in the Imperial Valley were “not acceptable to the employing association.”

Seeking to combat the lax enforcement and corrupt local administration of the program, unionists demanded better procedures from the Labor Department. Such demands typically included calls for public hearings on worker availability, wages, and working conditions. As early as December 1951, H.L. Mitchell issued a demand to Undersecretary Michael Galvin demanding “public hearings for each area or crop to determine the need” for braceros whenever employers requested them. In 1952, Mitchell again requested “public hearings to determine the prevailing wage rates” in California, where the union’s efforts to improve domestic

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460 Mitchell to Michael Galvin, December 19, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 36.
farmworkers’ conditions were frustrated by large-scale bracero contracting. And in 1953, Walter Mason excoriated the Labor Department’s “agreement in which the full authority for wage determination is left to the individual states.” A better system would include hearings providing the American farmworker with an “opportunity to express his point of view,” Mason argued. Although some department officials privately expressed their sympathy with such an approach, without congressional authorization and more appropriations for enforcement, their hands were tied.

Nevertheless, organized labor pressured the Labor Department internally through the Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor. In November 1951, Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin asked labor leaders to serve on the newly formed committee. The Advisory Committee included regional officials with the AFL and CIO, such as Nick Dragon, regional director of the CIO in Phoenix, and J.L. Rhodes, Southern director of organizing for the AFL. It also included union officials directly involved with organizing farmworkers. Mitchell, Hank Hasiwar, and Ernesto Galarza served from the NFLU, and United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) officials (who were then fighting the transition of packing shed operations into the fields) also sat on the committee.

Labor used the Advisory Committee to voice its opinions directly to the department. In addition to the perennial call for public hearings, in 1952 the committee also recommended the formation of tripartite “agricultural wage boards” to help the department determine prevailing wages. It also called for the inclusion of a 75¢ minimum wage in the international agreement,

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463 J.L. Rhodes to William Green, May 20, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
464 Mitchell to Maurice Tobin, November 5, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 36.
465 Mitchell, Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor Members List, ND, July 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
and requested that “labor organizations be officially represented in an advisory capacity” during international negotiations. 466

The Advisory Committee continued to press the department as the Bracero Program stabilized. When the 1954 unilateral recruitment scandal threatened to upend the program, the committee denounced the U.S. decision to go it alone “as a serious mistake…that will further encourage illegal migration” and force the “abandonment of the minimum standards [upon] which Mexico has always insisted.” The committee also used the occasion to recommend that the department “insist that farm employers provide American farm workers with transportation, housing, wage rates, and other benefits equal to those” guaranteed to braceros. 467 The following year, the Advisory Committee opposed any extension of Public Law 78 without amendments providing domestic workers with “the same benefits as are now provided for legally imported Mexican Nationals” in a “written contract.” 468

Occasionally, labor representatives were pleased to see the department respond to some of its lobbying. In congressional testimony in 1952, Secretary Tobin stated that he looked “forward to the day when we can eliminate not only the ‘wetback’ but also the contract Mexican national.” 469 The following year, the department issued a press release stating that it would widely distribute “a new pamphlet reminding qualified United States workers that they have the right to farm jobs ahead of Mexican contract or other foreign workers” in areas where braceros were employed in large numbers. 470 More significantly, the department also pressured Mexico

466 Department of Labor, Press Release, April 3, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
468 Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, Meeting minutes, January 27-28, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
470 DOL, Press release “Domestic Labor has Job Priority over Foreign Workers,” May 4, 1953, file Policy Statements, Operating Procedures, and Releases, 1951-57 [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney,
that year to allow American unions to represent braceros under Article 21 of the international agreement.\textsuperscript{471} It also held that when an employer was found in noncompliance with the bracero contract, the entire grower association to which he belonged would lose its certification to contract braceros.\textsuperscript{472}

Ultimately, however, labor found that the Eisenhower Labor Department under Maurice Tobin largely ignored its recommendations in this period. Without congressional authorization, department officials could not implement many of labor’s suggestions. When they might have, frustrated farmworker advocates found them unwilling or slow to move on them. Although American unions had the right to represent braceros, the department required that instead of basing representation on individual farms, “the most appropriate unit to be generally recognized for purposes of determining majority representation would be the [grower] Association,” making it virtually impossible to achieve certification.\textsuperscript{473} Decisions like these infuriated farmworker organizers and sapped their faith in the department. When Mitchell recommended that Ernesto Galarza accept a post on the Advisory Committee, Galarza replied, “I don’t want to go on the goddamn advisory puppet show.”\textsuperscript{474} The committee would never achieve anything, Galarza thought, and would only distract him from research and organizing work as he waited “at the

\textsuperscript{471} Ellis Coman to All Members, California Farm Labor Association, May 11, 1953, file Special Problems, 1953-56; Interpretations, Art. 21 of Agreement, Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 8, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
\textsuperscript{472} Wade E. Boote to Kenneth Robertson, October 4, 1954, file Opinions and Interpretations, 1951-56 (Mexican Labor Decisions) [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
\textsuperscript{473} Kenneth Robertson to Albert D. Misler, June 10, 1953, file Special Problems, 1953-56; Interpretations, Art. 21 of Agreement, Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 9, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
\textsuperscript{474} Galarza to Mitchell, December 16, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
church door on Constitution Avenue holding a tin cup to these…sleazy, eviscerated, junket fed bureaucratic pimp[s].”

With the passage of Public Law 78 in 1951, the Bracero Program entered a new period of stability, despite some breakdowns in bilateral relations as the U.S. and Mexico jockeyed for greater control over the program’s terms. Organized labor and other reformers were unable to draw on any momentum from the Truman Commission’s report on migrant workers in the face of the Korean War mobilization effort and the strength of the congressional farm bloc. Labor activists continued their lobbying efforts against the program as time went on, aided in the task by having a governmental target in the Department of Labor. However, the department’s reliance on the decentralized Employment Service limited the effectiveness of this approach and indicated the source of Galarza’s frustrations with measures like the Labor Advisory Committee. Rather than beg for change from the a department that he felt would never help him, Galarza favored taking the fight to fields to emphasize the intertwined problems of Mexican labor migration and farmworkers’ abysmal conditions.

**Imperial Frustrations**

He had been doing just that. After the failure of the Di Giorgio strike, the union had begun to recognize that the success or failure of organizing farmworkers would depend on its ability to grapple with competition from the foreign workers growers used to hold down wages and defeat union drives. As Public Law 78 worked its way through Congress, the union focused its attention on southern California’s Imperial Valley, which, bordering Mexico, stood as “the gateway of illegal and contract labor to California,” according to Galarza. In fact, Galarza had researched the area for several years while the union concentrated on Di Giorgio and the San

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475 Galarza to Mitchell, January 20, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 37.
Joaquin Valley. It offered the perfect stage for a fight centered on the Bracero Program. The Imperial Valley Farmers Association dominated the valley; according to Galarza’s research, its 480 members controlled 90% of the acreage, with a handful of grower-shippers dominating both the association and half the valley’s land. In 1948, Galarza noted the presence of “plenty of illegal labor at low rates of pay,” thanks to the fact that “there wasn’t a sign of the Border Patrol.” The following year, local worker Daniel Mays reported that growers were “firing all the white folks and taking nationals to work.”

The majority resident Mexican-American farmworkers fared just as poorly. In January 1950, Hank Hasiwar reported that some of them were slowly “starving because illegal aliens from Mexico have taken their jobs.” Three who still had them earned weekly paychecks of $8.70, $5.10, and $9.20 at the Arena Imperial Company in Brawley. Hasiwar observed that the “scale of 60 cents per hour for Contract Nationals has rapidly become the prevailing wage for all American workers.” As the pace of resident displacement picked up in the spring, the NFLU organized three locals in El Centro, Brawley, and Calexico.

The union channeled residents’ displacement complaints to government authorities such as Employment Service Director Robert Goodwin, who gave his usual promise that the Department of Labor would “exhaust all domestic sources, including organized labor” prior to certifying braceros. Nevertheless, by year’s end Galarza reported 4,000 braceros in the valley with another 4,000 requested by the Imperial Valley Farmers Association. Growers were also

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Galarza to Mitchell, December 1, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
Daniel Mays to Mitchell, enclosed in Mitchell to John Fishburn, December 14, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
Goodwin to Mitchell, May 29, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
Galarza to Mitchell, December 31, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
“running chartered Greyhound buses filled with wets who are picked up all over” the valley to be taken to the border “where the Mexican consul gives them [bracero] certificates.”

**Imperial Overreach**

By 1951, the NFLU considered its Imperial Valley locals strong enough to mount a challenge to the Imperial Valley Farmers Association in a bid to force a confrontation over both farmworker conditions and the effect the Bracero Program had on them. As Representative Poage and Senator Ellender traveled to Mexico to negotiate the new international agreement in February, Hasiwar sent a letter to Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin informing him that the O’Dwyer-Mets farm employed an illegal mixed crew of braceros and undocumented workers. The union demanded that the secretary cancel the farm’s bracero contracts immediately and demanded a hearing. By selecting O’Dwyer-Mets, the union hoped to illustrate the cozy relations between powerful growers associations and government officials. Keith Mets served as president of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association, and his business partner Frank O’Dwyer was the brother of the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, a fact that underscored the amicable relations between growers and the government officials responsible for negotiating and administering the Bracero Program. Instead of calling attention to the inherently biased administration of the program, however, grower-administrator friendliness prevented the Department of Labor from acting in any meaningful way. The Labor Department’s San Francisco office met privately with association leader and denied the union’s right to act as spokesperson for adversely affected workers. Nevertheless, the union had announced its intentions to target the association.  

As the springtime harvest approached, all of the NFLU’s California organizers descended on the Imperial Valley. Hasiwar, Galarza, Bill Becker, Bill Swearingen, and Carl Lara

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484 Galarza to Mitchell, December 11, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
485 Hasiwar to Tobin, February 5, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
486 Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 158.
organized twenty-five men and women from the three locals into a volunteer force to distribute informational leaflets in Spanish among not only resident farmworkers, but also braceros and undocumented workers. Acting on Mitchell’s instruction, on April 26 Hasiwar sent a letter to the association requesting a meeting “to discuss wages, working conditions and employment of resident farm workers.” The union demanded preferential employment for resident farmworkers, a one-dollar hourly wage, an increase in melon picking piece rates from 20¢ to 25¢ per crate, no discrimination against union members, and an end to undocumented workers’ employment. The association answered that it had no power to negotiate on members’ behalf with domestic workers; it existed solely to contract braceros.

Tensions rose in the valley as the melon harvest began in May. They erupted into open conflict on May 23 when the American Fruit Company fired all of its domestic workers. At a meeting that night in Brawley, 300 union members voted to strike. The following day, with 6,000 workers on strike, Mitchell telegrammed Secretary Tobin requesting that he “remove all contract Mexican nationals under terms of [the] International Agreement.” Mitchell believed this would occur immediately, since Assistant Secretary of Labor Robert Creasey had promised him on May 11 that officials would revoke bracero contracts as soon as picketing began.

Despite the promise, however, the department deferred to regional and state officials, who moved at a glacial pace in declaring a labor dispute. In the meantime, the union attempted to call braceros out on strike by distributing flyers in Spanish that invited them “to join the ranks” (“a ingresar a sus filas”) of the NFLU. The union would help them obtain “strict compliance of

487 Ibid.
488 Ibid., 159; NFLU Press Release, April 27, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
489 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 159.
490 Ibid., 160.
491 Mitchell to Tobin, telegram, May 24, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
492 Mitchell to Hasiwar, May 11, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
these contracts that have been violated so brazenly by employers” (“se cumplan estrictamente estos contratos que han sido violados con tan descaro por los patrones”). The Imperial Valley locals enjoyed some success in their effort to organize braceros. By June forty had signed union cards, and three hundred shared membership in the NFLU through an arrangement with a union in Mexicali and a Mexican national bracero organization that organized some of them prior to their departure from Mexico. Ultimately, though, bracero union members made up only a tiny fraction of the growers’ association’s total braceros, who continued working in the melon fields alongside undocumented workers. The United Packinghouse Workers and the Teamsters—who packaged and delivered the produce—might have made the strike effective by respecting the NFLU picket lines while others stayed in the fields, but both unions honored their contracts as part of a deal on state legislation with California’s powerful Associated Farmers.

Left on its own, the NFLU doubled down on its strategy to pressure the Labor Department to remove braceros from the struck farms. In a press release, Mitchell accused officials of “conniving with large-scale farm operators” to break the strike. By the end of May, the union filed a complaint for injunction against the department to try to force the removal of braceros, and Mitchell warned Secretary Tobin that “unless action is taken by the Labor Department in 24 hours,” growers would succeed in breaking the strike. As the melon harvest continued in early June, the NFLU’s legal counsel in Washington demanded that the department act in accordance with Article 32 of the international agreement forbidding bracero employment

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493 NFLU, Manifesto a los Braceros Contractados Mexicanos, May 25, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
494 Galarza to Mitchell, May 8, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35; Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 164.
495 The Associated Farmers had lobbied for legislation against prohibiting unions from refusing to handle goods produced by companies experiencing labor difficulties. The Teamsters agreed to ignore the strike if the growers dropped the legislation. When the Teamsters resumed deliveries, UPWA returned to the packing sheds. Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 161-62.
496 NFLU, Press Release, May 28, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
on struck farms and “remove all Mexican nationals” under contract with the Imperial Valley Farmers Association.

On June 8, more than two weeks after the strike began, Tobin finally “reached the conclusion that there is in existence a labor dispute in the Imperial Valley.” He promised to immediately “take action for the removal of Mexican contract workers from farms.” It took an additional week, however, for the department’s regional officials to begin their investigation, which proceeded not against the entire association but on a farm-by-farm basis. The investigators took statements at union meetings, which they found “disorganized” and run with “much confusion.” It was not until June 25—more than a month after the walkout and well after most of the fields had been harvested—that department officials began to remove braceros. Hasiwar later recalled that when Tobin gave word to Mitchell that the braceros would be removed, Mitchell excitedly called Galarza. The NFLU organizer was not impressed. “Mitch, the melon season is over,” he said, “You have won a Pyrrhic victory.” Underscoring the hollowness of that victory, the NFLU suspended the strike the same day the department removed the braceros, and union members soon began their seasonal northward migration to earn money as other crops ripened.

Galarza traveled to Washington to accompany Mitchell to a meeting with Secretary of Labor Tobin over the issue of braceros’ use in breaking the union’s strike. As they waited in a reception room, they were joined by Daniel H. Pollitt, one of the union’s attorneys; Msgr. George G. Higgins of the National Catholic Welfare Conference; and Gardner Jackson,

498 Tobin to Mitchell, June 8, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
499 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 170.
500 George Duemler to William S. Tyson, June 17, 1951, file Imperial Valley Investigation, 1951, Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 15, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
501 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 170.
502 Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 269.
503 Mitchell to Hasiwar, June 25, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
Mitchell’s old friend from the STFU days who now worked in the Department of Labor. Although the intensities of their emotions varied, all of them were upset with Tobin.\textsuperscript{504} In fact, Pollitt had prepared a lawsuit against the department, which the delegation awaiting Tobin planned to use as a threat to extract promises for speedier action in future labor disputes.\textsuperscript{505} If the department failed to remove braceros immediately from struck farms, there was little hope for the union to realize its organizing goals.

A secretary showed the men into Tobin’s office. They took in the large corner room’s ample windows and lush rugs and looked across a massive desk behind which sat Tobin. Before Tobin could rise to welcome them, Ernesto Galarza stalked across the room to confront the secretary of labor. “Mr. Secretary, you could sleep twenty farm workers in here very comfortably,” he snapped.\textsuperscript{506} Tobin replied angrily that the last time he met with NFLU representatives, they had issued a press release despite their promises that the meeting would be kept confidential. Galarza responded, “Yes, Mr. Secretary, you went back on your word. If you go back on your word again, there is going to be another press release. Just what have you got to hide?”\textsuperscript{507} Msgr. Higgins managed to calm the room down, and Tobin promised better enforcement in the future. But the union had been defeated yet again by powerful growers with easy access to barely regulated guestworkers.

Galarza wrote a lengthy report on the strike once it was all over that summarized the problems the union faced as the Bracero Program was poised to begin a long tenure under Public Law 78. In striking, the union faced the dual replacement labor pools of undocumented workers and braceros. The Imperial Valley locals attempted to combat the former by performing citizens’

\textsuperscript{504} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in this Land}, 270.
\textsuperscript{505} Mitchell, \textit{Mean Things Happening in this Land}, 271.
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{507} Ibid.
arrests when farmworkers emptied from labor contractors’ trucks and posting round-the-clock observers “at the crossing points on the Mexican border.” Galarza estimated that the efforts “turned back not less than 3000 illegal aliens.”\textsuperscript{508} Even so, the braceros embodied a problem the union could not overcome. In Galarza’s opinion, the Department of Labor viewed its role narrowly, thus allowing regional and state officials to delay “recognition of the existence of the strike.” When those officials finally got around to their investigation, the farm-by-farm basis gave the association the chance to transfer braceros to other members, allowing “between 4,500 and 5,000 Nationals…to work behind the picket lines,” in many cases “escorted either by police cars or armed retainers.” Under such policies, the department created and condoned “conditions which destroy the economic power of American farm workers to defend themselves against powerful combinations of bosses. That is the central lesson of the Imperial Valley farm labor strike of 1951.”\textsuperscript{509}

Return to the Valley

The NFLU underwent another financial crisis after the strike in Imperial. In July, Mitchell suggested reducing the California operation to a central office with one or two organizers during the winter months.\textsuperscript{510} By the end of October he had to inform his staff, “We shall not be able to meet our monthly payroll in full,” though he promised to send the retroactive paychecks when donations arrived.\textsuperscript{511} In January 1952, the union began operating under a new name, the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU), but the new name failed to bring a change of fortunes. The same month, Mitchell furloughed three organizers and reduced the


\textsuperscript{510} Mitchell to NFLU Officers and Organizers, July 3, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.

\textsuperscript{511} Mitchell to NFLU Officers and Organizers, October 29, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 36.
union’s organizing budget to a paltry $450.\textsuperscript{512} As part of the reorganization, Hasiwar was transferred to Louisiana to work with strawberry farmers and sugarcane workers, whose steadier employment Mitchell hoped would help underwrite the union’s California campaigns.

Galarza returned to the Imperial Valley later that month to organize, since “the bulk of the core membership in Imperial remains intact.” A meeting in Brawley drew 150 people, and he managed to collect some dues and motivate local volunteer organizers.\textsuperscript{513} From his Washington office, Mitchell attempted to use the firmer basis for the Bracero Program established by Public Law 78 as a lever to help move the Labor Department toward better program enforcement. In the spring, he requested that the department hold public hearings to determine the need for braceros, but was told that Congress had not appropriated any funds for that specific purpose, despite its $1.29 million appropriation for the program overall.\textsuperscript{514} Meanwhile, Galarza collected evidence of palpable adverse effect to use in the union’s claims of maladministration. As the melon harvest began in late May 1952, he noted that “wages have declined from $.90 to a dollar an hour to $.70 this year” because of increasing bracero employment.\textsuperscript{515} In a repeat of the previous year, association growers began releasing domestic farmworkers as the harvest approached, with a compliant California Farm Placement Service giving them the run-around by referring them to other employers who declined to hire them.\textsuperscript{516}

Continuing the union’s effort to organizing farmworkers by focusing on the Bracero Program, Galarza decided to focus on reinstating displaced resident farmworkers by locating

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\textsuperscript{512} Mitchell to All Members, National Executive Board, January 22, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\textsuperscript{513} Galarza to Mitchell, February 1, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\textsuperscript{515} Galarza, “Farm Labor Conditions in the Imperial Valley,” May 24, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\textsuperscript{516} Galarza to Mitchell, May 26, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36; Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 174-75.
bracero crews on association member farms and demanding that the local Farm Placement Service office refer the available domestic crews to replace them. He requested a list of growers using braceros and the number contracted by each from the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Employment Security Regional Director Glenn Brockway. But Brockway, himself friendly to growers, insisted that Galarza review them personally in the San Francisco office, 600 miles north of where they were originally compiled in Calexico. Galarza ignored the offer. Since American Fruit Growers, Arena Imperial, and Western Fruit Growers fired the largest number of domestics, the union simply concentrated its efforts on them.517

In early June, Galarza called a strike of melon pickers, but to avoid the previous year’s problem of bracero and undocumented worker replacements, he schooled his volunteer organizers in the intricacies of state law governing farm labor bus and truck safety standards. Galarza wrote to Mitchell, “We shall stop all trucks that the Border Patrol leaves unmolested.”518 The organizers reported vehicles in violation—virtually all of them—to inspectors with the State Department of Industrial Relations, which the California State Federation of Labor persuaded to visit Imperial.519 Galarza also dispatched “roving pickets” to ensure that braceros and undocumented workers were not working together in mixed crews. When they found a large mixed crew of braceros and daily border commuters on the Maggio Company farm, Galarza filed charges immediately.520

Taken together, these more targeted approaches yielded results. By restricting some of the undocumented worker supply for the largest growers and offering domestic crews as immediate replacements for braceros through the Farm Placement Service, by June 10, 1952

517 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 175-76.
519 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 176-77.
520 Ibid., 178.
Galarza could report “full compliance with the [international] agreement.” Moreover, Maggio lost its braceros. The farm had “over 50 of our men picking with union buttons on,” and “two of the biggest [labor] contractors have been broken on our charges of mixed crews.”

Perhaps more importantly, the Department of Labor had responded quickly and decisively. It even dispatched a new supervisor to El Centro “to clean up the local Employment Service office,” a move that a department investigator found growers resisted “because of their general opposition” to making “job orders available to domestics.”

To Galarza, it seemed the union finally had achieved a model for confronting the Imperial Valley Farmers Association and organizing American farmworkers in the difficult circumstances created by the Bracero Program.

_Beyond Imperial, 1952_

Elsewhere in the state, however, the union struggled. In March 1952, it became involved in a lengthy conflict with the Schenley Corporation in Kern County, home to Local 218. Searching for a way forward after Di Giorgio, the local struck after almost one hundred union members were fired at Schenley “for engaging in union activity.” Those farmworkers living in company housing on the 5,000-acre vineyard were evicted in addition to losing their employment.

According to the NAWU, Schenley, which maintained collective bargaining agreements with other AFL unions, was initially sympathetic to the idea of negotiating a contract, but the Associated Farmers, California’s grower lobby, “put the heat on the corporation officials.”

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522 Mary H. Hutchinson to Robert C. Goodwin, June 17, 1952, file Opinions and Interpretations, 1951-56 (Mexican Labor Programs) [2 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
523 Mitchell to Officers, All International and National Unions, March 19, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
Schenley demanded that the NAWU “demonstrate that it represents a majority of our workers,” but in April “the company rejected a card check,” insisting upon a State Conciliation Service election, which it repeatedly delayed.\(^{525}\) By June Schenley changed course and rehired the strikers, but in late August organizer Bill Becker reported that members’ hours were severely limited while former strikebreakers worked full schedules.\(^{526}\) Mitchell told Becker Schenley was giving the union “a run around of the first order.” There was little hope for genuine progress without a full-blown legal fight against the company, and the NAWU simply did not have the funds.\(^{527}\)

Shortly after the abortive Schenley fight, the NAWU’s California operation suffered from internal dissension. Fresno-based organizer Bill Swearingen, who had helped organize farmworkers during the Di Giorgio strike, had grown increasingly critical of the union’s direction as its limited funds forced it to retrench in 1952.\(^{528}\) This alone might not have been a problem, but Mitchell received reports from Galarza and Becker that Swearingen had been meeting with suspected Communists. Ever mindful of the STFU’s disastrous experience with Don Henderson’s UCAPAWA, Mitchell ordered Galarza to fire Swearingen and place the Fresno local under the union’s direct control. Smelling a Communist plot, Mitchell accused Swearingen of planning to use “his small local to take over” the union’s umbrella San Joaquin Valley Council “for propaganda purposes.”\(^{529}\)

Galarza cautioned against such dramatic action, arguing that Swearingen might have been duped and that revoking the local’s charter would undermine rank-and-file faith in the NAWU.

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\(^{527}\) Mitchell to Becker, September 2, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.

\(^{528}\) National Executive Board, Meeting Minutes, October 24-25, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.

\(^{529}\) Mitchell to Galarza, November 4, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
Try as he might, Galarza failed to calm Mitchell’s temper. The NAWU president advised Galarza not to be too “concerned about sticking to democratic procedures as far as communists and their followers are concerned. Use the same tactics they would use on you.”  

Galarza met with Swearingen late in November and reported to Mitchell that his receptivity to Communist Party members’ advances probably derived from “emotional strains” manifesting as “a violent devotion to ‘principle,’” a devotion that made him “suspect everyone else of hypocrisy.”  

On December 16, Mitchell replied to Galarza, “I think Swearingen is giving you a line.”  

The point was moot. That same day Swearingen wrote to Galarza telling him, “I have lost all confidence in the organization and its leaders.” “Despite my efforts through thick and thin,” he wrote, “I now find myself under suspicion for upholding the very things, which were my inspiration and mainstay in the five-year struggle.”

As the union struggled in 1952 with Schenley and Swearingen in the San Joaquin Valley, Galarza managed to win another victory on the bracero front in addition to the Imperial melon success. This time, the union tried a real publicity stunt to illustrate the flagrant violations growers were committing in the Bracero Program. In the Salinas Valley near the Pacific coast, he exposed illegal deductions from braceros’ paychecks for supplies that should have been provided to them for free. One bracero’s paycheck after deductions totaled a mere $2.75 for a week’s work.  

In September, Galarza informed Mitchell that bracero users had been deducting money for tie wires called “twistems,” which braceros used to tie bunches of carrots together. He had filed more than forty grievances with the local U.S. Employment Service officer, but “not one has been resolved favorably.” When a bracero union member, Francisco Hernandez Cano, was

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530 Mitchell to Galarza and Becker, November 22, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.  
532 Mitchell to Galarza, December 16, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.  
533 Swearingen to Galarza, December 16, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.  
534 NFLU, Press Release, October 9, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
fired for union activity, Galarza immediately put him on a Greyhound bus to Washington to meet
with Mitchell. Galarza wanted him “to see Tobin, some AFL people and the press,” as well as
the Mexican ambassador.\footnote{Galarza to Mitchell, September 2, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.}

The union pounced on the opportunity, arranging the meetings and issuing a press release
that charged that at rates of 65¢ to 72¢ per thousand, the twistem deductions took as much as $3
per week from the braceros’ meager earnings. On Hernandez’s information, the union claimed
that the 3200 braceros in the Salinas Valley were “discriminated against in favor of illegal aliens,
or wet backs, who are also hired to work in the same field.” The press release also characterized
the food growers sold to braceros as “unfit for human consumption.” One man had been treated
for malnourishment, but his employer refused to give him the milk a doctor had prescribed. His
weight had dropped from 140 to 100 pounds during his employment.\footnote{NFLU, Press Release, September 9, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.}

Mitchell forwarded the
information to Mexican Ambassador Rafael de la Colina, alleging that Hernandez had already
complained to the Mexican consular offices in California, though nothing had been done “to
correct the injustices reported.”\footnote{Mitchell to Rafael de la Colina, September 27, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.}

The public pressure had the intended effect. The Mexican embassy received Hernandez
and assured him his contract would be honored upon his return to Salinas.\footnote{Galaraz, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 211.}

Meanwhile at the
Department of Labor, an investigation verified what Hernandez had said about bracero
conditions and growers’ practice of deductions. Mitchell wrote to Galarza to let him know that
“Everything Cano [sic] told them was found to be true.”\footnote{Mitchell to Galarza, October 3, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.}
The department ordered that
deductions for blankets and other furnishings be immediately repaid to braceros, and it also ruled

\footnotesize
\begin{footnotes}
\item Galarza to Mitchell, September 2, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\item NFLU, Press Release, September 9, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\item Mitchell to Rafael de la Colina, September 27, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\item Galaraz, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 211.
\item Mitchell to Galarza, October 3, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
\end{footnotes}
that the twistem deductions were “in violation of the Migrant Labor Agreement and the Work Contract.”

**Imperial Collapse**

As 1953 began, the NAWU hoped to capitalize on the previous year’s successes in the Imperial and Salinas Valleys, but it ultimately found its triumphs short-lived as growers used the Bracero Program against the farmworker union. In February, Galarza returned to the Imperial Valley and reported the continued success of the union in achieving “cancellation of licenses of farm labor contractors who are found transporting illegals.” However, later that month association members resumed firing domestic farmworker crews in large numbers; by March 1 more than one hundred had lost their jobs. To make matters worse, Galarza reported that the local compliance official who had cleaned up the El Centro Employment Service office had been replaced by a former manager of the neighboring Coachella Farmers Association, a bracero-contracting growers association. By the time the melon harvest began in mid-May, a union field survey of the entire valley found that braceros composed 90% of the melon pickers. Clearly, this fact coupled with the firings did “not fit the picture of distressing labor shortages” claimed by the California State Department of Employment.

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540 Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 211; Robert C. Goodwin to Kenneth Robertson, March 20, 1952, file Opinions and Interpretations, 1951-56 (Mexican Labor Decisions) [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.


543 Galarza, “Displacement of Domestic Farm Workers in the Imperial Valley,” February 27, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 36.


545 Galarza, “Displacement of Domestic Farm Workers in the Imperial Valley,” February 27, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 36.
At the same time, growers retaliated against braceros who had joined the NAWU, in a clear example of the control they exercised over their guestworkers. Three of them, Andres Rodriguez Marquez, Joaquin Palacio Cosio, and J. Luz Terrazas, were deported outright. Along with nineteen others, the men had joined in March after their employer began assigning them meager work in retaliation for their testimony about a January farmworker truck accident in which they and other braceros were injured. Galarza reported that on May 12, they were told to pack their belongings, but “the men refused to leave.” When they were finally persuaded that “they were simply being taken to another field” nearby, they assented, but “were immediately taken to the office of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association,” where their contracts were cancelled. They were told “that they were in this trouble on account of having joined the union.” To make matters worse, in contravention of the international agreement they were simply deposited in Mexicali, not provided their return transportation to their points of origin.\footnote{Galarza to Mitchell, May 15, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 36.} When Galarza filed complaints about the matter with the Department of Labor on the grounds that the union had been authorized to represent the men, Labor Department Acting Solicitor Jeter Ray declared, “in the case of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association it would be necessary for an individual, in order to be elected a representative under Article 21, to obtain a majority of the votes cast from among all those contracted by that Association.”\footnote{Jeter Ray to Kenneth C. Robertson, July 15, 1953, file “Migratory Labor, William S. Tyson, Memorandums July 15, 1953-May 16, 1956, Public Law 78 [2 of 6], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 1, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.} The Labor Department that had insisted upon farm-by-farm investigations in the 1951 strike against the Imperial Valley Farmers Association now placed the union’s burden of proof on an association-wide basis. A clear pattern was emerging: whenever the union challenged administration of the Bracero
Program, the program’s rules and regulations were simply interpreted in whatever way was necessary to defeat the union’s claims.

Compounding the frustrations of growers’ bracero use and the government’s refusal to deal with the union transparently, farmers began to implement a structural change that transformed the industry in Imperial with the goal of removing all unions—not just farmworker ones—from the fields. In 1951, packinghouse workers in UPWA Local 78 refused to honor the NFLU’s picket lines. By 1953 the association rewarded UPWA loyalty by moving the packing sheds to the fields, erecting makeshift structures where harvested crops could be immediately packed and loaded onto trucks. The men and women who stayed in the sheds two years ago now watched as braceros did their jobs in the fields. Local 78’s president apologized to Galarza for his union’s lack of past solidarity over a pint of beer at a local bar.\(^{548}\)

Overall, California’s growers had closed ranks after the NAWU’s Imperial victory in 1952. As braceros flooded the state under Public Law 78, the Associated Farmers used its power in Sacramento to threaten the mission and budget of the State Conciliation Service, which declared whether or not a labor dispute existed and thus whether or not braceros could be removed.\(^{549}\) The California Department of Employment also continued to defer to grower prerogatives. When River Farms fired domestic workers the same day it hired braceros, the department’s Farm Placement Service pointed out that the farm was not technically authorized to contract braceros; it had merely “borrowed” them from fellow association member American Fruit. Since River Farms was not authorized for braceros, the discharged workers had no “re-

\(^{548}\) Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 185.

\(^{549}\) Ibid., 186.
employment rights.” When Galarza charged that American Fruit had illegally lent braceros to an unauthorized user, the response was silence.550

By 1954, Galarza had lost hope for the NAWU in the Imperial Valley. “We are frozen out,” he wrote to Mitchell. Ten of the union’s best volunteer organizers headed north for work in February, “five months ahead of usual.”551 In May, when the union had launched its melon effort each year for the three previous years, he noted, “practically every one of our key people has left.” He wrote with finality, “There is no point to my coming back.” Less than a year later, he declared Imperial totally lost: “The big growers are in pretty complete command of the entire front.”552 By then, virtually all of the Mexican American resident farmworkers involved in the union had permanently moved north, their vacant homes transformed into “ghost barrios,” which the Imperial Valley Farmers Association purchased, razed, and replaced with bracero housing.553

**Conclusion: Lessons under the New Bracero Program, 1951-54**

Although organized labor opposed Public Law 78, unilateral recruitment, and demanded that the Department of Labor do more to enforce the Bracero Program’s domestic farmworker safeguards, unionists found their efforts continually frustrated by the power of the grower lobby and their control over the decentralized administration of the program. The program expanded rapidly under these circumstances. In 1950, only 67,500 bracero contracts were issued (though that number masked “dried out” illegal immigrants). In 1951, the number of contracts jumped to 192,000, climbing steadily to 201,380 in 1953 before jumping again to 309,033 in 1954.554 These

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551 Galarza to Mitchell, February 1, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 37.
552 Galarza to Mitchell, March 2, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
553 Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 186.
554 Calavita, Appendix B, 218.
relentless increases embittered the many domestic farmworkers who struggled to stitch together an income and life.

In California, the NFLU did what it could to organize California’s farmworkers in the face of meager resources, member migrancy, and the dual threat of undocumented workers and braceros. By the end of 1953, the union had established a network of locals in the state’s most important agricultural valleys and trained what Galarza considered a “promising base for the local leadership,” which numbered some one hundred men and women from the Mexican American, black, Filipino, and Okie and Arkie communities.555 This network provided the only alternate source of information beyond those supplied by labor contractors and growers’ associations regarding the wages and labor conditions under which the state’s 200,000-plus agricultural workers toiled.556

Yet victories were few and far between, driven by the fact that the union was unable to prevent the use of braceros during labor disputes and the increasing presence of braceros in the state’s fields. Union membership turned over frequently, and members ceased paying dues as their income disappeared at the end of the harvest season. To make matters worse, the AFL discontinued its subsidies in July 1953, and the National Sharecroppers Fund was unable to bridge the gap.557 With Hank Hasiwar dispatched to Louisiana, where Mitchell hoped he would be able to find members with more steady income to help finance the union, Galarza was left to “hold the fort in California.”558 But, as Galarza later wrote, “There were no forts to hold.”559

At its core, the problem posed for the union by California was one of powerful growers who could rely on braceros to keep their fields union-free. Growers flouted with impunity the

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555 Ibid., 196.
556 Ibid.
557 Ibid., 201.
558 Mitchell to Galarza, August 28, 1952, STFU Papers, reel 36.
559 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 202.
regulations barring their use of braceros during labor disputes, and they wielded the guestworkers as a club to pay whatever wages they wanted, forcing domestic workers to move around in search of better work. Depression and Dust Bowl migrants, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans all competed for jobs made scarcer by bracero employment, while those growers who did not wish to pay at the bracero prevailing wage floor could hire undocumented workers with relative ease. The union had proven it could organize domestic resident farmworkers by locating stable farmworker communities and training dedicated volunteer organizers. Nevertheless, its moments of victory were always overshadowed by the looming threat of state-sanctioned labor importation and growers’ control over both Bracero Program administration and the terms of agricultural employment. Thus, the basic strategy of labor organizing seemed to hold little promise for the union in its efforts to fight to improve farmworkers’ lives. If the union hoped to make any lasting gains, it would have to find a way to focus on criticizing the lax enforcement of the Bracero Program and demanding better control over illegal immigration. Addressing either of these problems in isolation would not have been sufficient. Galarza and Mitchell knew they had their work cut out from them.
Chapter 4: The Border Cannot Hold: The “Wetback Problem” and Cross-Border Labor Organizing, 1948-1955

The NAWU’s experiences fighting the Imperial Valley Farmers Association had clearly demonstrated that growers were using the Bracero Program to defeat agricultural unionism. But they also illustrated just how easy it was for growers to hire undocumented Mexican workers rather than deal fairly with domestic farmworkers if and when Department of Labor officials ever removed braceros from struck farms. Even INS Border Patrol raids failed to help. Replacement workers were “on the job within a few minutes after the raid,” Galarza reported in 1951.\textsuperscript{560} Unsure of how to deal with growers’ control over a totally unregulated foreign labor force, the union sometimes resorted to citizens’ arrests in which some of the its more zealous devotees worked as a sort of union border patrol that blocked labor contractors’ passage and searched vehicles.\textsuperscript{561} Ultimately though, it was more or less helpless when it came to confronting the problem of undocumented immigration.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, that problem was exacerbated by the Bracero Program’s invitation to Mexican workers to come north for work. Although policymakers in the United States sought to use the program as a means to control labor migration across its southern border, the Bracero Program increased the undocumented population. American farmworkers’ poverty, braceros, and undocumented immigration were all interconnected in an agricultural labor market that transcended national boundaries. Between 1948 and 1955, these inextricably linked problems for domestic farmworkers focused the attention of labor and Mexican American civil rights groups on the U.S. borderlands. With the number of undocumented workers far surpassing braceros in the agricultural workforce and distracting from the effort to focus on


\textsuperscript{561} Ibid.

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improving the Bracero Program’s protections for American farmworkers, activists tried to draw
attention to the growing numbers of illegal immigrants who threatened to reduce farmworkers’
bargaining position and render the Bracero Program irrelevant. Nowhere was this effort to draw
attention to undocumented immigration more evident than in Texas, where unionists and
Mexican American civil rights advocates joined forces to publicize the effects of an open border
on the resident Mexican American farmworker population. This joint effort meshed with broader
national concerns on immigration that helped produce a crackdown in 1954 called Operation
Wetback, which led to the Bracero Program’s expansion under Public Law 78 by reducing the
available undocumented Mexican labor supply.

Nevertheless, the immigration crackdown and rapidly expanding Bracero Program
offered little solace to labor organizers working on behalf of the nation’s downtrodden
farmworkers. Based on their past experiences with government officials, they had little reason to
believe the federal government would demonstrate a lasting interest in enforcement when it came
to matters of foreign labor. As a result, they tried cooperating with Mexican unions in an attempt
to find a cross-border organizing solution to the problems posed by international labor migration.
The NFLU/NAWU, routinely defeated in its California direct organizing efforts among
farmworkers, recognized the limits of unionization in the context of the transnational movement
of Mexican guestworkers and undocumented immigrants. In response, it pioneered a cross-
border approach in its search for a winning strategy. It sought potential allies in Mexico’s labor
movement, while U.S. labor leaders at the national level seized on Cold War labor
internationalism in support of free trade unions to try to coordinate the American and Mexican
labor movements’ positions on immigration and the Bracero Program. Ultimately, however,
cross-border organizing and labor internationalism proved even less successful than federal
policy in finding a solution to the problems posed by international labor migration because labor organizations on both sides of the border had interests that could not be brought into meaningful alignment. While Mexican unions benefited from the reduced labor competition created by the outmigration of underemployed workers, the NFLU/NAWU had a vested interest in reducing all Mexican migration to a minimum.

The “Wetback Problem”

From its inception, the Bracero Program stimulated rising numbers of undocumented immigrants—known by the derogatory term “wetbacks” from their Rio Grande crossings—by raising Mexicans’ awareness of jobs in the United States. Indeed, the program’s inauguration seemed to indicate that the welcome mat—pulled inside by Depression-era deportations—had reappeared on the northern neighbor’s doorstep. Some returning braceros advised their friends and family that going through the Bracero Program was not worth the trouble given lax program oversight, poor working conditions, and low wages; it was better to cross the border illegally, especially for those living near the border who faced a long trek to the interior recruitment centers just to be transported north again. Taken together, these factors led many more Mexicans to enter the American workforce without a bracero contract in hand, joining braceros who simply “skipped out” on their contracts to become illegal immigrants. In 1943, INS apprehended 11,715 unauthorized immigrants, but that number had grown to 193,657 just four years later, a fifteen-fold increase (See Table 4.1).562

562 Calavita, Appendix A, 217.
Table 4.1: Bracero Contracts and INS Apprehensions, 1942-1948

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>4,203</td>
<td>11,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>50,098</td>
<td>11,715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>62,170</td>
<td>31,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>49,454</td>
<td>69,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>32,043</td>
<td>99,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>19,632</td>
<td>193,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>35,345</td>
<td>192,779</td>
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The increase in undocumented immigrants alarmed many leaders of the Mexican American community, perhaps none more than George I. Sánchez, a University of Texas professor and past president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Organizations of middle-class Americans of Mexican descent (including LULAC) throughout the Southwest historically had opposed Mexican immigration. They did so on the argument that constant new arrivals of relatively poor, working-class immigrants threatened their status as “white persons with Spanish surnames” in an American society in which race often determined economic position. For example, LULAC repeatedly advised the working-class populations of their communities to clean up their appearance and living habits to comport with Anglo norms of respectability as a means of avoiding a poverty-tainted “Mexican” label.\(^{564}\) Sánchez, a Tejano by heritage, reflected this anti-immigrant bias, arguing that large-scale Mexican immigration would undermine Mexican American claims to an American identity.\(^{565}\)

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\(^{563}\) Note that the number of bracero contracts for 1947 and 1948 do not include those undocumented workers who were later contracted as braceros after their arrest in the “drying out” process. In 1947, for instance, they accounted for more than 55,000 additional braceros.


In 1948, Sánchez tried to connect this Mexican American opposition with broader labor efforts in support of U.S. farmworkers. He contacted H.L. Mitchell after he became aware of the NFLU’s efforts and frustrations combating growers in California, informing him of his recently completed “wetback report” on Texas immigration, which Sánchez said he hoped to expand into a “much more complete study.” Mitchell promised to use his contacts in the AFL “to further the investigation and publicize its findings.” By February 1949, Sánchez took his case to AFL Latin American representative Serafino Romualdi, who assured him that his office shared “the greatest concern” about the “‘wet backs’ seasonal invasion from Mexico.” Mitchell had been badgering Romualdi to secure AFL president William Green’s support on undocumented immigrants. In a memo to Green, Romualdi suggested that the AFL “enlist greater support on the part of organized labor” on the issue. Texas labor was already on board. The day after Romualdi sent his memo, Texas State Federation of Labor executive secretary Harry Acreman wrote to Labor Secretary Maurice Tobin. In his letter, he blasted the Bracero Program for encouraging the growth of “this vast population of unskilled Mexican labor.” Furthermore, he argued that braceros simply “desert agricultural labor and locate in the towns and industries of our country,” while growers recreated “the peon conditions of central Mexico…in Texas.”

In June, Sánchez released an expanded version of his report titled, simply, “Wetbacks,” which he co-wrote with sociologist Lyle Saunders. The report did not mince words, reflecting Mexican American activists’ frustrations with illegal immigration. The introduction summarized

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566 Sánchez to Mitchell, July 7, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.
567 Mitchell to Sánchez, July 26, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 32.

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the consequences of this migration: “poverty, disease, slums, ignorance, dependence, low wages, and social and personal disorganization” for the immigrants. In a nod to middle-class Tejanos’ concerns as self-proclaimed leaders of their communities, the authors argued that undocumented immigrants’ presence also forced these conditions on “the Spanish-speaking citizens whom they displace.” The report lamented that labor organization of such citizens was impossible with the “over-supply of cheap, unprotected labor.” If the border remained open, the agricultural economies of central, western, and south Texas would soon be based on “the shifting quicksand that is the wetback—contraband labor.”

To demonstrate this, Sánchez and Saunders included a section authored by El Paso Times reporter Art Leibson on the 1948 unilateral bracero recruitment escapade. In October Truman had briefly opened the border in response to Texas growers’ outrage at Mexico’s refusal to allow them to hire braceros. Undocumented workers, who had already massed at the border in response to growers’ advertisements of work, crossed illegally, were arrested by the Border Patrol, and were then issued bracero contracts and sent to work on farms in Texas and New Mexico through the process called “drying out the wetbacks.” The report characterized what followed as an “invading horde” that “glutted the market, quickly knocking the [cotton] picking rate down to $1.50 [cwt] and less.” Leibson estimated that 90% of the cotton “was picked by wetbacks in 1948.” Working conditions in the fields made it “easy to conclude that the black slave…was far better off. Uncle Tom at least had his cabin.” In response to the “invasion,” Mexican American farmworkers simply “moved out.”

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572 For a fuller discussion of the incident, and the “drying out” process, see Chapter 2, Section “The Bracero Program Adrift, 1947-1951,” subsection “The Program in Flux.”
supported this conclusion; it estimated the migrants moving north and west for work at more than 100,000, with the migration beginning in those areas closest to the border.\textsuperscript{574}

In addition to the economic consequences to domestic farmworkers, the report also stressed that continued immigration would rend the national fabric and undermine the patriotic bona fides of the broader Mexican American community. Birthright citizenship for the children of undocumented immigrants meant that parents could apply as well, “even though they…know nothing of the government of the United States or any responsibilities of citizenship.” El Paso was already “losing its fight to Americanize its Latin-American youngsters,” the report anxiously declared. In their conclusion, the authors called for the full application of all penalties against undocumented immigrants, new legislation barring the employment of illegal aliens, and the formation of a presidential commission to examine the problems of the Spanish-speaking in the Southwest.\textsuperscript{575}

The “Wetback” report was circulated among labor and Mexican American civil rights organizations. Border unionists echoed its reform call in letters to their congressmen. Arizonan Mason M. Warren, head of the Yuma County Building and Construction Trades Council, repeatedly badgered Senator Carl Hayden, calling the “Wet Mexican situation here abouts…a joke,” and alerting him whenever he felt the Border Patrol failed to do its job.\textsuperscript{576} But the loudest response came from growers, who complained directly to Sánchez. Carl Payne, identifying himself as a “little farmer,” claimed that without undocumented workers, “we just couldn’t farm and you wouldn’t be getting vegetables so cheap.” He asked the professor if Texas farmers

\textsuperscript{574} Texas Employment Commission, Annual Report, 1948, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.


\textsuperscript{576} Warren to Hayden, July 19, 1949 and July 27, 1950, Box 91, Folder 12, Carl Hayden Papers.
should let their crop “rot in the field when the wetbacks keep coming by the house begging for
work?”

Public Law 78 and Undocumented Immigration

As it struggled to cope with the rise in illegal immigration, the INS both responded to
increased national attention to the issue and helped focus that attention. Together, these forces
led to calls for tougher border enforcement, with the INS hoping to regain control by expanding
the Bracero Program. Throughout the 1940s, the agency found itself subjected to contradictory
instructions from Congress. On one hand, the farm bloc, made up of Republicans and Southern
Democrats, pressured the INS not to enforce immigration statutes strictly during the harvest
season and threatened to cut appropriations to prevent the Border Patrol from doing its job too
effectively. On the other hand, liberal congressmen aligned with urban labor interests as well as
immigration hardliners attacked the INS for failing to do its job. To make matters worse,
newspaper and magazine coverage began focusing national attention on both the issue and the
INS’s enforcement. Life and Time magazines both ran pieces on undocumented immigration in
the spring of 1951, and the New York Times published a series of articles in March 1952 on the
subject. Caught in the middle, the INS helped shape the immigration debate as the Bracero
Program was being placed on new footing with Public Law 78 by releasing its own report during
congressional testimony that estimated the number of undocumented immigrants at over one
million. Faced with conflicting pressures, the INS as a bureaucracy hoped to save face by
controlling Mexican immigration through an expanded Bracero Program. The INS had been

Sánchez Papers.
578 Calavita, 31-37.
579 Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 123.
580 This effort was led by GeneralJoseph Swing, Eisenhower’s hand-chosen INS commissioner. Calavita, 50-61.
pursuing some form of this policy for a few years. In 1949, it apprehended 288,253 immigrants, but expanded that to 468,339 in 1950 (See Table 4.2).\textsuperscript{581}

When Public Law 78 institutionalized the Bracero Program in 1951, civil rights and labor activists generally opposed both it and undocumented immigration as two sides of the same foreign labor coin that drove down domestic farmworkers’ wages.\textsuperscript{582} Still, Public Law 78 helped clarify their critiques, since the federal government’s stronger role in the program gave them a better target, one at least potentially more responsive than the growers and their congressional spokesmen. Additionally, many hoped that the program’s firmer footing would reduce the undocumented immigration rate, especially since Texas growers became eligible for braceros. With the program on firmer administrative footing than it had during the 1948-1950 period, reformers focused first on eliminating the undocumented immigrants from the fields as the more pressing concern, then they could turn their attention to an assault on the Bracero Program.

Seeking to keep the pressure on policymakers as the program moved forward, the G.I. Forum—a Mexican American veterans and civil rights organization concerned with Mexican Americans’ claims to full citizenship—turned the Sánchez and Saunders report into a pamphlet on the Lower Rio Grande Valley that gave “wide publicity to the wetback problem” there.\textsuperscript{583} The Texas State Federation of Labor helped publicize and distribute the pamphlet.\textsuperscript{584} Nevertheless, undocumented immigration persisted.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{581} Calavita, 217, Appendix A.
\item \textsuperscript{582} Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 123.
\item \textsuperscript{583} Texas State Federation of Labor Weekly Newsletter, November 23, 1951, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Texas State Federation of Labor Records, 1932-1957, AR110, Series 15, Box 6, Folder 5 “Weekly Newsletter, 1951,” University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections; Gutiérrez, Chapter 5.
\end{itemize}
Table 4.2: Bracero Contracts and INS Apprehensions, 1949-1950

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
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<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>107,000</td>
<td>288,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>67,500</td>
<td>468,339</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Indeed, between 1951 and 1954—when the INS decisively mobilized against illegal immigration—the biggest barrier to the successful functioning of the Bracero Program was the presence of undocumented Mexican workers because their presence gave growers a cheaper labor force totally free of Department of Labor and contract regulations. If growers could obtain undocumented workers with ease, why should they bother to participate in the program at all? The question was obvious to President Truman. Immediately after he signed Public Law 78, he wrote to Mexican President Miguel Alemán arguing that the conditions of domestic farmworkers and braceros could not be improved unless both nations took “steps to shut off the stream of Mexican citizens immigrating illegally.” In his reply Alemán agreed with Truman and applauded his instruction to Congress that new legislation address the issue. Lower-level Mexican officials echoed Alemán’s stance on illegal immigration. A Mexican Public Health Officer spoke to arrested illegal immigrants at the Rio Grande Valley International Airport about to be airlifted back to Mexico in 1951. “You have committed a great sin in coming here,” he told them, and “The Government of Mexico is disgusted.” Such statements revealed the anxiety Mexican officials had over controlling the outmigration of their citizens, despite the fact that they explicitly encouraged it through the Bracero Program, which brought valuable remittances.

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585 Again, note that the number of bracero contracts for 1949 and 1950 do not include those undocumented workers who were contracted as braceros after their arrest through the “drying out” process.
587 Miguel Alemán to Harry S. Truman, July 27, 1951, as quoted in Kiser and Kiser, 158.
588 Xavier Casteneda, as quoted in Kiser and Kiser, 167.
and helped reduce underemployment. As the repeated unilateral recruitment episodes demonstrated, they had plenty of reasons to be concerned.

In 1952, Congress turned its attention to immigration concerns and passed the McCarran-Walter Act, officially known as the omnibus Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. The alliance of Southern Democrats and Republicans in Congress once again exercised its authority in the negotiations. Although it did not directly address the Bracero Program that now operated under Public Law 78, the McCarran-Walter Act legitimized growers’ demands for guestworkers by authorizing non-Mexican workers for temporary work under the law’s subsection (h) (ii). In coming years such workers came to be known as H2s. Although the law did not specifically bar the permanent immigration of foreign farmworkers as unskilled labor, it placed a priority on admitting skilled workers permanently. As Cindy Hahamovitch puts it, in practice “immigrant farmworkers would enter temporarily or not at all.”

While reforming immigration law, the 82nd U.S. Congress also facilitated growers’ continued access to undocumented workers. The McCarran-Walter Act criminalized harboring and concealing illegal immigrants, a measure supported by liberal Democrats, but rural congressmen struck down an amendment that would have made hiring them illegal as well. Public Law 283, also passed in 1952, further illustrated growers’ control. Like McCarran-Walter, it classified as felonies the acts of bringing illegal immigrants to the United States and harboring and concealing them once there. It also expanded INS authority to conduct searches and make arrests on private property. In deference to grower interests, however, the law’s “Texas Proviso”

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589 The law barred the permanent immigration of both skilled and unskilled labor unless the Secretary of Labor determined that a labor shortage existed. Although it did not specifically reference the permanent admission of unskilled labor in cases of labor shortages, it did allow for such admission for highly skilled and educated workers. Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 117-19; Cindy Hahamovitch, phone conversation with the author, September 11, 2012.
590 Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 119.
specifically excluded employment of illegal immigrants from the definition of “harboring.” The measure passed both houses easily because Truman had secured promises to act on immigration from lawmakers in exchange for his signing PL78, but in the coming months, Congress actually cut Border Patrol funds.591

It was no surprise, then, that undocumented workers from Mexico continued to arrive, pulled north because policymakers had thus far helped ensure growers’ access to them and, more importantly, because growers were happy to have them. Contracting workers from the Mexican interior recruitment centers as the Bracero Program required made little sense to border farmers who knew from experience that they could be obtained tens instead of hundreds of miles away. Others justified their employment of undocumented workers on sentimental grounds. Before a Department of Labor hearing in 1952, Fort Worth judge Joe Montague argued that many had “been on one place for years….You move them out to comply with some technicality and they’re heartsick.”592 California growers were less paternalistic in a series of 1953 interviews with department investigators. The final report stressed that growers felt “that the wetback was heads [sic] and shoulders above the National [bracero] production-wise [emphasis in the original].”593

On the Mexican side of the border, the Bracero Program itself led many prospective braceros to circumvent the system. At the recruiting centers, workers vied for a limited number of permisos—the permits allowing them to advance to the border reception centers. The applicant crush encouraged corrupt selection officials to solicit bribes from the men. On a Texas State Federation of Labor trip to the Irapuato bracero recruitment center, Jerry Holleman verified

591 Calavita, 65-66; Hahmovitch, No Man’s Land, 119; Kiser, 155-56.
592 “Wetbacks More than Illegal Aliens to Texans at Hearings,” Corpus Christi Caller, December 12, 1952.
“previous reports of the unmerciful ‘shake-down’ of the bracero.” He found that local officials often charged more than fifty pesos to let a worker leave a municipality for the center, where the potential bracero had to pay another 200 pesos to leave with a contract. One recent study estimates that roughly 75% of braceros paid a *mordida*—a bribe—to Mexican officials to help clear their way to the United States. For many potential braceros, it was smarter and cheaper to cross the border on their own.

As a result of these incentives to immigrate illegally, INS apprehensions continued to grow while bracero contracts rose more slowly. In 1951, there were more than two and a half times as many INS apprehensions as there were contracted braceros (509,040 vs. 192,000). The following year, the ratio was unchanged (528,815 vs. 197,100). By 1953, the problem was clearly getting out of hand as the ratio of INS apprehensions to bracero contracts exceeded four to one (885, 587 to 201,380). Moreover, INS apprehensions only told part of the story, since they could not account for all those who successfully evaded detection (See Table 4.3). The large and rising number of illegal entrants suggested the Bracero Program might be pointless, and it stoked Cold War-era fears of Communist infiltration along an unsecure border. Senator Pat McCarran, ardent Cold Warrior, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, and coauthor of the McCarran-Walter Act, used his committee’s estimate of five million illegal immigrants to argue that “vast numbers of militant Communists, Sicilian bandits and other criminals” threatened national security as a “ready-made fifth column” for America’s enemies.

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594 Jerry Holleman to Paul C. Sparks, ND August 1953, STFU Papers, reel 36.
595 Gonzalez, 62-5.
596 Calavita, Appendices A and B, 217-8.
597 McCarran, as quoted in Calavita. 49.
Table 4.3: Bracero Contracts and INS Apprehensions, 1951-1953

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>192,000</td>
<td>509,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>197,100</td>
<td>528,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>201,380</td>
<td>885,587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


“What Price Wetbacks?”

Frustrated that previous publicity efforts had accomplished little and angered that Texas growers passed over first domestic farmworkers and now braceros, in 1953 the Texas State Federation of Labor joined forces with the G.I. Forum on a study focusing on the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The report was co-authored by Eduardo “Ed” Idar, a Mexican American veteran educated on the G.I. Bill and president of the G.I. Forum, and Andrew McClellan, a Scottish immigrant and Rio Grande City businessman who worked for the Texas State Federation of Labor’s Mexican-American Affairs Committee. McClellan had spent significant time in south Texas interviewing braceros, domestic farmworkers, and others on employment and immigration. Idar and McClellan titled their report, published as a large glossy booklet, *Although the report’s introduction stressed that the immigrants were “forced by circumstances” into their migration, What Price Wetbacks? nevertheless cast them in a harsh light. Their circumstances included ignorance, poverty, illegality, “and [a] willingness to accept indescribable hardships.” Their numbers forced their “blood brothers, American citizens of Mexican descent” to move north for work, “pushing wages down, down, down.” These were no innocent immigrants; they were “sad-eyed and sick” Mexican workers who “infest[ed]” Texas,*

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598 Texas State Federation of Labor, Executive Board Meeting Minutes, September 15, 1953, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Texas State Federation of Labor Records, 1932-1957, AR110, Series 15, Box 1, Folder 2 “Minutes, Executive Board, Feb 1, 1952-Feb 13-14, 1955,” University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
599 McClellan to Paul Sparks, July 31, 1952 and McClellan to J.L. Rhodes, February 12, 1953, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Mexican-American Affairs Committee, AR110, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 2 “McClellan, Andrew C., Correspondence—1951-1954,” University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
bringing “syphilis, tuberculosis, infantile diarrhea and other diseases, along with a host of crime.” Although “these high disease and death rates are not the fault of the people who suffer from them,” the report stated, “wetbacks” still deserved Texans’ “fear.”

The report relied on visually arresting images to help drive home its points on the problems accompanying undocumented immigrants. The booklet’s centerfold featured a collage of local newspaper headlines such as “Dog Routs Band of Wetback Attackers,” “Alien Charged with Burglary of Mission,” and “Wetback Admits Raping Child.” Photos taken by McClellan depicted children in tattered clothing on their way to work, filthy tent and shack housing in dusty groves, a sorely malnourished baby with distended abdomen, and a worker drinking from an irrigation ditch. A bar chart illustrating annual INS apprehensions from 1934 through 1953 reinforced the image of the undocumented immigrant as a poor peasant; the bars were made up of small men wearing sombreros.

In addition to its focus on disease, crime, and poverty, What Price Wetbacks? placed the issue in a Cold War context. The authors asked, “Who is to say how many Communists mingle with the hordes of wetbacks wandering casually into the country?” Answering their own question, they cited figures from the San Antonio district immigration office showing that fifteen “subversives” from countries as diverse as Russia, the Philippines, and Iraq had been deported over the past two and a half years after entering from Mexico. Many more probably made it through undetected, especially since agents from “communist-dominated Guatemala” would have little trouble “masquerading as Mexicans.” The report also recounted the story of a human smuggling ring in Brownsville as evidence that the open border undermined immigration.

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601 Ibid., 28-29.
602 Ibid., 7, 19, 22-23.
restrictions against “undesirable European aliens.” The criminal ring had been smuggling European immigrants excluded by the nation’s immigration laws. In the end, there was simply no way to know “the extent to which subversive elements may be using the open border to infiltrate.”

Finally, the report turned to the Bracero Program. Idar and McClellan blasted the Department of Labor’s prevailing wage determination process that relied on the state employment services and local officials in the back pocket of their state’s largest growers. Because farmers submitted their bracero requests before the harvest began, they had to advertise their job postings for domestic farmworkers even earlier, listing wage rates those workers would never accept and facilitating an easy labor shortage declaration. Thus, the prevailing wage was simply the rate growers were willing to pay. However, cotton farmers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley bypassed even these grower-friendly procedures. Their primary labor source—undocumented workers—had pushed the prevailing wage down to 25¢ an hour in the valley, which made them totally ineligible for braceros under the 1951 international agreement. Such conditions forced the “heavy migration” of Mexican American “citizen labor” out of the area, in turn further deepening growers’ dependence on “wetback” labor and reinforcing in their minds their claim that domestic farm labor simply would not do the work.

What Price Wetbacks? concluded by offering recommendations on the Bracero Program, farm labor migrancy, and illegal immigration. It called for public hearings on prevailing wages to give American farmworkers a voice in the prevailing wage determinations, equal employment

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603 Ibid., 30, 32.
604 Ibid., 50.
605 The agreement stipulated a minimum hourly rate of no less than 50¢, or the prevailing wage, whichever was higher.
conditions for braceros and domestic workers, and more U.S. Employment Service funding for compliance activities. U.S. Migrant workers deserved better farm placement services and priority over braceros, the report added. And to stop the “wetback invasion,” the authors argued against a border crossing card system that growers were demanding. Instead, the nation needed stronger immigration laws and better enforcement.  

Operation Wetback

The last recommendation seemed to be within sight by the summer of 1953, thanks to increased national attention to the issue and the breakdown in international negotiations over the Bracero Program’s extension. In August, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. toured the California border. “There can be no doubt about the extent of the problem,” he told reporters. The INS’s 101,132 apprehensions the same month illustrated that extent clearly. Additionally, the spectacle of unilateral recruitment in late 1953 and early 1954 demonstrated the border’s potential as a flashpoint between the U.S. and Mexico when it came to questions of America’s agricultural labor supply. Early in 1954, when U.S. officials beckoned Mexican workers to cross at Mexicali-Calexico, they were beaten back by Mexican officials who were instructed to prevent their crossing. When many of them found their way around border fences, they were “dried out” in the same process the INS had been using for years: they had to set a foot back into Mexico before officers processed them as braceros. This “ritual of sovereignty,” as Mae Ngai calls it, often occurred in full view of Mexican border agents, who sometimes took the opportunity to grab the Mexican citizen and play a literal diplomatic tug-of-war with the U.S. Border Patrol.

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607 Ibid., 54, 59.
609 For the full account, see Chapter 3, Section “Public Law 78 and the Institutionalization of the Bracero Program”, subsection “Renewed Unilateralism on the Road to Bracero Program Stabilization; “Wetback’ Influx Near the Record,” The New York Times, November 22, 1953.
610 See Chapter 3, Section “Public Law 78 and the Institutionalization of the Bracero Program”, subsection “Renewed Unilateralism on the Road to Bracero Program Stabilization;” Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 124.
Something had to be done about the undocumented immigration problem if both the U.S. and Mexico intended the Bracero Program to last on a reliable and stable basis. On the northern side of the border, the federal response came in 1954 in the form of a dramatic INS mobilization called Operation Wetback.

Killing two birds with one stone, the Eisenhower Administration used the operation to tamp down criticism over undocumented immigration while also stabilizing the Bracero Program as the sole source of Mexican labor in the United States. In February, retired General Joseph Swing was appointed Commissioner of Immigration. Swing, a military man with virtually no experience in immigration issues, began his tenure by touring the border and reorganizing the Border Patrol. As Juan Ramon García pointed out in his study of the operation, Swing imposed military organization on the INS in preparation for a concerted drive against the “wets.”611 As the June harvest began in the nation’s southernmost agricultural regions, Swing launched his operation, which was to last 30 to 45 days.

Operation Wetback contained two major emphases. The first was arresting and deporting illegal immigrants (with Mexico’s cooperation), though many of the arrested Mexicans were “dried out” and turned into braceros. In California, Operation Wetback produced 84,278 apprehensions in June and July. INS netted similar numbers in Texas, where the San Antonio District reported 80,127 apprehensions.612 The so-called “wetback drives” were well publicized and relied on visible displays of force (such as the use of spotter aircraft and sweeps through the cotton rows) in an effort to persuade many undocumented workers to leave voluntarily.613

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612 The San Antonio District included all of Texas except the El Paso and Trans-Pecos regions. Ibid., 228.
613 Calavita, 54-5.
Overall, this allowed INS to claim that Operation Wetback forced the removal of 1.3 million illegal immigrants, while total apprehensions for Fiscal Year 1954 topped one million.\textsuperscript{614}

Operation Wetback’s second major focus was persuading and coercing growers to switch from “wetbacks” to braceros. Like the enforcement drive, this too proved successful. At a planning meeting in May, Farm Placement Service chief Don Larin assured attendees that the Labor Department would help publicize the drives and help growers request braceros as replacements.\textsuperscript{615} Additionally, Swing held cordial meetings with growers prior to the operation, and he noted before a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee that if a farmer failed to secure legal labor, “all he has to do is let either the Department of Labor or Immigration know and we will see that he gets it.”\textsuperscript{616} He also emphasized that braceros would be less likely to leave their employer, and pointed out that they were immune from random deportation raids.\textsuperscript{617}

Together, increased INS vigilance and Swing’s powers of persuasion combined to solidify and expand the Bracero Program rapidly by tamping down the diplomatic tension over undocumented workers and reducing their availability as an alternate labor supply for growers. Between 1953 and 1955, the number of contracted braceros nearly doubled, to 398,650 (See Table 4.4).\textsuperscript{618} In Region X of the Bureau of Employment Security\textsuperscript{619} (encompassing Arizona, California, and Nevada), the number of bracero users grew from 3,765 in 1953 to 8,732 in 1955, while the total number of braceros employed in the region expanded from 102,793 to 171,006.\textsuperscript{620}

\textsuperscript{614} Calavita, Appendix A, 217; Garcia, 227. Both Garcia and Garcia y Griego note that INS estimates of those who removed themselves voluntarily are dubious at best because they are unverifiable. In addition, Fiscal Year 1954 ended just three weeks into Operation Wetback, creating difficulties of interpretation in the official apprehension numbers. For Garcia’s discussion, see 227-28. For Garcia y Griego’s account, see 795-97.
\textsuperscript{615} Garcia, 175.
\textsuperscript{616} Swing, as quoted in Calavita, 53.
\textsuperscript{617} Calavita, 56-60.
\textsuperscript{618} Ibid., Appendix B, 218.
\textsuperscript{619} Which oversaw the U.S. Employment Service.
\textsuperscript{620} Bureau of Employment Security, “Summary Foreign Farm Labor Program 1953 Region X,” Table 1, file Reports and Statistics, 1953-60 [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the
G.A. Pickering, president of the Yuma Producers Cooperative Association, wrote to Arizona Senator Carl Hayden in 1954 to tell him that a new “general feeling” prevailed among growers: “everyone wants to go along with the legal program.” His association added 125 new members in the wake of Operation Wetback as growers presented their undocumented workers for “drying out” or simply accepted the restrictions on bracero labor in exchange for the predictability, stability, and control the program brought to their labor relations.621

Table 4.4: Bracero Contracts and INS Apprehensions, 1954-1956

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>309,033</td>
<td>1,089,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>398,650</td>
<td>254,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>445,197</td>
<td>87,696</td>
</tr>
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</table>


The story was the same in Texas. According to the Texas Employment Commission, peak bracero employment crested at 68,000 in 1953, expanded to 98,000 in 1954, and swelled to 111,000 in 1955. The commission’s 1954 annual report underscored the success of Operation Wetback. The Border Patrol’s “mass roundup of illegal entrants created an immediate shortage of workers” that was only resolved when “some 50,000 Mexican Nationals were contracted by farmers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to harvest the cotton crop.”622 Although Juan Ramon Garcia has argued that many of the new braceros produced by the roundups were, in fact, “dried out wetbacks,” in 1954, even some of the most stalwart champions of growers’ right to use undocumented workers in South Texas had made the switch to legal braceros.623

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621 G.A. Pickering to Carl Hayden, August 14, 1954, Box 446, Folder 14, Carl Hayden Papers.
622 Texas Employment Commission, Annual Reports, 1953-1955, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
623 Garcia, 184.
Between 1948 and 1954, undocumented immigration posed serious problems for Mexican American activists, labor organizers, and the Bracero Program itself. The attempt to use the program to regulate labor migration across the border without strong immigration enforcement was doomed to fail. Going forward, the declining numbers of apprehensions and the relatively modest expansion of the Bracero Program when compared to the total Mexican labor force in the United States in 1954 (see Table 4.4), undocumented workers no doubt continued to arrive, though many Mexican workers chose to come legally through the program.

Labor and civil rights activists had tried to define the issue and suggest solutions, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief when Commissioner Swing executed Operation Wetback. Although Mitchell’s and Galarza’s farmworker union and the G.I. Forum denounced the Bracero Program going forward as nothing more than “legalized wetbackism,” the expansion of the program sharpened their attacks by allowing them to aim at one target, not two.624 Still, studying undocumented workers only sharpened labor’s focus on the Bracero Program’s weaknesses, especially the lack of sufficient safeguards for Mexican nationals and the displacement of American farmworkers. As they struggled with the twin problems of undocumented workers and braceros, unionists on both sides of the border tried to find common strategies to grapple with the difficult problems inherent in organizing farmworkers who competed in a labor market that transcended national boundaries.

Cross-Border Organizing

The NFLU had been thinking about and experimenting with cross-border approaches for several years, but by the mid-1950s, it had become clear to Mitchell and Galarza that it needed to enlist broader labor support to realize the possibility of cross-border cooperation. Ernesto Galarza concluded as early as 1948 during the NFLU’s Di Giorgio strike that any attempt to deal

624 Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 125.
with the problems of braceros and undocumented workers would require cross-border labor organization. If the NFLU were to have any hope of waging successful agricultural strikes, it would need to keep braceros out of the fields. The only sure way to achieve this goal would be through “the participation of the trade-union organization of both Mexico and the United States.” Mexican unions might be able to organize braceros before their arrival in the U.S., allowing American farmworkers and braceros to work together.

In October 1948, unionists from both sides of the border met in Laredo, Texas for a preliminary conference. Serafino Romualdi helped organize it in his capacity as secretary of international relations for the Confederación Interamericana de Trabajadores, an AFL-backed hemispheric labor umbrella organization founded in 1948 to counter communist unions in Latin America. Delegates from the NFLU and the Confederación Proletaria Nacional (CPN) discussed non-compliance with the Bracero Program, “the treatment of Mexican workers in the United States; the undermining of wage and living standards” by undocumented workers, and “the systematic exclusion of labor” from negotiations over the international agreement.

The NFLU celebrated this “first meeting” of Mexican and American unionists “to consider the problem of both legal and illegal migration of agricultural labor.” The two unions struck a deal on a joint program to make braceros union members. The CPN trumpeted the agreement at its third general conference in 1949. The unions planned “a common organizational and protective action” for Mexican and American workers. Leaders of both organizations had

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625 Galarza, “Conference of Representatives of the Confederación Proletaria Nacional of Mexico and the National Farm Labor Union” October 19, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33.
626 José Luis Rubio, Las internacionales obreras en América, (Madrid, 1971), 82.
627 Ibid.
628 NFLU, Press Release, October 15, 1948, STFU Papers, reel 33
“formed a liaison committee,” and the NFLU agreed to recognize CPN-organized braceros “as members with full rights.”

However, the celebratory mood soured by mid-January 1949. When H.L. Mitchell tried to contact CPN leaders through the Confederación Interamericana de Trabajadores vice-president Enrique Rangel, no one replied, Rangel included. Mitchell wondered if the silence was because “these guys do not speak English and do not know what I am saying.” He asked Galarza to write them in Spanish. A few days later Mitchell reported to Galarza that he still had not heard anything. In a phrase that undoubtedly irked the Mexican Galarza, he assumed the CPN leaders were “still setting [sic] on their tortillas.” Galarza reported back to Mitchell that the problem was not the language barrier. Galarza had written to the CPN three times, the final time telling them, “their operation hasn’t been worth a damn.”

Communication never resumed between the two organizations, probably because the CPN had more pressing concerns turning on the Mexican labor movement’s relationship to the “perfect dictatorship” of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had run Mexico as a one-party state since the end of the last spasms of the Mexican Revolution. In 1952, the CPN joined with other labor federations backed by President Miguel Alemán, whose policies focused on capital accumulation and tended to ignore the demands of Mexico’s largest labor federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM). The CPN and other unions formed the Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos as a PRI-backed counterweight to the more independent CTM, and the Alemán Administration itself encouraged this development in a

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630 Mitchell to Rangel, January 3, 1949, and Mitchell to Galarza, January 6, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
631 Mitchell to Galarza, January 10, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
632 Galarza to Mitchell, January 19, 1949, STFU Papers, reel 34.
bid to divide the labor movement and thus strengthen the PRI’s leverage over the CTM and the labor movement at large. This policy of “controlled organizational diversity,” as one scholar puts it, allowed the PRI to pursue more growth-oriented policies regardless of labor opposition in the postwar period. 633

Discouraged but not deterred, Galarza tried other Mexican labor organizations, this time the CPN-affiliated Alianza de Braceros Nacionales de México en los Estados Unidos de Norteamerica. But the two organizations came at the Bracero program from different angles, and tension was soon evident. José Hernandez Serrano, secretary-general of the Alianza, had first contacted Galarza in 1949. 634 His organization sought to minimize bracero exploitation. When Galarza denounced the adverse effects of braceros on American farmworkers’ wages, Hernandez shot back, “The workers of Mexico also have a right to live and earn a living with our work in the United States.” 635 In February 1950, Galarza retreated from his more inflammatory points, noting that he wanted “to express how much this union wants to maintain direct contact with the Alianza,” establishing “a constant exchange of information” and “a program for a mutually beneficial struggle.” 636 Still, the two groups made odd bedfellows; Galarza worked for a union explicitly opposed to the Bracero Program, while Hernandez headed a group in support of braceros who depended on the program for their earnings.

Nevertheless, as both the U.S. and Mexico prepared to negotiate the new international agreement to accompany Public Law 78 in 1951, Galarza and Hernandez shifted into high gear in an effort that ultimately brought about state repression in Mexico. Late in 1950, Hernandez

633 Kevin J. Middlebrook, The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 147-52. For a broad summary of the presidential administrations of Mexico and the Mexican labor movement’s relation to them, see Middlebrook, Chapter 5.
634 For more on the Alianza-NFLU relationship, see Cohen, 163-66.
635 Hernandez to Galarza, December 19, 1949, my translation, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers.
asked Galarza, “in the spirit of solidarity” for assistance, “since our work depends on the help that you are able to give us.” Galarza traveled to Mexico City in January 1951 to present the NFLU’s recommendations to U.S. negotiators and gain some level of access to the proceedings, but he was rebuffed. He then decided to take his case to Mexican workers directly through the Alianza, which began organizing a mass meeting of bracero applicants.

Galarza held a press conference prior to the event, where he released documents related to grievances braceros had taken to the NFLU in California. Reporters from the major dailies like *Excelsior* and *El Universal* attended, since the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores barred them from the bilateral negotiations. The resulting publicity prompted a backlash from the Secretaría de Gobernación. Authorities threatened Galarza with expulsion from Mexico, arrested two Alianza officials, and intimidated the rest. The CTM, probably following PRI instructions, told Galarza to cease and desist. Organizers cancelled the mass meeting. Before he left, Galarza did manage to meet with the U.S. ambassador to make his case. As he later recalled, it fell on the deaf ears of Ambassador William O’Dwyer. This was hardly surprising, Galarza later wrote, since the ambassador was the “brother of Frank O’Dwyer, partner of Keith Mets, President of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association, associate of B.A. Harrigan, employer of more than five thousand braceros.”

Despite his frustration, Galarza continued to pursue transnational union cooperation. In addition to the Alianza, the NFLU had been in contact with a Mexican agricultural workers union just south of California’s Imperial Valley, where the NFLU was then establishing locals.

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637 Hernandez to Galarza, December 18, 1950, my translation, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers.
638 Galarza to William Green, February 12, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35; Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 156.
639 Ibid.
and preparing to challenge the Imperial Valley Farmers Association.\textsuperscript{641} In August 1950, Ignacio Marquez R., secretary-general of the Union de Trabajadores Agrícolas del Valle de Mexicali sent H.L. Mitchell “a fraternal greeting” offering his “profound gratitude for your beneficial work” among farmworkers. Marquez noted that his union had firsthand experience with the NFLU’s problems, since farmworkers in the Mexicali Valley “know and suffer the problems of the abundance of Mexican workers” who “crowd the border.”\textsuperscript{642} The letter closed by requesting cooperation between the two unions for joint action against low wages and poor working conditions on both sides of the border.\textsuperscript{643}

Galarza replied to Marquez that, “obviously the problem of economic competition from illegals in Imperial continues with its usual severity,” but that the problem could not be remedied simply by “solidly organizing farmworkers on this side.” In addition, “To this should be added the support of organized labor on the Mexican side,” Galarza wrote. He suggested the two unions enter an agreement providing for “fixing a wage scale,” one that reflected “what California workers represented by this union accept.” In addition, he suggested a system of preferential hiring for Mexicali Valley farmworkers in Imperial, “enrollment of workers hired in Mexicali” in the NFLU, and “coordination of activities” to defend “our common interests.”\textsuperscript{644}

The two unions explored this coordinated approach during 1951. Both signed an agreement in March to effect “joint action and mutual support,” the “organization of contract workers” on both sides of the border, and “transferred membership and prorating dues.”\textsuperscript{645} Galarza and Hank Hasiwar went “over the border a number of times” and worked in Imperial to help prevent the execution of an INS arrest warrant against undocumented workers involved in

\textsuperscript{641} See Chapter 3, Section “Imperial Frustrations.”
\textsuperscript{642} Marquez to Mitchell, August 18, 1950, my translation, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers.
\textsuperscript{643} NFLU, National Executive Board Minutes, November 18-19, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
\textsuperscript{644} Galarza to Marquez, October 25, 1950, my translation, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers.
\textsuperscript{645} Galarza, “Do Not Release,” March 9, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 35.
both unions’ activities. Cooperation appeared to be working both ways: in May, twelve braceros showed up at a Monterey County Central Labor Union meeting and requested to be transferred into the local union in Soledad.

Ultimately, though, NFLU collaboration with the Alianza and the Unión de Trabajadores Agrícolas del Valle de Mexicali proved difficult because of the Mexican state’s crackdown on opposition to its bracero policies. Shortly after the NFLU and Mexicali union signed their agreement, police in Mexico questioned the wife of the Mexican union’s president about her husband’s activity, and he was later arrested. As the NFLU was defeated repeatedly in Imperial, the Mexicali union suffered the same labor competition on the southern side of the border that the NFLU experience in the north. Meanwhile, the Alianza suffered intense governmental repression following its attempted mass meeting that had been designed to embarrass the Alemán government. In the face of this persecution, Hernandez’s Alianza retreated into advocacy for braceros with pending grievances against American employers after their return to Mexico, though Hernandez and Galarza corresponded regularly and established a limited joint membership program. By June 1953, Texas activist Andrew McClellan noted in a report that the Alianza had only limited success operating in the U.S., “and not too effectively at that.” As for the joint membership program, “nothing seems to have come out of that proposal,” McClellan remarked.

Working with farmworker unions just across the border might have proven more successful, but the NFLU’s limited finances and rank-and-file reaction prevented any strong

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646 Galarza to Rowland Watts, April 16, 1951, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers.
648 Cohen, 165.
649 Galarza to Serafino Romualdi, March 8, 1951, Box 19, Folder 6: Alianza, Galarza Papers; Galarza to Dorothy Mitchell, October 2, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 36.
650 McClellan to Paul Sparks, June 29, 1953, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Mexican-American Affairs Committee, AR110, Series 7, Box 1, Folder 2 “McClellan, Andrew C., Correspondence—1951-1954,” University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
concerted action. Some Mexican American farmworkers in the Imperial Valley reacted angrily when they learned of the Galarza’s plan to welcome braceros into the union. Calexico farmworker and NFLU volunteer organizer Angelo Medina left the union late in 1950 over the issue. Medina blasted Galarza in an impassioned letter, telling him that succeeding in Imperial would “be a miracle ‘specially now that you are trying to admit braceros.” After all, they were “the main cause of low wages.”

Medina’s critique must have stung Galarza. He knew better than anyone the difficulty U.S. farmworkers faced with the Bracero Program, and the NFLU had issued more than its share of denunciations of the labor importation scheme. In fact, it rejected its necessity entirely, claiming that plenty of American farmworkers would be available for growers if only they paid decent wages and provided adequate working conditions. Still, the NFLU organizer and Mexican immigrant was willing to try just about anything to help combat the program. For Galarza, enrolling braceros and cooperating with Mexican unions was worth a shot in what seemed at times to be an utterly hopeless fight.

Labor Internationalism and the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee

By the early 1950s, the NFLU’s tentative early efforts at transnational organizing with the CPN, Alianza, and the Mexicali union all seemed to lead nowhere. If the union hoped to challenge the Bracero Program successfully in its bid to organize farmworkers, it would need more powerful allies operating at the national and international levels. With Public Law 78 about to go into effect, the NFLU’s 1951 convention called for the establishment of “a joint committee representing the trade unions” of both nations. This committee would “work out arrangements

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651 Medina to Galarza, November 22, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
for recruitment, transportation, collective bargaining and representation of foreign workers in the United States.”

Luckily for the union, the suggestion came at a time when American labor was increasingly interested in its foreign counterparts. The burgeoning Cold War conflict extended to labor organizations, with American labor leaders denouncing state-controlled unions in the Soviet Union. At the international level, divisions over the Marshall Plan fractured the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1949, and unions in Western nations formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in opposition to what had become a Soviet-dominated labor body. In the Western Hemisphere, the new international labor politics transformed the Confederación Interamericana de Trabajadores into the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (ORIT) in 1951.

During this reorganization, which coincided with international negotiations and congressional deliberations over the Bracero Program, organized labor in the U.S. reached out to its Mexican counterpart. On April 5, AFL representatives met with leaders of the Confederación de Obreros y Campesinos de México (COCM), like the CPN a PRI-dominated labor organization. The AFL delegates “proposed to the Mexican labor movement that some regulatory agreement be reached” between the two unions establishing “a standard by which Mexican laborers should enter the United States.” On May 31, both sides met in El Paso for a follow-up conference, but “because no high ranking AFL folk” attended, the American unionists

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652 NFLU, Proceedings of the National Farm Labor Union Convention, December 8-9, 1951, STFU Papers, reel 36.  
655 COCM was a rival to the CTM that had been given legal recognition by the Ávila Camacho government in a bid to weaken the CTM and thus help bring the entire labor movement more in line with PRI policies. Middlebrook, 113.
failed to strike a deal. Their proposal requested that braceros be “under the protection of both organizations [AFL and COCM]” and, reflecting the Cold War context, stated that workers should “in no case be affiliated with the Communist party.” It also called for COCM to “establish offices in such border cities as Juarez, Neuvo [sic] Laredo, Mexicali and Tijuana, in order to distribute work orders from the American Trade Unions on a fair basis” as a means of regulating bracero migration.

AFL representatives tried again in July 1951, traveling to Mexico City for a flurry of meetings with Mexican labor officials. The delegation met with officials of COCM, the CTM, the CPN, and the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM). CROM was one of Mexico’s oldest labor organizations, dating back to the Mexican Revolution, although its power had declined precipitously after 1936 when it refused to join the CTM. In these meetings, the representatives learned that all of them “were of the same mind as expressed by the American Labor Delegation concerning the interchange of labor across the International borders.” Mexican unionists told them they favored the retention of surplus workers for the development of the nation’s domestic industries. In exchange for the Mexicans’ support, the American delegation promised “to continue its Legislative activities toward strengthening the legislation” protecting “Mexican Nationals who enter the United States.”

Despite the seeming agreement, however, little was accomplished. In 1952, Texas State Federation of Labor unions in El Paso worked on a pact with COCM to incorporate braceros into their unions, but the agreement seemed futile so long as undocumented immigration continued.

656 J.L. Rhodes to William Green, June 8, 1951, file 28, box 35, RG21-001, George Meany Memorial Archives.
657 Rafael Ortega, et al., “Memorandum of proposed agreement between representatives of the American Federation of Labor and the Confederación de Obreros y Campesinos de Mexico,” attached to J.L. Rhodes to William Green, June 8, 1951, file 28, box 35, RG21-001, George Meany Memorial Archives.
658 Middlebrook, 89-90.
659 J.L. Rhodes to William Green, Aug. 4, 1951, file 29, box 35, RG21-001, George Meany Memorial Archives.
unchecked. By 1953 H.L. Mitchell, whose union had helped pioneer the cross-border approach to the Bracero Program, experienced deep pessimism about the prospects of meaningful cooperation. Still, the AFL’s Serafino Romualdi insisted Mitchell travel to Mexico City to meet CTM general secretary Fidel Velázquez.

If Mitchell needed an opinion on Velázquez, all he had to do was ask Galarza. In August 1950 Mitchell forwarded an AFL request to Galarza to go to Mexico to meet with Velázquez as part of the AFL’s early outreach to the CTM. Galarza wanted nothing to do with it. Once proudly independent, the CTM now relied too much on the PRI to be of any use on the Bracero Program, he said. In many ways, Galarza was right. Velázquez had helmed the CTM since 1942, and he rose in the federation by drawing his support from weaker unions, not the larger and more independent trade unions that had built Mexico’s labor movement from the Revolution onward. Because he lacked a strong base of support in the CTM, and given the ongoing efforts of the PRI to divide and conquer Mexico’s labor movement, Velázquez had come to rely heavily on the PRI for favors. The process began during the World War II administration of Manuel Ávila Camacho, when Velázquez steered the labor movement through a period of increasing PRI restrictions on union rights. The symbiotic relationship continued after the war as several Mexican presidents continued to chip away at labor militancy by encouraging rival organizations that in turn made the entire labor movement more reliant on cozy relations with the governing party. Because of CTM’s quasi-lapdog status, Galarza argued that Velázquez “won’t side with us openly in an issue with the Mexican government” and “won’t follow through on any

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661 Mitchell to Galarza, June 27, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 37.
662 Galarza to Mitchell, August 22, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
663 Middlebrook, 111-22.
agreement.”  

When Mitchell asked him to go to Mexico again in 1953, Galarza’s stance was the same. “Velázquez is no good,” he wrote; “I’d rather swab my big mouth with crankcase bilge than go all the way to Mexico to see that bum.”

Galarza stayed put in California, but Mitchell and Romualdi made the trip in August 1953, and Velázquez assented to a plan for “joint membership in the unions of the two countries operating in the agricultural industry.” Under such a plan, a bracero “would authorize the U.S. union to act as his representative” in contract disputes under Article 21 of the international agreement. Velázquez also informed the men that the CTM had requested that Mexico’s government guarantee the right of braceros to form “their own trade union organizations,” the right of those organizations “to negotiate collective agreements,” and the “right of Mexican Union representatives to accompany Mexican workers to the U.S. in order to supervise the application of the agreement.” The men pledged to seek consultative status for labor organizations at the upcoming program renewal negotiations. Romualdi undoubtedly worked the ORIT free trade union angle as well. The three men demanded better border security for a Cold War world, since Communists were “active in promoting such illegal migration” so they could exploit “for propaganda purposes the deplorable…conditions that result from it.”

The most important outcome of this meeting was a plan to hold a major conference between Mexican and American union leaders in Mexico City later in the year. The conference opened on December 14 under ORIT auspices. Delegates from the CTM, CPN, Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros (the oil workers’ union), United Mine Workers, AFL, CIO, and NAWU spent three days discussing undocumented immigration, the Bracero Program, and international

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664 Galarza to Mitchell, August 22, 1950, STFU Papers, reel 35.
665 Galarza to Mitchell, June 17, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 37.
666 Mitchell, Memo: Conference with Fidel Velázquez, Secretary General Mexican Federation of Labor, August 6, 1953.
labor cooperation. Mexican unions called on their American brothers to lobby for harsher penalties against employers of undocumented workers, and both sides sought to establish a program for “an exchange of visitors from unions in an identical industry,” as well as a membership transfer program for immigrant workers.\footnote{International Conference of Trade Unions of Mexico and the United States Convened by the ORIT, Resolutions, December 14-16, 1953, Box 21, Folder 10: Joint-U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee, minutes, news releases, statements, 1953-54, Galarza Papers.}

The conference then turned to the Bracero Program. The delegates noted that bracero migration “constitutes a social problem…which equally affects both countries.” But in a nod to Mexican sensitivities, the delegates declared that U.S. farmworkers were adversely affected only when braceros came “in a larger number than is really required.”\footnote{Ibid.} Perhaps this qualified statement was made possible when the anti-bracero Mitchell had a slight change of heart on the issue. He made a statement at the conference that said he understood why Mexican peasants went north for work now that he had the opportunity to observe how they lived south of the border.\footnote{Joe Garcia, Report on the Conference of Mexican and American Union Leaders held in Mexico City, December 14, 15, 16, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 37.}

The Mexicans and Americans pledged to lobby their respective governments for consultative status for labor in future diplomatic negotiations over the program, and both pledged to obtain “the necessary authorization to participate in the supervision” of bracero migration.\footnote{International Conference of Trade Unions of Mexico and the United States Convened by the ORIT, Resolutions Adopted by the First Committee on Points 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the Agenda, December 14-16, 1953, Box 21, Folder 10: Joint-U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee, minutes, news releases, statements, 1953-54, Galarza Papers.}

Galarza proposed that Mexican unions organize braceros at the recruitment centers so their membership could be transferred to the NFLU upon arrival in the U.S., to which Mexican unionists agreed.\footnote{Joe Garcia, Report on the Conference of Mexican and American Union Leaders held in Mexico City, December 14, 15, 16, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 37.} Finally, the conference asked that ORIT coordinate “the constitution of a
committee of Mexican and United States representatives…[to] undertake the study of these problems.\textsuperscript{673}

In May 1954, ORIT established the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee at a conference at Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, choosing the location in a nod to the economic integration of the border. Earlier in the year, Mitchell expressed his hope that the Joint Committee (on which he sat) could be used to push the CTM to back an organizing campaign paid for by American labor. At the very least, this would give the NFLU desperately needed money to organize along the border.\textsuperscript{674}

Mitchell was disappointed by the results of the May conference. The Joint Committee reiterated the demand for consultative status in negotiations and demanded that Article 21 of the international agreement (allowing braceros to designate representatives) be enforced. Organized labor in Mexico offered some organizational help, such as distributing leaflets at recruitment centers urging braceros to join unions when they arrived in the U.S., and instructing Mexican union members to advise braceros of their trade union responsibilities before their departure. However, the NFLU received neither funds nor a sweeping organizing campaign from the Committee.\textsuperscript{675}

Subsequent Joint Committee meetings yielded the same boilerplate results. At a conference in San Diego in 1955, the Committee called for “mutual aid and cooperation,” a union voice in prevailing wage determinations, more compliance officers for the Department of

\textsuperscript{673} International Conference of Trade Unions of Mexico and the United States Convened by the ORIT, Resolutions, December 14-16, 1953, Box 21, Folder 10: Joint-U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee, minutes, news releases, statements, 1953-54, Galarza Papers.

\textsuperscript{674} Mitchell to Galarza, March 10, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.

\textsuperscript{675} Joint Committee, Chronicle of the First Meeting of the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee, May 11-13, 1954, Box 21, Folder 10: Joint-U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee, minutes, news releases, statements, 1953-54, Galarza Papers; Serafino Romualdi to George Meany, ND June 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
Labor, and consultative status during bilateral negotiations. Although the new Mexican President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines was more of a labor moderate than Alemán as he pursued a policy of controlled inflation and economic growth, he was not afraid to oppose labor. He had recently denied a CTM request for consultative status at bilateral negotiations. By that time, Galarza held no hope for the Joint Committee. He informed Mitchell that he was raising worms in a coffee can and told Mitchell to do the same. “I’ll bet that during the next 12 months you will see more accomplishment inside that can than among all us field representatives of the joint committee,” he wrote. Two years later, Galarza’s vermicular prediction proved correct. At the Joint Committee’s fourth conference in 1957, the demands had not changed. The Committee continued its call for consultative status, and the group once again urged that braceros “be organized before they leave Mexico by the trade unions of that country” through “a union membership card which will entitle him to membership in any affiliated union of the AFL-CIO.”

In the end, the transnational effort against the Bracero Program was unable to make a difference because the very precondition of that effort—Mexican unions’ cooperation—undermined its slim chance of success. If Mexican unions had achieved the outright end of the program, they would have faced an internal migration of surplus labor toward Mexican unions’ urban strongholds. Thus, they had a vested interest in ensuring the continued outmigration of Mexico’s surplus agricultural population. In addition, the CTM’s relationship to the PRI reinforced its hesitance to do anything substantive about the Bracero Program and its problems.

678 Galarza to Mitchell, March 14, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
With the conservative Fidel Velázquez helming the CTM, and unions’ declining importance in and growing dependence on the PRI, labor’s challenge to the Bracero Program south of the border amounted to little more than calls for better contract conditions and compliance.\textsuperscript{680}

Indeed, at the 1954 founding conference of the Joint Committee, the Mexican delegation seemed to reflect its state dependence by shying away from confrontation with the government. The delegation stated that Mexico’s increasing population (expanding rapidly from a Green Revolution that made a large rural population superfluous) and the appeal of working north of the border provided powerful motivations for emigration “beyond the control of the government and of the Working Classes.”\textsuperscript{681} The Mexican labor-state dynamic was not lost on Galarza. At the 1955 conference, he noted, “the spokesman of the Mexican delegation, [Alfonso Sanchez] Madariaga, seemed quite concerned to protect his government from criticism.” He doesn’t like what’s been published up here, Galarza wrote, “especially in the labor press.”\textsuperscript{682} With friends like these and awkward alliances between labor movements that both opposed braceros’ presence in their countries, the NAWU was on its own.

\textbf{Conclusion: The Border Cannot Hold, 1948-1955}

Between 1948 and 1955, questions about the Bracero Program and the U.S. border with Mexico loomed large for both farmworker advocates and national policymakers. During the period labor focused its attention on the U.S. borderlands in two ways. In Texas, labor leaders joined with Mexican American civil rights activists to bring attention to the problem of undocumented immigration and its impact on the state’s resident farmworkers. Dealing in the currency of the postwar Red Scare and at times scathingly anti-immigrant, this activism joined a

\textsuperscript{680} Davis G. Pfeiffer, “The Bracero Program in Mexico,” in Kiser and Kiser, 77-78.
\textsuperscript{681} Joint Committee, Report and Proposals of the Mexican Delegation, May 11-13, 1954, Galarza Papers, Box 21, Folder 10: Joint-U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee, minutes, news releases, statements, 1953-54
\textsuperscript{682} Galarza to Mitchell and Gardner Jackson, August 29, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 39.
growing chorus of media voices, congressional immigration restrictionists, and the INS itself in calling for immigration reform. The Eisenhower Administration finally responded to the calls with Operation Wetback. That 1954 enforcement drive reduced illegal immigration and helped sell the Bracero Program to reluctant growers as a predictable source of Mexican labor, one that continued to offer them the threat of deportability while giving them a ready supply of contract labor that they could use to prevent their domestic farmworkers from contesting conditions.

Given the inherent weakness of the border as a meaningful barrier in the bid to organize the American agricultural labor market, organized labor in the United States reached south across the line in an attempt to formulate a cross-border strategy to deal with the problems of international labor migration. The NFLU/NAWU led the charge, but labor at the national level was quick to join the fray, especially as the Cold War order took shape. Nevertheless, American unions’ belief in aiding and cooperating with free trade unions often foundered on the shoals of the complicated relationships between Mexican unions, braceros, and the government. With a labor movement frequently repressed or controlled by the governing PRI, and unions that wanted as few unemployed workers as possible competing with its increasingly defensive workers, little could be expected beyond the showpiece Joint Committee. Thus, borderlands and cross-border approaches held promise but ultimately could not deliver.

Still, Operation Wetback had simplified things for labor opposition to the Bracero Program by expanding the program and raising its profile, which produced a large and inviting target. As long as the border remained open, the program’s opponents faced the contradictory task of denouncing employers of undocumented workers and demanding that they switch to braceros while also lobbying against the entire Bracero Program. With the “wetback problem” put to rest (at least temporarily), and with the limitations of the cross-border approach apparent,
Mitchell and Galarza prepared their battered union for a last-ditch effort to continue their bid to organize farmworkers in California. By now, their repeated struggles and defeats in organizing had made clear that any attempt to succeed would depend upon their ability both to press organized labor for moral and financial support to help farmworkers and to marshal their meager resources for a publicity war against the Bracero Program.
Chapter 5: Turning Points: The AFL-CIO Merger and Bracero Program Reform,
1955-1959

By 1956, H.L. Mitchell and Ernesto Galarza had come to the realization that the Bracero Program was a do-or-die issue for the NAWU. Organizing farmworkers in California in the face of growers’ easy access to braceros had not worked, and cross-border organizing strategies had gone nowhere. Without some sort of game-changer, the union’s leaders understood that their union’s tenuous position was unsustainable. Mitchell had been working on farmworkers’ behalf since the Great Depression with little to show for it, and in California, Galarza had been beating his head against a wall of undocumented immigrants, braceros, growers, and government officials for almost a decade. To make matters work, Galarza’s back ached terribly. Years of driving around California’s rural back roads in a beat-up car had badly impacted four of his lower vertebrae, sending him to the operating room for corrective surgery.683

The two men at the heart of the NAWU hoped that the 1955 merger of the AFL and CIO would produce the momentum they needed by leading to an organizing campaign for the nation’s farmworkers. Indeed, the new labor federation’s Industrial Union Department seemed to bode well for organizing prospects, given its $8 million dollar fund for organizing the unorganized.684 The NAWU submitted several proposals to the AFL-CIO in hopes of securing money and organizational resources to build a union of farmworkers. It had been arguing for one since 1954, by which point the merger was just a matter of time. But two years of constant attempts to get George Meany and Walter Reuther interested in organizing farmworkers had gone nowhere. The labor leaders were worried about the expense of an agricultural campaign that promised migratory members who could not pay dues regularly. Instead of firm commitments, the AFL-

683 Galarza to Mitchell, April 12, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
684 Mitchell to All Officers and Members, NAWU, December 12, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 39
CIO deferred decisions and urged the NAWU to merge with the United Packinghouse Workers of America or the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen. Only then would it release funds and consider organizing proposals.

Getting the runaround while the union verged on insolvency made Mitchell and Galarza wax philosophic about their union and its relationship with the national labor movement at the end of 1956. “The kind of union I had visualized all along, and which we have tried out in such a small way already,” Galarza wrote, was more about rank-and-file union democracy, political education, and “the decent and creative use of the talents and abilities of the people you work with,” not the “big business unionism” of the AFL-CIO. Mitchell tended to agree, at least on the NAWU’s uniqueness. When the STFU first formed, “local craft unionists in Memphis branded us visionary socialists” for the union’s heritage from “the old radical tradition of agrarian revolt,” he told his friend. If and when labor leaders got around to offering financial support, Mitchell wrote, “it is going to be on their terms.” There was not a dime’s worth of difference between the Reuthers and the Meanys of the world, Mitchell thought. The “ideas are fundamentally the same….They only use different terms for expressing them. Walter makes his old socialist soapbox speech that still sounds militant—while Meany uses the straight old craft union line, but both mean the same damn thing”—dues-paying members.

Despite their pessimism at the end of 1956, by 1959 the AFL-CIO would announce an organizing campaign for farmworkers. The decision did not come as the result of the NAWU’s moral suasion, though. Between 1955 and 1959, the Bracero Program earned a new place in the public eye. Operation Wetback’s immigration crackdown and the subsequent rise in bracero contracts made the Bracero Program an increasingly inviting target for reformers who sought to

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685 Galarza to Mitchell, November 6, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
686 Mitchell to Galarza, November 14, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
use it as a focal point for illustrating the abuses growers perpetrated against their workers—both foreign and domestic—through a taxpayer-subsidized guestworker program. While the AFL-CIO demurred, the NAWU worked to expose the dangers that the Bracero Program represented for American workers. The publicity effort helped unify anti-bracero reformers among the liberal and religious communities who opposed the program, and the nascent reform coalition found a willing ally in Secretary of Labor James Mitchell. Secretary Mitchell—who joined the Cabinet as a Democrat-for-Eisenhower and whose tenure came to be marked by concern for farmworkers he felt the nation had failed—directed the Department of Labor to seize the opportunity presented by public criticism of the Bracero Program and reform its administration. Gradually, a reform synergy was building in the period among the NAWU, farmworker reformers, and James Mitchell’s Department of Labor. By 1959, that synergy was focused on both curtailing the abuses of the Bracero Program and forcing the AFL-CIO to build a farmworkers’ wing in the house of labor.

**Waiting on Labor and Reforming the Bracero Program, 1955-1957**

Mitchell hoped that the financial and organizational clout of a merged labor movement could be harnessed to a farmworker organizing drive. He had proposed such a plan to AFL President George Meany as early as 1953, when he suggested a budget of half a million dollars over five years to cover twenty-three organizers in California and Louisiana, where the union had its small membership bases. In 1954, as the AFL and CIO moved closer to a merger, Mitchell renewed his entreaties, suggesting a one-year budget of $200,000 for a California organizing drive. He was rebuffed. Meany called Mitchell and gave him “a lecture” about

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687 Mitchell to Meany, Memorandum: An Organizing Campaign in Agriculture, January 6, 1953, STFU Papers, reel 36.
labor history and self-sufficiency. According to Mitchell, Meany said the AFL had been “subsidizing” the union for seven years without “enough progress to justify” it. The labor chief argued that the NAWU was “trying to impose unionism on people who did not really want organization.” As to any further assistance, Meany said “he couldn’t see it at all.”

As merger negotiations between the AFL and CIO continued, the NAWU decided to sound out Meany’s chief rival, United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther, then president of the CIO. Reuther had been frustrated at the CIO’s inability to organize workers in the early-to-mid 1950s under his leadership, and he looked to the merger as a means of rectifying the situation. Perhaps Reuther could point the way forward for NAWU, Mitchell thought. Reuther organized meetings between the NAWU and representatives from the United Packinghouse Workers of America in July and August 1954. At the meetings, CIO officials pressed for some sort of “Joint Organizing Committee of Agricultural and Packinghouse Workers” that would organize workers into a new combined union. The suggestion came as part of an attempt to quiet jurisdictional squabbling between the two unions. In 1951, UPWA Local 78 in the Imperial Valley had failed to honor a NAWU picket line, but in just two years, Local 78’s leadership watched their members’ jobs disappear as growers transferred packing operations from the sheds, where workers were covered by collective bargaining rights, directly to the fields, where they were not. By the spring of 1954, Galarza reported that UPWA organizers were “committed publicly to an organizing drive of both sheds and fields,” an effort which included attempting to poach Galarza’s trained volunteer organizers. Yet the NAWU had few options. After

689 Mitchell to Galarza, June 4, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
691 Mitchell to Meany, August 3, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
complaining to Meany about the raiding, Mitchell agreed to Reuther-sponsored joint campaign discussions with UPWA officials in hopes of both smoothing relations and securing additional funding.\textsuperscript{693}

Despite the talks, however, the NAWU and UPWA failed to reach a deal. UPWA president Ralph Helstein questioned the NAWU’s “ability to finance the campaign among fieldworkers,” and doubted the union’s ability to “raise any money from the AFL.”\textsuperscript{694} Helstein promised Mitchell that his union would not organize any additional field workers, but later informed him that the promise only applied to Louisiana, where NAWU and UPWA both had won contracts covering sugarcane harvesting and processing workers.\textsuperscript{695} California farmworkers were still fair game.\textsuperscript{696} Mitchell wrote to Meany in frustration in January 1955, going so far as to conjure his Depression-era UCAPAWA ghosts in a bid to turn Meany’s rabid anti-Communism to the union’s advantage. Helstein’s double-dealing led NAWU leaders to believe UPWA was not only “communist infiltrated, but communist dominated,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{697} But his attempt failed to trump Meany’s belief that Mitchell’s union simply was not cut out for the job for which it sought assistance. Meany ignored the plea, and UPWA continued trying to organize farmworkers in Imperial throughout the year with little success.\textsuperscript{698}

Faltering negotiations and continual hedging by top labor brass led Mitchell to conclude, “neither AFL or CIO have any intention of spending money on agricultural worker

\textsuperscript{693} Mitchell to Meany, June 1, 1954; Mitchell to Galarza, June 2, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
\textsuperscript{694} Mitchell to Meany, October 5, 1954; Galarza to Mitchell, September 29, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
\textsuperscript{695} Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 287-88.
\textsuperscript{696} Mitchell to Galarza, November 22, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
\textsuperscript{697} Mitchell to Meany, January 25, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38. Mitchell undoubtedly felt secure in his anti-Communist appeals by this time. The Taft-Hartley Act forced unions to submit non-Communist affidavits, and as a result the CIO expelled eleven affiliated unions representing over one million members between 1948 and 1950. Those affiliates had had heavy Communist influence during the Popular Front era of labor organizing during the New Deal. For more see, Dubofsky, 200-08; Lichtenstein, The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit, 308-10; Tomlins, Chapter 8, and Zieger, 246-49.
\textsuperscript{698} Galarza to Mitchell, February 2, 1955; Mitchell to Galarza, April 26, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
organization.” Still, he remained “willing to explore all angles for a deal.”

He was given some hope in January 1955 when his old friend and ally Gardner “Pat” Jackson was given an assignment “to work on farm labor” under Jack Livingston in the anticipated AFL-CIO Organization Department, but the details were vague. The following month brought a seeming reversal of fortunes when Meany was quoted in the press saying agricultural laborers “will not benefit by unionizing.” Statements like that only confirmed Galarza’s skepticism. Meany was not interested in people “who have no power or money to protect legitimate rights. That does not seem to count in the current mergers.” Furthermore, Galarza’s members and volunteer organizers in California were beginning to lose the faith. They were remembering the union “with gratitude, but it’s a feeling of regret that a good bunch could not have done better.”

Galarza thought it was time for Mitchell to face the facts that a labor merger wave was about building larger, consolidated unions. In such a context, he wrote, there was a distinct “possibility that the merger will definitely destroy us as a union, since we are so insignificant.”

With no funds forthcoming from the labor movement, union activity ground to a halt. Galarza reported, “All union work in the field has stopped.” In April 1955 Mitchell issued a report to the NAWU executive board that advised closing the Washington, D.C. office if the union exhausted its funds. There was “little reason to hope” that the upcoming AFL-CIO merger would result in an organizing campaign for farmworkers. The NAWU should solicit the support

700 Mitchell to Galarza, January 20, 1955
703 Labor historians such as Robert Zieger and Nelson Lichtenstein have generally come to this conclusion, but it is important to note that Walter Reuther hoped the AFL-CIO merger would produce a reinvigorated union movement in the United States. However, the details of the merger and the CIO’s relatively weak position compared to the AFL made it difficult to effect this reinvigoration. Lichtenstein, The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit, 322-23; Zieger, Chapter 12.
705 Galarza to Mitchell, March 10, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
of “our members and friends in and out of the labor movement….If we fail, we must go down fighting in the same manner in which we rose 21 years ago.” Mitchell made direct appeals for donations from friendly unions that had assisted in the past, such as the United Mine Workers and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen. The union scraped by on the gifts it received in reply, as well as its meager monthly grants from the Sharecroppers Fund.

In the meantime, Mitchell kept up his efforts for an organizing campaign. With Meany disavowing farmworkers in the press, he approached the CIO once more. In June, he wrote to Victor Reuther stating that he was willing to renew discussions with the CIO and UPWA about a joint organizing campaign, and in July he played to the CIO’s industrial union heritage by arguing that agriculture might be organized “through the establishment of organizing committees” like the one that had organized the steel industry. If the committee succeeded, the credit for the organizing model would naturally go to the CIO in the newly joined labor federation. The NAWU president was hopeful that his new tack would yield results, especially when the December AFL-CIO merger convention announced “a big campaign to organize the unorganized,” complete with an $8 million fund. Mitchell was “sure that the organization of people on the farm will also be undertaken.”

However, 1956 brought more frustration. Although Walter Reuther was friendly toward the NAWU, Mitchell’s request from the Industrial Union Department for a $2,500 monthly subsidy until the AFL-CIO decided on an organizing campaign was answered with a one-time $5,000 grant. In California, Galarza attempted to rebuild the union, this time focusing on the

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706 Mitchell, Report to Executive Board, April 3, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
707 Mitchell to John L. Lewis, May 19, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 38.
709 Mitchell to All Officers and Members, NAWU, December 12, 1955, STFU Papers, reel 39.
San Jose and Santa Clara Valleys, which made up “one of the largest Mexican [American] communities in the state,” comprised mainly of “refugees from farm areas where the Nationals have taken over.” He hoped to devise a program for moving domestic workers into jobs held by braceros, but such a program required that the labor movement “put up what it takes” to wage a fight against the grower-friendly state agencies responsible for placing domestic farmworkers and authorizing braceros. A mere $5,000 just would not cut it. By June Galarza recommended suspending California operations until national labor leaders made up their minds.

Later that month, Mitchell contacted President Pat Gorman of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen about the possibility of folding the NAWU into his organization. Perhaps this move would win some organizing funds for farmworkers. Mitchell’s old friend in the Amalgamated, Leon Schachter (with whom he had organized the STFU’s union member transfer program during World War II), had recently told him that his union might consider such a proposal. However, like Meany, Gorman had an eye toward “an International dues problem with your membership in view of the fact that agricultural workers are not in the better paid group.” Negotiations continued slowly on the proposed merger. NAWU officers attempted to undercut Gorman’s argument that money would be an issue. He and Galarza continued to badger the Reuthers. They now advocated for a donation to the Amalgamated for an agricultural campaign should the two unions merge. Mitchell put the onus on Walter Reuther, who had vowed to “zip open those money bags” of the labor movement for “an organizational crusade” after the merger.

712 NAWU Executive Board, Meeting minutes, June 16-17, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
713 Mitchell to Gorman, June 30, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
informed” that the labor movement “has no interest in the welfare of 2 million or more human beings at the bottom of the economic heap,” Mitchell told him. In August, Mitchell sent a new version of his organizing campaign outline to the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in hopes of receiving an answer, but again he met with deferrals and silence.

On October 16, Mitchell and Schachter managed to get a meeting with George Meany to discuss the proposed NAWU-Amalgamated merger. The AFL-CIO president’s opinion had not changed. According to Mitchell, Meany said “he was yet to be convinced that agricultural workers could be successfully unionized.” His own experience on a union investigation of an Oxnard, California lemon pickers’ strike during the 1940s left him convinced farmworkers were “unorganizable,” like “domestic service employees and white collar workers.” Still, he told the men that the Executive Council was considering Mitchell’s draft organizing proposals, and Mitchell left the meeting with the impression that he “seemed to have an open mind and was ready to be convinced.” Meany told them to press forward with their merger. But the wave of consolidation sweeping the labor movement now worked against a NAWU-Amalgamated marriage. Ongoing talks between the Amalgamated and UPWA about their own merger had fallen through. In light of that recent event, Gorman became more conservative in merger talks with the NAWU. The Amalgamated’s president had little interest in adding the potential financial burden presented by the NAWU agricultural worker jurisdiction and the destitute farmworkers that came with it without the counterbalancing weight of UPWA’s dues-paying members with more stable employment. Gorman informed Mitchell that his union’s executive

board felt the NAWU merger “should be given further consideration.” The merger idea was table indefinitely. By this point, the NAWU president expected nothing from the labor movement.

*Reforming the Bracero Program*

NAWU leaders’ dissatisfaction over the labor movement’s unwillingness to help was all the more justified because the Bracero Program grew to more than twice its former size following Operation Wetback’s crackdown on undocumented workers. Just before the INS drive, bracero contracts numbered 201,380, but that number reached a plateau of more than 430,000 annually between 1956 and 1959 (See Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Bracero Contracts by Year, 1954-1959**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>201,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>309,033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>398,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>445,197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>436,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>432,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>437,643</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data adapted from Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 218, Appendix B.

However, more significant than raw numbers was the rising share of braceros in the overall seasonal agricultural workforce. In 1951, Mexican contract workers comprised 15% of total seasonal farmworkers, but by 1957, their proportion swelled to 34.2%. With braceros representing over one-third of the seasonal workforce, and with the decentralized administration of the program working to growers’ benefit, domestic farmworkers experienced significant wage stagnation or decline despite Public Law 78’s provisions against it. In 1945, when the war that had created the “emergency” farm labor shortage in the first place

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719 Gorman to Mitchell, October 26, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
720 Majka and Majka, 153.
ended, agricultural wages were 47% of industrial wages. By 1959, they had declined to 36%.\footnote{Jacob Clayman, Table 2, “Testimony before Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies, and Manpower of the House Committee on Agriculture,” Apr. 7, 1960, file 47, box 35, RG28-001, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.} It was no wonder the NAWU had difficulty organizing farmworkers in this context of declining economic power relative to industrial workers, a context created by the very guestworker program that prevented effective organization. Nevertheless, efforts to reform the program during the 1955 renewal debate resulted only in the inclusion of a minor showpiece amendment requiring the Secretary of Labor to consult with workers when determining labor shortages. In addition, bracero certification requests had to be posted publicly so domestic workers could apply for the jobs, though Galarza was frustrated more than once by California officials’ refusal to turn over lists of bracero requests.\footnote{Craig, 138.} 

Facing an insurmountable structural problem with the labor market and without any significant AFL-CIO help, Galarza decided to wield the only weapon the union had left: publicity. He threw himself at the job with his usual enthusiasm and launched a major public relations fight against the Bracero Program. He began touring bracero camps and interviewing Mexican contract workers in the summer of 1955. The following spring he released his findings in a pamphlet titled, “Strangers in Our Fields,” published jointly by the U.S. Section of the Joint-U.S. Mexico Trade Union Committee and the Fund for the Republic.\footnote{Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947-1960}, 251.} The report opened by describing braceros’ rural Mexican origins, the greased-palm selection process in Mexican recruitment centers, and bracero domination of certain crops and regions. For instance, in the cotton fields of the Diablo-Edwards area of Texas, braceros made up 87% of cotton pickers.\footnote{Galarza, “Strangers in Our Fields,” September 1956, reprint, STFU Papers, reel 39, 1-5.}

Given their importance in harvest labor conditions, the report sought to ascertain “the degree to...
which the Mexican alien farm worker…actually enjoys the legal, contractual and civil rights to which both governments have been committed since the inception of the program in 1942.”

The remainder of the eighty-page report was a chronicle of bracero complaints about their experiences as well as a hearty denunciation of the Department of Labor’s maladministration of the program. Galarza compiled his list of grievances from over 345 interviews near or in bracero camps, which he conducted out of sight of bosses or camp managers. One bracero summed up the general feeling among the men. “The sheep over there in that field are better than we are,” he said. “They have a shepherd to watch the flock and dogs that protect them instead of biting them. Here in the camp it is one bite after another.” The “bites” the man referred to were the braceros’ numerous paycheck deductions.

One of the braceros’ major complaints was the cost of food in the camps. Galarza noted that the $1.75 maximum meal charge had become the standard deduction for all meals, which were usually provided by contracted concessionaires who maximized profits by providing low quality food. Galarza called food quality complaints “an almost universal grievance.” Despite the bracero work contract’s guarantee of cooking facilities for the men to prepare their own meals, in practice they were almost always forbidden from doing so, the report argued. One foreman refused to let braceros have a stove and utensils because “it would be dangerous to make a fire in that old building” where they were housed. Only ten of the 345 interviewees were currently preparing their own meals.

Like the meals in the camp, Galarza’s questions about housing focused braceros’ discontent. One reported covering “the holes in the windows and walls with paper.”

725 Ibid., 9.
726 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947-1960, 251.
728 Ibid., 40-45.
asked for an additional blanket, the camp manager refused. “No, you are supposed to have only one,” he told the farmworker. Another bracero told Galarza that his crew was housed “in a barn which was used for the cows when we moved in.” The barn planks had four-inch gaps between them, and “the smell inside” was “repelling.” Of the 345 interviewees, Galarza encountered just two who had “either seen or heard of a housing inspector in their camps.” He argued this was no doubt the result of the Department of Labor’s decision to delegate housing inspection duties to the California Department of Employment, which in turn delegated the task to its understaffed and underfunded Division of Housing.

Galarza performed his own inspections during his interviews. Although the larger grower association-operated camps (housing up to 1000 braceros) tended to be better, there were numerous smaller camps—many of them “former wetback depots…touched up with minor repairs”—that had more serious problems. Of the 200 small camps Galarza visited, he found forty-four in serious violation. In one, he found a drainage ditch carrying “stable and kitchen waste meandering among the tents.” In another, eighty braceros shared “two privies without doors, screens or seat covers,” and in scores of others, he found frigid men who lacked adequate protection from the cold weather during November 1955.

In addition to documenting bracero complaints, “Strangers in Our Fields” offered a stinging critique of the Department of Labor’s administration of the Bracero Program. There was no chance of oversight when the Bureau of Employment Security employed just fifteen compliance officers for all of California and Arizona, making each officer responsible for over 6,600 braceros in 1955. Not one bracero Galarza interviewed “knew the name or the address” of

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729 Ibid., 22-24.
730 Ibid., 26.
732 Ibid., 27-28.
his Department of Labor area representative. With resources spread so thinly, the department could only achieve “token enforcement” by relying on the good behavior of the agencies affiliated with it through the U.S. Employment Service. As evidence of the abysmal department record, Galarza cited two crashes of vehicles used to haul braceros. Eleven Mexican workers were killed in these accidents, but “neither representatives of the Mexican Consular Service nor of the compliance division of the Department of Labor were on the spot to investigate” within twenty-four hours of the accidents. When even men’s deaths did not warrant investigation, the report argued, “invariably the bracero will decide to be silent about his grievances.”

The biggest problem with the program remained prevailing wage determinations and the total lack of redress for braceros’ and domestic farmworkers’ grievances. Galarza hammered the point once more about wage determinations. In California, the State Employment Service simply gathered information on “payments in the various crops,” which the U.S. secretary of labor then compiled. The secretary determined the prevailing wage in a crop and region as “the most common wage found in the area,” instead of adhering more strictly to the guidelines that defined the prevailing wage as the rate at which domestic workers could be attracted to the work. Thus, the decentralized administration of the program led to a “maximum of flexibility and a minimum of attention to administrative controls.”

The result was unemployment and displacement for domestic workers and meager earnings for braceros. Out of twelve braceros Galarza interviewed in a northern California camp, half made less than ten dollars for a week’s work, and he found several working in lettuce fields who had made less than a dollar over a two-week pay period thanks to minimal hours and payroll

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733 Ibid., 12, 62.
734 Ibid., 52-56.
735 Ibid., 67.
736 Ibid., 34.
deductions. Some even owed their employers money.\textsuperscript{737} When the NAWU tried to advocate on braceros’ behalf, Galarza noted, Department of Labor procedures required the union to provide all the information on a grievance, “which is then transmitted to the employer engaged in the alleged dispute, who usually sends the bracero right back to Mexico.”\textsuperscript{738} With payroll deductions for inferior services, low wages, and no redress, Galarza concluded that a bracero returned to Mexico possibly “a little richer,” most likely poorer, but “in either case he certainly is wiser.”\textsuperscript{739}

Department of Labor officials charged with administering the Bracero Program reacted angrily to “Strangers in Our Fields.” Director Robert Goodwin of the Bureau of Employment Security\textsuperscript{740} said the report was marked by a “lack of objectivity.” Galarza designed the pamphlet “to highlight selected and dramatic cases,” Goodwin argued.\textsuperscript{741} When Mitchell told the director that he was “attacking the honor and integrity of Ernesto Galarza” by joining with California farmers (who had recently called the report “slanderous”), Goodwin fired back that the report contained “misrepresentations without foundation in fact.”\textsuperscript{742}

Meanwhile, Bureau of Employment Security officials in Region X, which included California, were so affronted by the pamphlet that they issued a memorandum to refute some of Galarza’s claims. However, the refutations either glossed over Galarza’s points or contained tacit admissions of the Department of Labor’s shortcomings in administering the program. Officials admitted that Galarza’s promise of anonymity to his bracero interviewees was “generally speaking good investigative technique,” but argued, “it is quite probable that the author received many complaints \textit{because} of this approach.” Apparently officials believed good investigative

\textsuperscript{737} Ibid., 33-40.\textsuperscript{738} Ibid., 73.\textsuperscript{739} Ibid., 79.\textsuperscript{740} Goodwin was promoted from his former post as director of the U.S. Employment Service.\textsuperscript{741} Goodwin to Noakes, September 26, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.\textsuperscript{742} Mitchell to Goodwin, October 2, 1956; California State Board of Agriculture to James Mitchell, September 20, 1956; Goodwin to Mitchell, October 5, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
technique led to unfounded grousing, not honesty. On housing, the memo plainly admitted, “We cannot pretend that our own Field Representatives inspect more than a small percentage of the thousands of housing units in California.” Officials dismissed Galarza’s complaints that the Department of Labor ignored union advocacy of bracero grievances by noting that neither growers nor the department could deal with the union officially until a majority of braceros employed by an entire grower association voted for union representation. Overall, Region X administrators declared that Galarza asked the impossible: “To ‘police’ the program in a manner implied by the author would obviously involve hundreds of compliance officers,” an expansion that would have required much larger congressional appropriations. To these men, the prospect seemed absurd.\(^\text{743}\)

As Bureau of Employment Security officials denounced it, the pamphlet’s circulation led to calls for Bracero Program reform. Farmworker reform advocates had begun concentrating on the Bracero Program as the biggest stumbling block for their efforts in the wake of Operation Wetback, which helped to clear the way for a direct attack on the program. Religious and liberal-minded groups were at the forefront of this farmworker reform drive, and they began to focus increasingly on denouncing the program in concert with the union.\(^\text{744}\) In 1955, Galarza delivered “a pretty atrocious denunciation of the Department of Labor” before a conference held by the Bishops’ Committee for the Spanish Speaking. Archbishop Robert Lucey of San Antonio, who had served on the Truman Commission on Migratory Labor, “thanked the Lord that there are laymen who have the nerve” to mobilize against the program.\(^\text{745}\) “Strangers in Our Fields”

\(^\text{744}\) Anne Effland, “The Emergence of Federal Assistance Programs for Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in post-World War II America” (Ph.D. diss., Iowa State University, 1991), 45-47; 51-53.
emboldened reform-minded groups. From California, the author reported an “urgent response” from “Catholics, [the Religious Society of] Friends,” and the National Council of Churches, as well as a faculty organization at Santa Clara University. The organizations viewed the publication “as a sign of lively interest in the labor movement” about the program and began lobbying the Department of Labor and asking Galarza for regular updates. In November the National Sharecroppers Fund joined the fray, publicizing a letter it sent to Secretary of Labor James Mitchell demanding that he “investigate fully and publicly the facts.”

Secretary Mitchell was probably relieved to see reformers indicting his department and demanding improvements, and he began using these calls as justifications for increasing the department’s authority at large and over the Bracero Program specifically. Mitchell had been a “Democrat-for-Eisenhower” during the 1952 election. His résumé was a mix of public service and private enterprise. He had spent four years working with the New Deal’s Emergency Relief Administration during the 1930s, but during the 1940s and early 1950s he held a variety of labor relations positions in both the private and public sectors until joining the Eisenhower administration as an assistant secretary of the Army.

James Mitchell may have seemed an unlikely person to lead a government reform effort on behalf of farmworkers, but when he replaced Martin Durkin as secretary of labor in the fall of 1953, Mitchell immediately embarked on a reformist path by building a strong Labor Department that he would soon use on behalf of the nation’s most impoverished workers. First, he worked to rebuild the department’s authority and organization after Congress had transferred

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748 Effland, 58-60.
749 Durkin, a former union leader, resigned over the Eisenhower Administration’s lack of interest in reforming the Taft-Hartley Act after nine months on the job.
much of its responsibilities to other departments after World War II. Next, he directed his
attention to farmworkers, workers he felt the nation had failed by excluding them from even the
most basic protections guaranteed to industrial workers. Noting the appalling living and working
conditions of migrant workers, repeatedly tried to persuade Congress to enact some kind of
farmworker reform.\textsuperscript{750} He pushed for the creation of an Interagency Committee on Migrant
Labor to ameliorate farmworker conditions by encouraging the enactment of state-level
legislation. It never cleared the objections of the congressional farm bloc. He backed legislation
to extend Fair Labor Standards Act protections to farmworkers on four occasions during his
tenure at the department, an effort that was met not only with congressional disapproval, but also
the denunciation of Secretary of Agricultural Ezra Taft Benson.\textsuperscript{751}

“Strangers in Our Fields” and the criticism it unleashed gave Secretary Mitchell the
opportunity for which he had been waiting; if he could not achieve farmworker reform by
pressing for change, he hoped he could use the Bracero Program as a lever to improve
conditions.\textsuperscript{752} Mitchell issued new housing and meal regulations and launched a vigorous
housing inspection campaign in the wake of Galarza’s report. The new housing regulations came
after department compliance officers conducted brief on-the-spot inspections in November and
December 1956. The spot checks revealed housing that was “unfit for human habitation.”\textsuperscript{753} The
revised standards barred the construction of triple-deck bunk beds, mandated separate cooking
and eating facilities in new facilities and proper ventilation of kitchens in existing ones, and
required spring mattresses in braceros’ beds. Additionally, braceros were entitled to one toilet

\textsuperscript{750} In fact, Congress had so neutered the Department of Labor after World War II that Congress repeatedly
considered merging it with the Department of Commerce. Henry Guzda, “James P. Mitchell: Social Conscience of
\textsuperscript{751} Effland, 62-69; Hahmovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, 126.
\textsuperscript{752} Effland, 70.
\textsuperscript{753} Glenn Brockway, Regional Director BES, to All Associations and Employers Contracting Mexican National
Farm Workers, December 26, 1956, Box 20, Folder 2: California Department of Employment, Farm Placement
Service, 1957 (1), Galarza Papers.
per fifteen men, hot water for bathing, and laundry facilities that could accommodate weekly laundering of braceros’ clothes.\(^{754}\) The department also ruled that food concessionaires in the camps had to improve offerings. Meals made from “kidneys, tripe, tails, chicharrones, [and] hearts” could only be served once a week.\(^{755}\)

With the new housing regulations established on Secretary Mitchell’s initiative, Robert Goodwin announced to the Department of Labor’s Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor that federal compliance officials would begin a yearlong inspection tour on January 11, 1957.\(^{756}\) By April it was apparent that growers were violating standards with abandon. For example, the California Farm Placement Service issued a bulletin during the inspection tour that reported the Department of Labor inspectors had found the Coachella Valley Farmers Association housing 2,193 braceros in a facility that accommodated only 940.\(^{757}\) Overall, the 1957 inspections in Region X revealed that 38% of California’s and 46% of Arizona’s bracero housing facilities were deficient (See Table 5.2). By August the department had closed fifty-eight camps.\(^{758}\) While they were at it, inspectors also examined payroll records as part of an overall compliance drive. In California 17.5% of payroll inspections revealed violations, with the rate climbing to 39.5% in Arizona (See Table 5.3). The 1957 enforcement campaign represented a massive increase in the


\(^{758}\) Craig, 152.
department’s activity. In 1956, Region X reported 404 housing and 328 payroll inspections; in
1957 those numbers skyrocketed to 3,612 and 893.\textsuperscript{759}

Table 5.2: Bureau of Employment Security Housing Inspections, Region X, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Housing Inspections</th>
<th>Deficient Facilities</th>
<th>% Deficient</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>2,929</td>
<td>1,117</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3,612</td>
<td>1436</td>
<td>39.8</td>
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</table>


Table 5.3: Bureau of Employment Security Payroll Inspections, Region X, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Payroll Inspections</th>
<th>Violations</th>
<th>% in Violation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Growers howled in response to the emboldened efforts of Mitchell’s Department of
Labor, and they hoped to nip in the bud what they viewed as the department’s bureaucratic
activism, fearing what appeared to be an emerging synergy among the department, labor
activists, and other reformers. A New Mexican growers’ association president wrote to Assistant Secretary of Labor Rocco Siciliano to protest the department’s new measures. A bracero had little need for federal protection, he wrote, since “he can strike, and our proximity to the border makes it easy for him to…return home if he feels that wages or working conditions are not


\textsuperscript{760} File Reports and Statistics, 1953-60 [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 8, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.

\textsuperscript{761} Ibid. No payroll inspections were conducted in Nevada.
precisely to his liking.” President Charles Shuman of the American Farm Bureau Federation was more direct, writing Secretary Mitchell to school him in American jurisprudence. “A man is innocent until proved guilty,” he wrote, but Bracero Program administrators were violating that basic principle by enforcing sanctions on growers for program violations. “If the Department of Labor says a man is guilty—he’s guilty, and that’s the end of it,” Shuman concluded.

Still Waiting

While the Department of Labor conducted its inspections in 1957, the NAWU tried to build on the reform moment it had helped create with its publicity by once more attempting to force the AFL-CIO to move on the problems facing farmworkers. By January 1957, Mitchell had become convinced that every nudge labor leaders made to get the NAWU to merge with another union was an attempt to sweep them under the rug. He was willing to accept that as long as it meant the AFL-CIO would underwrite some kind of organizing drive for farmworkers, but during the first week of the month Mitchell learned from a friend in AFL-CIO offices that Meany had lied to him in October 1956. At that time, the AFL-CIO president had assured Mitchell that the Executive Council was considering NAWU’s organizing proposal. However, Mitchell reported to Galarza, “No committee had been designated to look at the agricultural labor problem,” and “no study was under way as Meany indicated.” If the NAWU merged with the Amalgamated anyway, it could not even count on the Industrial Union Department for support. After all, “in spite of all Walter’s good intentions, commitment, etc., the only thing we’ve gotten is a hand out of $5,000 last spring,” he complained.

762 James F. Cole to Siciliano, March 1, 1957, Box 25, Folder 8: Labor; Committee Correspondence—General, 1957, Joseph M. Montoya Papers, University of New Mexico Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
764 Mitchell to Galarza, December 17, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
765 Mitchell to Galarza, January 7, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
Mitchell and Galarza toyed again with the idea of an immediate merger with the Amalgamated, which would require Executive Council approval, as a means to force the council to declare its position on farmworkers. But the Amalgamated’s leadership continued to shy away from any formal commitments. Writing to Galarza from the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting, Mitchell reported that the “news from Miami is most discouraging.” Without a discussion—let alone a commitment—of funds for an organizing campaign, the Amalgamated’s President Gorman reiterated that he would not consider “adding any financial burden” to his union. Mitchell finally abandoned the merger idea in late March.

Nonetheless, the NAWU continued to demand that the labor movement do something concrete for farmworkers, especially since the publicity surrounding “Strangers in Our Fields” was stirring interest. In February 1957 the Joint U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Committee issued a brief follow-up to the pamphlet titled, “Just One More Look, Mr. Secretary.” It applauded the Department of Labor’s improved attitude and compliance efforts, but found agricultural labor conditions “still intolerable.” The situation demanded a “tenfold” increase in compliance staff, the report argued. With attention still focused on Galarza’s report, Mitchell wrote to Walter Reuther requesting a $25,000 grant to organize California farmworkers and proposed relocating the union headquarters to San Jose to effect Galarza’s plan to replace braceros with domestic farmworkers. Reuther offered another $5,000, but promised that further assistance was “under

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767 Mitchell was unable to even bring the matter up with the Executive Council. The entire session of the Executive Council was devoted to organized crime’s role in labor unions following the formation of the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management in January. Mitchell to Harry Poole, January 30, 1957; Mitchell to Galarza, February 5, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
769 Mitchell to Galarza, March 21, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
770 Frank Noakes, “Just One More Look, Mr. Secretary,” February 18, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
advisement” pending discussion “with the officers of the AFL-CIO.”"\textsuperscript{772} Mitchell replied with a proposal for $70,000 to organize “approximately 6000 unemployed or partially employed resident workers” to replace braceros. However, he added that he was “none too hopeful that the top officials of AFL-CIO will give any substantial assistance.”\textsuperscript{773}

Four days later, though, on March 8, Victor Reuther spoke with Mitchell, telling him that the Executive Council had been “disgusted with George Meany’s reversal” at the Miami meeting on plans to organize white collar workers. Walter Reuther had produced a copy of one of the NAWU’s organizing campaign outlines and said, “Here is an organization that wants to do a job and is asking for a small amount of money.” It was not an overriding concern for agricultural workers motivating the recent grant, Reuther told Mitchell, rather it was that the CIO faction was “just fed up with refusal of the top officials…to do any organizing of the unorganized.”\textsuperscript{774}

Indeed, Walter Reuther had taken the CIO into a merger with the AFL partly on the hope that a combined labor movement could lead to new organizing campaigns in the South and among white-collar and service workers. He admitted as much at the founding AFL-CIO convention in 1955, declaring, “We have not achieved labor unity based upon stagnation.”\textsuperscript{775} Given the Reuther brothers’ frustrations with Meany, Victor was eager to tell Mitchell that the NAWU would get the full $25,000 it had requested to serve as a “guinea pig.”\textsuperscript{776}

Once more, though, the strategy to force the NAWU to merge with another union reappeared. This time it seemed that the Reuthers’ promise of funds came at the price of bowing to the CIO-affiliated UPWA, which had recently announced its own plans to organize unemployed California farmworkers and was continuing to cause problems for the NAWU’s

\textsuperscript{772} Reuther to Mitchell, February 21, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
\textsuperscript{773} Mitchell to Reuther, March 4, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
\textsuperscript{774} Mitchell to Galarza, March 8, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
\textsuperscript{775} Walter Reuther, as quoted in Lichtenstein, \textit{The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit}, 323.
\textsuperscript{776} Mitchell to Galarza, March 8, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
Louisiana sugar locals. Mitchell refused to deal with UPWA or its president Ralph Helstein. He wrote to Galarza to vent, stating “We cannot make any kind of deal with [the] bastard—he would double cross and sell his own mother.” In April Helstein made overtures to Mitchell, but Mitchell promised to tell him what he had recently told Walter Reuther: “No joint organizing or merger but a policy of staying out of UPWA’s way if they will leave us alone and not interfere.” In June relations between UPWA and the NAWU reached a new low. Mitchell denounced the union in a letter on June 5, which UPWA Vice President A.T. Stephens found “absurd and foolish.” With the prospect of cooperation gone, the Reuthers made good on their initial promise of the full $25,000, mostly because of their esteem for Galarza’s work on the Bracero Program and the attention “Strangers in Our Fields” had brought to farmworker conditions.

By October, Mitchell still had not given up hope for a broader organizational campaign in agriculture. If he could somehow focus the reform synergy developing among the union, liberal reformers, and Secretary of Labor Mitchell, perhaps he could put organized labor on the spot and force decisive AFL-CIO action. Mitchell worked with National Sharecroppers Fund Executive Secretary Fay Bennett on a November conference in New York City titled, “Meeting Our Responsibility to Low Income Farmers and Migratory Labor.” Mitchell and Bennett hoped it would both keep the pressure on the Department of Labor and persuade the labor movement to finally come through with a plan for farmworkers.

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778 Mitchell to Galarza, March 18, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
779 Mitchell to Galarza, May 16, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
781 Mitchell to Galarza, September 26, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
782 National Sharecroppers Fund, Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, October 18, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
As the Sharecroppers Fund finalized the conference plans, Mitchell and Galarza appeared before the Industrial Union Department to report on the NAWU’s activity as well as request a renewal of their $25,000 grant, but Victor Reuther informed them that there would be no more money unless they merged with UPWA. Without this merger, the IUD could not consider doing any more for the NAWU unless the entire AFL-CIO came through with a broader commitment. Mitchell and Galarza were “greatly disturbed after the interview” with Victor Reuther. It appeared that the Reuthers had “cast us to the wolves” and given UPWA “a green light to raid our membership.” Without broader AFL-CIO backing, the brothers only seemed willing to provide money if it helped solidify a CIO union’s position in the relatively new labor federation.

With this lifeline denied, the NAWU focused its hopes on the mid-November conference in an attempt to rally a nascent reform coalition in opposition to the Bracero Program and pressure the AFL-CIO to act. Keynote speakers included A. Philip Randolph and Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, president of the National Council of Churches. Senator John F. Kennedy could not attend, but he sent his best wishes. Attendees received copies of “Strangers in Our Fields” and other informational booklets on the Bracero Program. Panelists included spokespersons from government agencies, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, and several unions, including the NAWU. The conference’s recommendations ranged from extending credit to small farmers to including farmworkers under special protective legislation. On the Bracero Program, the conference recommended that the Department of Labor appoint tripartite committees to advise on prevailing wages and adverse effect. As for organized labor, attendees demanded

783 Mitchell and Galarza to Walter Reuther, November 5, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
784 Mitchell to Gorman, November 27, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
785 National Sharecroppers Fund, Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, October 18, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
“intensified efforts by AFL-CIO to organize farm workers,” since the NAWU “cannot do this job without help.”

On the heels of the conference, Mitchell made plans for the upcoming December AFL-CIO annual convention in Atlantic City. He drew on his allies A. Philip Randolph, Leon Schachter, Gardner Jackson, National Sharecroppers Fund head Dr. Frank P. Graham, and director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Msgr. George G. Higgins. Together, the men persuaded Meany to join them at a luncheon. Faced with this array of labor, liberal, and religious leaders and keenly aware of the recent publicity surrounding the Bracero Program and the plight of domestic farmworkers, Meany “agreed to request [that] the Industrial Union Department…make a survey to determine” how farmworkers’ problems might be solved. This survey would be preliminary to a subsequent organizing campaign. Although Mitchell did not get the “impression that a full scale organizing program is going to be undertaken immediately,” he believed he had finally “made some progress along this line.”

Overall, then, the 1955-1957 period represented an important advance for those who sought to improve farmworker conditions by attacking the Bracero Program. Although the NAWU could not get a firm commitment for farmworker organization from the newly merged AFL-CIO, Galarza’s publicity efforts helped draw attention to the maladministration of the Bracero Program. This in turn helped breathe life into a nascent reform coalition of labor, liberals, and religiously inspired activists who kept that attention focused as the Bracero Program expanded in the wake of Operation Wetback. Meanwhile, reformers found a receptive ear in

787 Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November 29, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
789 Mitchell to Fr. Donald McDonnell, December 17, 1957, STFU Papers, reel 40.
Secretary of Labor James Mitchell, who began using his authority over the Bracero Program to force some limited improvements over agricultural labor conditions given the hostile reception his broader reform farmworker proposals received in Congress and the Department of Agriculture. Together, these three forces created a reform synergy that would continue to build through the end of the program.

Further Reforms and Still Waiting, 1958-1959

If the period between the AFL-CIO merger in 1955 and Meany’s promise of an organizing campaign study in 1957 had been one of ups and downs for the NAWU, 1958 offered the union a whipsaw of promise and despair. In January, the NAWU submitted guidelines for the Industrial Union Department study, urging the AFL-CIO to focus its attention on California, where 15,000 large farms grew two-thirds of the state’s agricultural production. The union argued such farms represented labor’s best chance to organize farmworkers, since they could be organized en masse, with the largest growers forced to set new labor standards for California agriculture. An organizing drive would require from “two to five years” to be successful, the NAWU guidelines suggested, and would face numerous legal challenges since agricultural workers were excluded from state and federal protective legislation. Overall, the campaign would cost at least $360,000 annually for the first two years. Despite the high projected costs, things seemed to be moving forward in February. Victor Reuther met with Mitchell and told him that once the Industrial Union Department’s Executive Committee met, “they would approve the preliminary survey and make money available.”

Yet what Victor Reuther said was not what Walter Reuther intended. By month’s end, Mitchell wrote to National Sharecropper Fund executive secretary Fay Bennett to express his

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790 Mitchell to Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, Memorandum: “A Survey Preliminary to Organization of Agricultural Workers,” January 6, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
791 Mitchell to Galarza, February 4, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
concern that “Reuther and his Industrial Union Department are trying to get out from under the commitment they made” because “they realize they will be committed also to finance an organizing campaign once a survey is made.” As always, the conflicting jurisdictional claims of UPWA and the NAWU served “as an excuse to do nothing.” The NAWU president was less diplomatic in his correspondence with Galarza. “Walter Reuther is a cold calculating inhuman machine that’s interested solely in Walter R. and we have no power for him to use,” Mitchell wrote. Without a firm commitment from the labor movement, Mitchell told his executive board, by May the NAWU would be faced with insolvency once more.

An early spring meeting with AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer William Schnitzler and UPWA president Ralph Helstein left Mitchell even more frustrated. Schnitzler told Mitchell that the NAWU had to turn over one of its Louisiana sugar workers locals to UPWA in exchange for favorable consideration of the organizing proposal at the upcoming AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting. The need for assistance required the NAWU president to swallow the poison pill of a joint UPWA-NAWU project. Whenever the two unions settled on a plan, the Executive Council would “assign organizers or provide money to hire and train” them. Mitchell thought it an obvious CIO power play. “Walter Reuther has lowered the boom on the NAWU—work out something with UPWA or we don’t help,” he wrote bitterly.

In a letter to the NAWU Executive Board, he and Galarza vowed not to consider any proposals if they meant “further dismemberment, dissolution, or merger with the United Packinghouse Workers,” though in truth Mitchell realized he had few options.

792 Mitchell to Bennett, February 24, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
793 Mitchell to Galarza, March 11, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
794 Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza and George Stith, March 25, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
795 Mitchell and Galarza to Executive Board, March 31, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
At Mitchell’s request, in early April A. Philip Randolph, Leon Schachter, and International Ladies Garment Workers Union vice-president Charles Zimmerman pressed Walter Reuther for a meeting to discuss the farmworker drive and “arrive at some definite conclusions.” Meanwhile, the NAWU president told Schnitzler that he would only work out a joint program with UPWA if the NAWU remained independent. He had ample reason for concern. Gardner Jackson had recently spoken to Victor Reuther about a job in the Industrial Union Department, only to be told that he would not be considered until the NAWU “merged with a larger international union or otherwise ceased to exist.” Amid these signals, Mitchell wrote to tell Galarza that he didn’t think “there is the slightest hope that these guys will have a change of heart and do anything to help us organize.” Instead, he put his hopes in a direct-mail campaign to solicit contributions from individual union locals.

While Mitchell collected the funds that trickled in and waited on a definitive answer, Galarza was busy organizing in California. The $25,000 Industrial Union Department grant in 1957 enabled him to begin outreach efforts among unemployed domestic farmworkers in order to establish hiring halls that could be used to displace braceros. However, he found that California Farm Placement Service officials and growers gave farmworkers the runaround, classifying them as “unqualified” for some farm work, keeping them waiting in offices for hours, dispatching them to the wrong farms, or simply adding them to bracero crews to accelerate the harvest and reduce everyone’s hours. Nonetheless, farmworker interest in the NAWU plan grew in early 1958, aided by volunteer organizers, word of mouth, and religious and civic relief

797 Mitchell to Schnitzler, April 4, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
798 Mitchell to Victor Reuther, April 24, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
799 Mitchell to Galarza, April 23, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
800 Galarza to Mitchell, November 22, 1957; Galarza to Frank Noakes, January 8, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40.
organizations that kept in contact with Galarza following the “Strangers in Our Fields” report. Galarza reported staying “in constant touch” with farmworker crews in “Marysville, Sacramento, Tracy, San Jose, Hollister, and Salinas,” with “demands for meetings from Gilroy, Watsonville and Greenfield.” By the middle of April, he counted among the NAWU’s California assets the following: thirty-two volunteer organizers, a direct mailing list for his bilingual fliers reaching up to 5,000 farmworkers, radio spots on Spanish-language stations, and 3,000 farmworkers registered for job availability with the Farm Placement Service. He also cultivated ties with California’s emerging Mexican American civil rights activists. He was offered and accepted the chairmanship of the Community Service Organization’s Agricultural Committee.

On the basis of this organizing groundwork and farmworker mobilization, Mitchell pressed Schnitzler to deliver on the AFL-CIO’s promises. The NAWU believed its bracero-replacement strategy represented “a program which in your terms, ‘makes sense,’” he told the secretary-treasurer. “We should like to see this program extended,” he wrote. Such a program made all the more sense since the Texas State AFL-CIO had recently begun assisting the Texas Employment Commission with the recruitment of tractor drivers to replace “specials,” skilled braceros who could perform work that most braceros were normally barred from performing. With more than just the NAWU working on the project, the AFL-CIO might be more likely to come through with the necessary resources. Furthermore, the NAWU and UPWA agreed to

802 The veracity of Galarza’s estimate for the fliers is hard to assess, given the inherent instability of migrant communities and the union’s interest in promoting its efforts. Given that farmworkers almost always worked in crews and moved around frequently, however, the 5,000 number is at least believable. Galarza to Mitchell, March 31, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 40; Galarza to Mitchell, April 10, 1958; Galarza, “Report on Activities in California for the year ending March 31, 1958, April 17, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
803 Mitchell to Schnitzler, April 28, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
coordinate independent efforts to avoid raiding and duplicating work, a move Schnitzler
applauded as a “great contribution toward the organization of the agricultural workers.” There
was “no reason” why “efforts in this field should be limited to the single effort of either union
individually or together,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{805}

Nevertheless, the decisive meeting that Randolph, Zimmerman, Schachter, and Mitchell
had requested with Walter Reuther was continually deferred. When almost two months passed
after their initial request, Randolph tried Meany, who forwarded the request to Reuther and
included his June availabilities.\textsuperscript{806} Meanwhile, the California situation deteriorated because the
union’s funds had been exhausted. By the end of May, Galarza reported that he would soon be
forced to close the union’s hiring halls in San Jose, Stockton, and Hollister.\textsuperscript{807} He was so fed up
with the labor movement’s lack of support that he suggested returning the NAWU’s charter and
going independent from the AFL-CIO as a show of protest.\textsuperscript{808}

With Galarza increasingly depressed about future prospects and beginning to think about
getting out of farmworker organizing altogether, in July Mitchell decided to decamp from his
Washington, D.C. headquarters and pay his friend a visit in California to see things for
himself.\textsuperscript{809} It was Mitchell’s first major trip to the West Coast on union business since the Di
Giorgio strike. He had long suspected that Galarza’s reports were sometimes filled with
“exaggeration,” but his trip dispelled that notion. Some farmworker slums had housing so bad
they reminded him of 1930s Arkansas.\textsuperscript{810} Overall, he was impressed with Galarza’s work. He
praised his friend’s “magnificent job in training” a “corps of leaders” he felt would be able “to

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{805} Schnitzler to Mitchell, May 7, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\item \textsuperscript{806} Meany to Reuther, May 22, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\item \textsuperscript{807} Galarza to Mitchell, May 30, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\item \textsuperscript{808} Mitchell to Galarza, June 10, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\item \textsuperscript{809} Ibid, Galarza to Mitchell, June 2, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\item \textsuperscript{810} Galarza to Gardner Jackson, July 30, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\end{footnotes}
break the Mexican National problem, regardless of what the AFL-CIO does or does not do.” The mostly Mexican American group in Hollister would be able to “spearhead the organizing of the coastal area near Salinas and Watsonville,” which included roughly 8,000 domestic farmworkers, while the Modesto-based Okies and Arkies could do the work in California’s Central Valley, where 30,000 farmworkers lived.811

Despite Mitchell’s positive evaluation, though, the union’s effort fell apart rapidly once he left and the harvest accelerated, driven by a growers counterattack. By mid-September, Galarza reported that union members had been fired from farms in Hollister. Tomato piece rates were frozen at about 12¢ per box. In Yuba City, someone fired a .45 caliber bullet through a NAWU organizer’s car window after he received an “anonymous phone call to get out.” And there were at least 15% more braceros in the areas of NAWU activity over the previous year. Galarza wrote to Mitchell to tell him he was ready to call it quits. “I simply must call the representatives of the five groups…together and tell them the truth,” he wrote, “[—]there is no present for them in the labor movement. And if there is a future, some other prophet will have to tell them.”812

As Mitchell pondered his friend’s statements, he no doubt fought back feelings of agreement, at least about the labor movement. Throughout the summer he kept waiting for labor leaders to do something—anything—about his proposals. He hoped the August AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in the rolling and picturesque Pocono Mountains might bring some movement, and he wrote A. Philip Randolph to ask him to try again for a meeting with Meany and Reuther. He also lobbied Meany directly to use the union’s “program of placing Americans

811 Galarza to Fay Bennett, July 25, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
812 Galarza to Mitchell, September 17, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
on farm jobs” held by braceros as the beginning of an organizing campaign. Meany’s response to Randolph’s inquiry revealed just how low farmworkers were on the AFL-CIO priority list. Since he last contacted Walter Reuther about it, Meany wrote, “I did not receive any further word or reply.” To make matters worse, the AFL-CIO president had been so busy that, “I cannot recall the purpose of the above group sitting down for a conference.” As for the conference, Meany advised that Randolph’s request for the meeting “be held in abeyance for the time being.”

As summer turned to fall, the situation appeared hopeless. Failing to make any decisive moves during the harvest season and completely out of money, Galarza’s California organization disintegrated. He suspended all fieldwork, keeping in touch with his volunteer organizers only by phone. He had no mass meetings or relief efforts planned for the upcoming winter. As for Mitchell, he told Galarza he was certain help would not be forthcoming. “The AFL-CIO isn’t going to come through with financial, moral, and political support,” he wrote.

The NAWU needed the former most of all. The National Sharecroppers Fund’s increased activities following its 1957 conference meant it had a harder time meeting its monthly commitment to the NAWU. Mitchell wrote to Fay Bennett in November to underscore the seriousness of the situation. The union’s five salaried officers had not been paid since August 1. Without immediate assistance, “we will have to dissolve the organization,” he noted. Moreover, the dissolution was beginning to grow important for Mitchell and his wife’s personal solvency. He told Galarza, “I don’t think we can collect unemployment insurance as long as the

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813 Mitchell to Randolph, July 30, 1958, Mitchell to Meany, August 1, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
814 Meany to Randolph, August 13, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
815 Galarza to Mitchell and Gardner Jackson, November 13, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
816 Mitchell to Bennett, November 3, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
office is open.” From California, Galarza replied that he had “stopped keeping records other than bills paid.” As for Meany, Galarza would “not any longer hang on his ignorance or his prejudice or whatever it is that motivates him in relation to us.”

Revived Hopes

If Mitchell and Galarza were fed up with the unwillingness of the AFL-CIO to move forward with a plan for the nation’s farmworkers, at least they could take some small solace from the Department of Labor’s continuing reforms of the Bracero Program. The reaction to “Strangers in Our Fields” and the 1957 National Sharecroppers Fund conference had shown Secretary of Labor James Mitchell that a growing coalition of religious, labor, and liberal groups was unwilling to tolerate the Bracero Program status quo, and that he could build on the momentum that their actions had produced by continuing to refine the program’s administration and correct its abuses throughout 1958. In effect, the reform coalition was giving him cover to increase the department’s enforcement and compliance activities.

Domestic farmworker recruitment was one area of improvement. Unionists on the department’s Labor Advisory Committee on Farm Labor called on the Bureau of Employment Security to “effect a drastic reduction in the number of foreign workers” by requiring employers “to recruit throughout the entire United States.” In response, Secretary Mitchell announced that he had instructed Assistant Secretary Newell Brown and Bureau of Employment Security Director Robert Goodwin not to approve bracero requests where “domestic workers can be obtained to meet farm labor needs.” The assistant secretary hammered the point before a

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817 Mitchell to Galarza, November 4, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
818 Galarza to Mitchell, November 4, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
820 Department of Labor, Press release USDL-2360, Executive 3-2320 “Stepped up Recruitment of Domestic Farm Workers Urged by Mitchell,” April 6, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
meeting of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association, which had done so much to replace domestic farmworkers with braceros. Brown told the growers that a “large surplus of domestic manpower” in rural areas was “increasingly troubling the public conscience.” The Imperial Valley Farmers Association and other growers’ associations would have to increase wages; improve housing for migrants; establish contracts with farmworkers covering transportation, hours, and wages; and conduct systematic recruitment in rural areas of chronic underemployment, Brown told them.821 The department’s pronouncements were not idle talk, either. When New Mexico Congressman Joseph Montoya complained to Goodwin about domestic recruitment on behalf of griping farmers, the director fired back, telling him, “There is a substantial number of unemployed farm workers presently available in Oklahoma and the States in the Mississippi River Valley.” If his state’s growers needed farmworkers, Goodwin told him, they could use the Employment Service to recruit from those areas.822

Still, the decentralized administration of the program threatened to derail any directives coming from the top. Department officials anticipated this and instructed their affiliated state agencies to comply. In connection with Montoya’s complaint, Goodwin reprimanded M. F. Miera, executive director of New Mexico’s Employment Security Commission. Between 1942 and 1947, “your State ranked near the top” for cotton picking wage rates, he wrote, but in 1951, it “dropped to the lowest in the country and remained the lowest since.” Henceforth, Miera would have to tell growers to do more to recruit domestic workers, which included offering them a wage “at or exceeding” the bracero rate, as well as housing suitable for migrant families.823

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822 Goodwin to Montoya, February 28, 1958, Box 25 Folder 9: Labor: Committee Correspondence—General, Jan-April 1958, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
823 Goodwin to Miera, February 28, 1958, Box 25 Folder 9: Labor: Committee Correspondence—General, Jan-April 1958, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
California, the message trickled down to growers through the state Department of Employment’s Farm Placement Service. On the first day of its pre-harvest-season annual meeting, the service invited grower association managers to attend so it could tell them, “we shall of necessity depend on the employer and his association managers to do more on their own behalf to recruit and use domestic workers.”\textsuperscript{824} And even though the NAWU continued to be frustrated by growers’ token hiring of domestic farmworkers, the Department of Labor’s legal division claimed it was making “the investigation of all complaints in which it is alleged employers have failed to hire domestics” a “top priority.”\textsuperscript{825}

As they promoted the recruitment of domestic farmworkers, department administrators began making adjustments to procedures governing braceros’ wages. Addressing long-standing union grievances about prevailing wage determinations, the Labor Department issued a new ruling effective September 1958 that sought to reduce braceros’ adverse effect on domestic farmworker earnings. Prior to the ruling, the prevailing wage followed a “two-thirds rule.” According to this formula, whatever wage was paid to two-thirds or more of an area’s domestic labor supply became the prevailing wage.\textsuperscript{826} Under the new ruling, the prevailing wage would be the wage received by the greatest number of domestic farmworkers if they accounted for 40% or more of the surveyed population. If that wage failed to cover 40% of workers, the department would begin at the bottom of the range and move upward until 51% of workers were included, with the highest wage in the 51% becoming the floor of the prevailing wage range. Officials hoped the new formula would boost bracero rates and reduce adverse effects by making it easier...


\textsuperscript{826} Craig, 152.
for the Labor Department to standardize the higher wages paid to a smaller proportion of workers.  

At the same time, officials instituted a new policy for braceros working at piece rates. The international agreement stipulated that braceros should not earn less than 50¢ per hour, but where they were employed at piece rates, they often failed to meet this minimum hourly wage. As a result, the department issued a “90-10 formula,” which required that where fewer than 90% of braceros averaged 50¢ per hour, employers would have to raise piece rates accordingly. In an effort to preempt grower complaints, Goodwin was careful to note, “no individual worker is guaranteed 50 cents by the policy. He will earn more if he works harder and more effectively. He will earn less if he slows down or loaf.” Thus, officials could ensure better enforcement of the international agreement while they upheld “the traditional piece rate processes in agriculture.”

The Department of Labor complemented its new rulings by continuing the enforcement drive it had launched the previous year. In Bureau of Employment Security Region X, officials continued the housing inspections (albeit at a slower pace), launched a compliance tour of bracero feeding facilities, slightly increased bracero complaint investigations, and massively expanded payroll inspections. Overall, compliance activities had increased 49% over 1957 in the region (See Table 5.4).

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828 Craig, 152-53.
830 Goodwin to Lyndon Johnson, July 25, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 5 of 5.

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Predictably, growers denounced the Department of Labor as union-dominated. The department’s new measures not only encroached on their managerial rights; they also reached into growers’ self-governance. New regulations stipulated that bracero-contracting associations had to hold annual elections to choose no fewer than five directors if the association wished to continue hiring braceros.832 For growers, all these rules were simply too much. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson (who had braceros working on some of his property) received a flood of letters and telegrams from growers and ranchers in his state, most of which were coordinated by the Texas Farm Bureau Federation.833 Clearly organized labor was “putting on the heat to the Labor Department bosses to pour it on Texas farmers and ranchers,” one wrote.834 Another declared, “I think some of the little egg head caesars [sic] in Washington should have their heads

833 Johnson received a flood of telegrams with identical language on April 15, 1958, suggesting that the Farm Bureau coordinated the campaign through its county affiliates. Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 1 of 5.
834 C.E. McCormick to Johnson, April 19, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 1 of 5.
examined.” “Civil Service workers have irritated the taxpayers long enough,” he wrote. Still another found it absurd that unions “actually want our farmers” to provide “hot and cold water [and] modern toilet facilities.” And a retired army colonel laid the blame back at the feet of President Truman, who had signed the international agreement and Public Law 78 back in 1951. Truman’s “evil political thinking” led him to delegate “the power for the American participation in this agreement to the Depart. of Labor and representatives of American Labor.”

In addition to their charge that unions ruled the Department of Labor, growers renewed their decades-old argument that Americans simply would not do the work. One telegraphed Johnson that he had just come from the local employment office, where “two able-bodied men [were] sitting in [the] office refus[ing] to work on farm, due to laziness.” Another lamented that growers were “required to even go out of the state in search of labor before he could be certified for braceros.” He argued it was much cheaper and easier to hire braceros who actually wanted to do the work. Similarly, a Doña Ana County, New Mexico grower was upset after following Goodwin’s advice to Montoya about domestic farmworker availability in the Mississippi River Valley. His association had hired twenty-four men from Missouri, but after ten days only half were left, though “one may be bak [sic] on the job if he is out of jail.”

835 Roy Perkins to Johnson, May 9, 1958 and May 22, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 1 of 5.
836 D.E. Denney to Johnson, April 28, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 3 of 5.
838 Harley Bryant to Johnson, April 22, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 1 of 5.
839 Joe Sooter, Pres Bailey Co Farm Bureau to Johnson, telegram, April 19, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 2 of 5.
840 Raymond Worrell to Joseph Montoya, May 26, 1958, Box 25, Folder 10: Labor: Committee Correspondence—General, May-June 1958, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
part, Congressman Montoya declared that there was “no logic, rhyme or reason for this imposed condition” on the county’s cotton growers.  

Despite growers’ loud protestations, Department of Labor officials refused to budge. Even a Johnson-led meeting of the entire Texas congressional delegation with Secretary of Labor Mitchell failed to bring more than a promise of “further review” and reassurances that the department had “no intention of imposing unworkable procedures.” It appeared the Johnson Treatment was no match for Secretary Mitchell’s commitment to improve farmworkers’ conditions. The Labor Department was unwilling to soften its new regulations because it could not afford to be seen as backsliding on its commitments to reform the Bracero Program. The “Strangers in Our Fields” report and the resulting negative publicity surrounding the department’s housing inspection tour meant that officials had to push forward regardless of how strenuously growers objected.

Out in California, Galarza tried to keep the heat on the department, taking the opportunity presented by lack of organizing funds to work the publicity angle, as he had in 1956. This time, he focused on exposing collusion between California growers, state farm placement officials, and Bureau of Employment Region X Director Glenn Brockway. Brockway had established a “Foreign Labor Operations Advisory Committee” in Region X in 1954 “as a means of securing collective advice from a representative group of growers and employers.” Labor was completely locked out from the committee. At its first meeting, Brockway told the assembled grower representatives that it was his view that a similar committee composed of labor representatives “would not be purposeful” because “their interest is not believed to extend to

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841 Montoya to Worrell, April 19, 1958, Box 25, Folder 10: Labor: Committee Correspondence—General, Jan-April 1958, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
842 Johnson to Chas De Stefano and Don Angonio, May 29, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1958, Box 605, Folder LABOR, Mexican Labor 1 of 5.
operational considerations” of the Bracero Program. Minutes from the committee’s meetings reveal that members concerned themselves with eliminating any chance of negative publicity, thus enabling growers and administrators to operate more smoothly. For instance, in early 1955, the committee worked to assemble data showing that bracero “skips”—those who “skipped out” on their contracts and became undocumented immigrants—usually returned to Mexico. This data could be presented to the public in case the high percentage of 1954 skips was discovered by the public.

The committee held sixteen such “collective advice” meetings between November 1954 and October 1957. Galarza found out about them when he came to the defense of William Renner. Renner was a Bureau of Employment Security compliance official who had taken his job a little too seriously for growers’ tastes, and they pressured Brockway to fire him. Brockway did just that, dismissing him for failing “to maintain and carry on satisfactory relations with the state officials and members of the public.” Upon his firing, Renner handed Galarza the committee meeting minutes, which he had collected at the regional office. Galarza contacted Congressman John Shelley of California, who was friendly to labor. Shelley pressed Robert Goodwin to release the minutes, but he deferred to Brockway, who eventually handed them over given the pressure. The congressman then gave them to Galarza and H. L. Mitchell, who

844 Regional Foreign Labor Operations Advisory Committee, Meeting No. 1, November 9, 1954, Galarza Papers, Box 12, Folder 7: Regional Foreign Labor Operations Advisory Committee, correspondence, minutes, notes, 1954-1960.
845 At the January meeting of the committee, Brockway noted that in 1954, the “skip” rate in Arizona was more than 22%, while in California it exceeded 16%. Regional Foreign Labor Operations Advisory Committee, Meeting No. 2 Minutes, January 13, 1955; Meeting No. 3 Minutes, March 11, 1955, File “Bureau of Employment Security, For. Lab. Operations Advis. Com., 1954-58 [1 of 4], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 2, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
847 Shelley to Goodwin, February 25, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
issued press releases. By the fall of 1958, with accusations of collusion flying, Brockway wrote his grower associates to tell them “the Committee is abolished.”

*Forcing Labor’s Hand*

Still, efforts to reform the Bracero Program and root out grower-administrator collusion failed to get at the heart of domestic farmworkers’ problems—their inability to organize into unions to challenge their employers. That would require the AFL-CIO to make good on its continually deferred promises of an organizing campaign. NAWU leaders had entreated all they could and gotten nowhere in four years. Now, they and their friends prepared for one final push designed to both raise national awareness of farmworkers’ plight and force the nation’s labor leaders into action.

Seeking to build on the success of its 1957 conference on migratory labor, the National Sharecroppers Fund decided to establish a blue-ribbon National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor in 1958. Mitchell was enthusiastic about the idea. “A big name group may well attract more attention,” he wrote to Galarza, “It’s the public attention attracted by the press that gets results.” By early spring, Fay Bennett had secured commitments to serve on the Advisory Committee from Archbishop Robert E. Lucey; Princeton Theological Seminary Dean Dr. John Mackay; Msgr. George Higgins, director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference’s Department of Social Action; and Rabbi Eugene Lipman, director of a similar department for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Among the prominent liberals on the committee were Tuskegee Institute president Dr. L. H. Foster, the recently retired liberal New York senator Herbert Lehman, Eleanor Roosevelt, and six-time Socialist Party presidential candidate and the

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849 Mitchell to Galarza, March 18, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
man who first suggested forming a sharecroppers union in the New Deal South, Norman Thomas.\textsuperscript{850}

With its star-studded lineup, the National Sharecroppers Fund announced the Advisory Committee’s formation on October 20, 1958. Sharecroppers Fund Director Frank Graham and A. Philip Randolph made the announcement, noting that the committee would hold hearings in Washington D.C. in February 1959. “Responsible government and other expert witnesses will be invited to report” on farmworker problems and conditions, the two men said. The announcement concluded by upholding the Advisory’s Committee’s purpose “to assemble and evaluate…the extent to which the agricultural economy of the United States is dependent upon the inefficient use and low standard of living of farm labor, both domestic and foreign, and to formulate a program to the end that the farm worker…achieve his full share of participation in the American standard of living.”\textsuperscript{851}

By November the Advisory Committee was already achieving some of its intended effects. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers had already pledged $10,000 for the committee, and Mitchell expected the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department to contribute a large amount, even if “these damn union officials…won’t give a dime to help organize a union of farm workers.”\textsuperscript{852} But Mitchell was wrong on this last point. The committee’s formation had finally prompted some action on the long-awaited organizing campaign. On November 10, Walter Reuther wrote to George Meany to tell him that although farmworker organizing efforts had so far not been “notably successful,” he believed “a climate of opinion and a national awareness could be created at this time which would make an organizing campaign practicable and effective.” He asked Meany to place the

\textsuperscript{850} Fay Bennett to William L. Batt, Jr., April 21, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\textsuperscript{851} National Sharecroppers Fund, Press release, October 20, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
\textsuperscript{852} Mitchell to Galarza, November 10, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
organizing proposal on the next Executive Council agenda. “The moment is at hand,” he wrote.853

Little more than a week before Reuther wrote to Meany, Mitchell remained unconvinced a campaign was forthcoming. NAWU’s president sent George Meany a letter at the end of October requesting AFL-CIO Executive Council consideration of a memorandum outlining a major organizing campaign.854 In it, he signaled a willingness to cooperate with the hated UPWA in exchange for a commitment of $100,000 annually over at least two years.855 Mitchell was willing to do almost anything to secure an organizing campaign, worried as he was about his union’s financial solvency. By November, he felt compelled to ask the National Sharecroppers Fund if it could spare any money from its upcoming Advisory Committee conference preparations to help the union, which had not paid salaries to its bare-bones staff in almost four months.856 He also wrote Walter Reuther to sound him out on his proposal, asking, “Shall we just give up AFL-CIO as hopeless and dissolve our Union?”857 In his frustration, he vented to his friend Galarza, writing, “We are and always have been the stepchildren of Labor or at best its poor relations.”858 While they waited for an answer, the two men prepared for the worst.

Thankfully, they did not have to wait long for a pleasant surprise. Publicity surrounding the Advisory Committee conference prompted the nation’s labor leaders to move forward.859 Reuther responded to Mitchell’s letter with a small donation to keep NAWU afloat and some reassurances about the future. He told Mitchell that Meany had responded favorably to Reuther’s prodding, and he wanted to hold a January conference with AFL-CIO officers on agricultural

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853 Reuther to Meany, November 10, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
854 Mitchell to Meany, October 24, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 41.
855 Mitchell to AFL-CIO Executive Council, Memorandum: An Application for Assistance in Organizing Agricultural Workers in California, October 24, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 41.
856 Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November 3, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
857 Mitchell to Reuther, November 17, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
858 Mitchell to Galarza, November 19, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
859 Mitchell to Galarza, December 10, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
workers. In addition, Mitchell’s organizing proposal had been placed on the agenda of the AFL-CIO’s next Executive Council meeting.\footnote{Reuther to Mitchell, December 2, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.}

On January 8, 1959, Meany, Reuther, Mitchell, A. Philip Randolph, and the Amalgamated’s Leon Schachter gathered to discuss the problem of American agricultural workers. According to Mitchell’s account of the meeting, Randolph and Reuther pressed Meany to support a campaign. Randolph noted the growing public calls for reform among “leaders of all religious faiths, a large number of civic organizations, and many outstanding citizens,” all of whom looked “to organized labor for leadership.” When Meany countered that the NAWU had received AFL assistance in the past without getting results and that expensive legal battles could result from organizing workers not covered by national labor law, Reuther elevated the discussion.\footnote{Meany may have been thinking of the Taft-Hartley injunction against the NFLU during the Di Giorgio strike. Should agricultural employers try to use injunctions against farmworker unionization drives, the AFL-CIO would be drawn into lengthy and costly legal battles as both sides attempted to use the courts to establish new precedents, or tie each other up in procedural legalisms.}

The AFL-CIO had “a moral obligation” to take up the problem and “help solve it.” Meany then asked about UPWA’s role in such a drive, revealing some trepidation about CIO power in his barely three-year-old federation. Reuther assured him they should be consulted, but were fairly marginal in the field. Satisfied, Meany asked for a more complete organizing draft for the Executive Council to consider.\footnote{Mitchell, Memorandum: Conference with AFL-CIO Officers on Agricultural Workers, January 8, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.}

However, before the Executive Council even met, the AFL-CIO found itself forced to announce its support of an organizing campaign given the attention the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor’s February conference gave to farmworker conditions. The Advisory Committee held its hearings February 5 and 6, 1959. In a moment that demonstrated the synergy of labor, the reform coalition, and the Department of Labor, the committee heard testimony from
government officials (including Secretary of Labor Mitchell), relief organizations, growers associations, the NAWU, and farmworkers themselves. The hearings highlighted migrant poverty, poor working conditions, the plight of farmworkers’ children, and the Bracero Program’s effects on domestic farmworkers. Although growers protested that they needed the Bracero Program because “American citizens avoid such work if they possibly can,” the Advisory Committee found that braceros “are legally in a superior position to citizen workers.” H.L. Mitchell characterized the working conditions of the people his union represented as “blue sky sweatshops.” Farmworker testimony verified domestic workers’ displacement, and Secretary Mitchell called migrant children’s poor education access “the ugliest kind of human waste.” Calling for reform, he declared, “the migrant farm worker will never take his place as a fully useful citizen” until “Federal legislation guarantees him a decent minimum wage.” At the end of its two days of hearings, the Advisory Committee recommended expanding bracero protections to all domestic workers; extending the National Labor Relations Act, Fair Labor Standards Act, and Social Security Act to farmworkers; federal aid for states to improve migrant housing, health, and welfare services; education and child care for migrant children; and a congressional investigation of Public Law 78.863

Mitchell and Galarza had heard all this before; indeed, they had been saying it for years. They heard something new, though, when William Schnitzler gave his speech to the Advisory Committee. The AFL-CIO was clearly on the defensive at the conference. NAWU testimony reiterated the fact that their union had been laboring in California on a shoestring budget against the combined power of a labor importation scheme and organized agricultural capital. Indeed,

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863 National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, “Report on Farm Labor: Public Hearings of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor,” February 5-6, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
part of the rationale for the Advisory Committee itself was to press the AFL-CIO to make its intentions on farmworker clear. Now, the task of articulating AFL-CIO policy fell to Schnitzler.

Schnitzler defended the labor movement’s record on farmworkers and seized the opportunity to show reformers that the nation’s labor movement cared. In fact, Schnitzler tried to show that it had always cared; despite the reality of meager and mercurial support over the years, he claimed that NAWU “would never have been able to survive except for the assistance” of the AFL-CIO and its member unions. He called farmworker conditions “pitifully substandard.” Corporate farms “have a powerful lobby,” he said.” If labor expected to make any headway, “we will have to push uphill and push with everything we’ve got.” So far, the AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer had offered the usual platitudes. But it appeared that at long last, the nation’s labor leaders had sorted out their differences over the matter. “I am happy to report,” Schnitzler declared triumphantly, “we have formulated a program for an organizational campaign among workers employed on the large corporate farms.” According to the AFL-CIO, change was on the way.

**Conclusion: The Reform Coalition United against the Bracero Program**

Between 1955 and early 1959, the NAWU struggled mightily for both an AFL-CIO commitment to an organizing campaign for the nation’s farmworkers and significant reform in the Bracero Program. For almost all of the period, it appeared they would only be successful at the latter. “Strangers in Our Fields” had exposed the serious violations in the Department of Labor’s administration of the program and gave ammunition to reformers beyond the labor movement who sought to improve farmworker conditions. As those reformers began to coalesce around a campaign against the Bracero Program, they pressured the Department of Labor, and in return the department—led by the reform-oriented James Mitchell—launched a new compliance

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864 AFL-CIO, Press release, February 6, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
drive that extended to housing, wages, and even the interstate recruitment of domestic farmworkers. Despite growers’ complaints, the department continued its efforts confident that the public attention simultaneously was trained on it while providing cover for administrative reform. The efforts of the union, reformers, and department officials were thus mutually reinforcing. NAWU-driven publicity gave Secretary Mitchell some of the cover he needed to enact his reform by helping to create and embolden a growing anti-bracero reform coalition.

A push by the NAWU and its leaders lay at the heart of this process. The union’s organizing failures in the past had shown that traditional union drives in the fields would be ineffective without broader attention focused against the Bracero Program that prevented any organizing successes. That attention would reorient farmworker reform efforts toward an increasingly vocal assault on the program and toward pressuring the AFL-CIO to act. As Galarza later wrote, “the liberal conscience was stirring and it found operation” in the Advisory Committee. With its array of prominent liberals, religious, and civil rights leaders, the committee’s hearings highlighted farmworkers’ abysmal living and working conditions and underscored the Bracero Program’s influence on them. Ultimately, the committee’s distillation of liberal opposition thrust AFL-CIO vacillation into the spotlight and forced the labor federation to move on the NAWU’s proposals. At long last, the labor movement had offered a vocal commitment before a high-power assemblage of citizens to “zip open those money bags” for the nation’s poorest people. As the money began to flow, however, it soon became apparent that it would take more than an organizing campaign based in the traditional labor movement to change the course of farmworker unionism.
Chapter 6: The Rise of AWOC, the Fall of NAWU, and the End of the Bracero Program, 1959-1964

Between 1959 and 1964, NAWU’s ongoing efforts against the Bracero Program finally bore fruit. The union’s activism and publicity on the Bracero Program had helped create the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, which focused the reform coalition’s efforts and ultimately pushed the AFL-CIO to commit to organizing farmworkers, a commitment that would be embodied in the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). At long last, it appeared that the nation’s labor movement would do something for farmworkers by putting the combined clout of a merged labor federation behind an effort to expand the ranks of labor to the nation’s poorest workers. Through its research, lobbying, and prodding, NAWU had been responsible for much of this development, and AWOC’s formation was a real victory for Mitchell’s and Galarza’s union. However, that victory proved short-lived. NAWU was forced to disband as the labor movement’s internal politics militated against it, and the new AWOC stumbled in the field because of inexperienced leadership, inconsistent support from the AFL-CIO, and the magnitude of the task before it. It limped along weakly until its eventual merger with Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers. The merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 had produced a labor movement more interested in consolidation than expansion.\footnote{Robert Zieger, \textit{The CIO, 1935-1955} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 296.} The future of organizing belonged to new movements with different strategies.\footnote{For example, the Chicano movement helped to produce Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers, which enjoyed more success in fighting for farmworkers through consumer boycotts rather than more traditional labor organizing campaigns and strikes.}

Despite the destruction of the NAWU and the failures of the AWOC project, Mitchell and Galarza still succeeded. The seeming impossibility of their organizing mandate in the face of the Bracero Program combined with their meager financial resources had led them to try a
different approach. Using Galarza’s research and NAWU’s connections among unionists, liberals, Mexican American activists, and religious reformers, Mitchell had helped pull together the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor. Indeed, it was the Advisory Committee’s 1959 conference that pressured AFL-CIO leaders to act on the farmworker question in the first place. More importantly, though, the committee’s formation stood as evidence of an expanding and increasingly vocal reform coalition dedicated to improving farmworker conditions and eliminating the Bracero Program.

Emboldened by the Department of Labor’s 1957 and 1958 enforcement drives and spurred on by labor leaders’ actions on farmworkers, that reform coalition continued to demand changes to the Bracero Program. As the Eisenhower Administration drew to a close, Secretary of Labor James Mitchell responded by further pressing growers on the bracero issue through expanded regulation of their use of Mexican guestworkers, using the program as a lever to improve farmworkers’ wages and employment conditions. By 1960, the farmworker question had become a national one, with exposés of agricultural labor conditions and labor unrest in California fields illustrating the need for reform. In this context, the fight over the Bracero Program erupted in Congress. The election of John F. Kennedy Administration in 1960 only strengthened the reformer-grower antipathy, with the former pushing for outright termination and the latter demanding a return to the old status quo. However, the new liberal political climate of the 1960s extended to farmworker reform, and growers ultimately lost their biggest guestworker program. Agricultural strikes, the reform coalition, and above all the elevation of the farmworker problem into a national issue finally fractured farm bloc support for the program and enabled congressional opponents to end the Bracero Program.
The Creation of AWOC and the Destruction of NAWU

After years of lobbying the AFL-CIO to commit to farmworkers, the NAWU seemed to have succeeded when the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor (Advisory Committee) hearings in February 1959 forced the AFL-CIO to announce an organizing campaign in advance of the Executive Council plan’s to discuss one. Obviously NAWU leaders hoped they would have an important and immediate role to play in the coming campaign, but once again the union was forced to wait. Although it had been a consistent voice in the wilderness for farmworkers’ rights, and although the Advisory Committee was a byproduct of the union’s almost twenty-five years of activism, questions about the strength of the NAWU’s position emerged instantly.\(^{867}\)

Just a few days after the AFL-CIO announcement, Mitchell reported to National Sharecroppers Fund Secretary Fay Bennett, “No funds will be channeled to or through the Union as such.” Instead, the labor movement’s leaders insisted upon a large organizing committee that would spearhead a drive in the California fields.\(^{868}\) Galarza thought such a “traditional” committee would be ill suited to the task at hand, since “there is nothing traditional about the situation we face out here.”\(^{869}\)

In late February, the AFL-CIO Executive Council approved the organizing committee, but AFL-CIO politics led to foot-dragging. Although A. Philip Randolph told Fay Bennett that the “top leadership” was “most enthusiastic,” and that “the Union [NAWU] would not be left out,” by late March the AFL-CIO had not acted.\(^{870}\) On one hand, Meany’s suspicions of Walter Reuther’s motives gave him pause. Mitchell had concluded that when it came to the AFL-CIO

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\(^{867}\) The National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor grew out of efforts of NAWU and the National Sharecroppers Fund, which had been established during the New Deal as a fundraising arm for the old Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

\(^{868}\) Mitchell to Bennett, February 10, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.

\(^{869}\) Galarza to Mitchell, January 5, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.

\(^{870}\) Bennett to Mitchell, February 26, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
and farmworkers, “Meany isn’t calling the shots.” Reuther “can when he wants push him into agreeing to what Walter wants,” he reported.\(^{871}\) This probably caused Meany to proceed with caution. On the other hand, Meany had no affection for NAWU. Reuther reported that although he had “been nudging George Meany to create the special committee,” the AFL-CIO president “was most emphatic in saying” that funds would not be used to pay NAWU salaries.\(^{872}\) But even Reuther seemed to be playing politics. He had secured the promise of an organizing drive, but refused NAWU’s requests for a $25,000 Industrial Union Department grant lest he anger Meany and risk cancellation of the whole campaign.\(^{873}\)

Meany made good on his commitment as winter turned to spring, choosing former United Auto Workers organizer Norman Smith (reflecting Reuther’s influence) to head a new Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) with an annual budget of $100,000.\(^{874}\) Since NAWU had a special familiarity with the California situation, Meany allowed Galarza to serve as Smith’s assistant, and permitted AWOC’s hiring of NAWU-trained rank-and-file leaders like DeWitt Tannehill as AWOC organizers.\(^{875}\) When organization started, farmworkers were to pay a $2 initiation fee, with half going to NAWU and the other half to AWOC. Once organized into solid locals by AWOC, they would be turned over to NAWU control.\(^{876}\) At the same time, AWOC would organize packinghouse workers near the farms into UPWA locals, thus coordinating the activities of the NAWU and UPWA while building both unions. The AFL-CIO followed these decisions with a position paper outlining planned efforts to enforce existing laws governing farmworker conditions, enact new protective legislation, draw on new bodies like the

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\(^{871}\) Mitchell to Galarza, January 8, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\(^{872}\) Reuther to Mitchell, March 11, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\(^{873}\) Mitchell to Galarza, March 16, 1959; Mitchell to Reuther, March 16, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\(^{874}\) Mitchell to Bennett, April 2, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\(^{875}\) Mitchell to Galarza, April 3, 1959; Norman Smith to Mitchell, May 21, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\(^{876}\) Mitchell to Galarza, April 3, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
Advisory Committee to mobilize public opinion, and help farmworkers organize through the AWOC.\textsuperscript{877}

Despite the seemingly clear instructions, NAWU leaders continued to be confused about their union’s relationship with AWOC. Galarza thought he and Smith would be able to work together, but worried that “we both need to know just how the machinery of the campaign works.” He was particularly worried about the question of “how the Organizing Committee assists us without absorbing us,” especially since he saw his role as NAWU secretary diminishing while “that of assistant to Smith increases.”\textsuperscript{878} Mitchell told Galarza to do what he could to retain NAWU autonomy in his new role lest the hated UPWA swoop in with “superior forces…when workers are organized.”\textsuperscript{879}

As preliminary organizing began in the summer, jurisdictional concerns took a back seat to the organizing job at hand. Smith and Mitchell began a regular correspondence in an attempt to stay on the same page. AWOC began holding mass meetings among farmworkers to drum up interest, and Smith noted the reactivated NAWU locals were helpful in turning out numbers in Fresno, Gilroy, Hollister, Modesto, and San Jose. Old NAWU members were also instrumental in collecting dues from the newly initiated.\textsuperscript{880} Overall, Smith was certain that “we can begin to get a substantial union membership in a short time.”\textsuperscript{881} Revealing the cooperation, Smith told Mitchell that as new locals formed under AWOC, Galarza was forming special committees in each that would submit reports “directly to you.”\textsuperscript{882}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[878] Galarza to Mitchell, May 18, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\item[879] Mitchell to Galarza, May 21, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\item[880] Smith to Mitchell, June 9, 1959; Smith to Mitchell, June 15, 1959; Smith to Mitchell, June 22, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\item[881] Smith to Mitchell, June 11, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\item[882] Smith to Mitchell, July 6, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
\end{footnotes}
involved seemed genuine. Referring to new locals, he told Mitchell, “I want them to become active participants of the National Union,” not of an independent AWOC.  

Even with Smith’s good intentions and reassurances, it soon became clear that the NAWU’s position in AWOC was ambiguous at best. Galarza found plenty of cause for concern in his dual role as Smith’s assistant and NAWU secretary. He wrote to Mitchell in July to tell him that while Smith was willing to split dues between AWOC and NAWU where old locals had been reactivated, the dues from new groups would be impounded in a separate AWOC fund. This decision contradicted what Smith had told Mitchell one month earlier. Furthermore, Galarza noted that as Smith hired organizers to the AWOC staff, he only gave them AWOC credentials, and Galarza saw no way to “issue [NAWU] credentials to men Smithy is hiring.” Overall, Galarza worried that Mitchell and NAWU risked being replaced by AWOC. “You should assert your presidential prerogatives,” he told his friend.

Mitchell sought some clarification from Smith, but there was little he could do to control the AWOC chief without moving to California, where Galarza was the union’s point man. For over a decade Mitchell had operated out of a small office in Washington, D.C. where he lobbied federal bureaucrats, labor leaders, and donors on behalf of his union. Perhaps he had become a creature of Washington, or perhaps he realized he had little chance of controlling Walter Reuther’s handpicked lieutenant in charge of AWOC. Whatever the reason, the Mitchell chose to stay put. “We will have to depend on correspondence,” he wrote to Smith, warning that it was imperative for AWOC gains to be “reflected in the existing structure of the National Union if it is to be preserved.” Privately, Mitchell worried that “old CIO methods” were being applied in  

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883 Smith to Mitchell, July 24, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
884 Galarza to Mitchell, July 13, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
885 Galarza to Mitchell, July 14, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
886 Mitchell to Smith, July 20, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
AWOC, which threatened to replace the NAWU with a new union. Nevertheless, Mitchell consoled himself with the belief that as long as Smith was “on the level with us, we ought not be too concerned.”

Galarza was not convinced, and he continued to warn about the materializing risks that AWOC posed to the NAWU. His reports to Mitchell grew deeply pessimistic. “I am not equal to doing my share in the campaign and consolidating a union structure at the same time,” he wrote; “we have literally turned over our organizational structure to the AWOC.” Galarza tried to convince Mitchell to move to California so he could “get into this battle so you keep up with it, keep your place in it and give it what resources you have.” Mitchell still resisted, even after he admitted to Galarza that Norman Smith had stopped sending him updates. Illustrating his ignorance, he reported that he had only learned of AWOC’s organization of 300 dues-paying members when AFL-CIO Organizing Director Jack Livingston told him about it. Mitchell simply capitulated, telling Galarza, “I can’t see how anything I decide will have any effect out there.”

The defeatist tone was almost too much for Galarza. “The NAWU as an entity, or even as a voice, has ceased to exist in California,” he replied.

The confusion and bad feelings only worsened as summer turned to fall, fed in part by Galarza and Mitchell’s concerns about UPWA’s increasing importance in the campaign. After Galarza and Smith had a falling out over Galarza’s assertion that the union had “simply declined out of existence,” Mitchell tried to smooth things over. The AWOC director wanted “to build a union of farmworkers” regardless of “whether they become members of NAWU, UPWA,” or

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887 Mitchell to Galarza, July 24, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
888 Galarza to Mitchell, August 5, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
889 Galarza to Mitchell, August 11, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
890 Mitchell to Galarza, August 27, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 42.
891 Galarza to Mitchell, September 9, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
892 Galarza to Mitchell, October 1, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
something else, Mitchell wrote. He told his friend that he had no choice but to stay on with
AWOC if he wanted to prevent AWOC’s UPWA organizers—“those two commie bastards,” he
called them—from taking over.\textsuperscript{893}

*Destroying NAWU*

Galarza later wrote about the process of the NAWU’s marginalization. Although he was
Smith’s assistant in name, by late 1959 Galarza found himself sidelined and his advice ignored.
Smith instead surrounded himself with UPWA-allied men. Louis Krainok, an old UPWA hand
and AWOC’s head of public relations, took an increasingly active role in advising Smith on
organizing strategies. Instead of the NAWU’s careful, quiet, painstaking organizing, Krainok
convinced Smith to form “flying squads of pickets” who could strike in “quick sortie[s].”\textsuperscript{894} While
sometimes successful, these actions also prompted growers to begin organizing against
AWOC.\textsuperscript{895} By the fall Smith began bypassing Galarza altogether, leaving him bitter. Galarza
later recounted the dissolution of existing NAWU locals and their absorption into new AWOC
locals, the printing of AWOC membership cards, the impoundment of NAWU dues, and the
dropping of the NAWU’s trained volunteer organizers. Soon, Smith and Krainok held staff
meetings without Galarza. Smith also cut Galarza out of meetings with regional Department of
Labor and California Farm Placement Service officials responsible for certifying braceros and
clearing domestic farmworkers for placement, apparently at these officials’ requests.\textsuperscript{896}

Galarza had had enough. “By the end of September [1959] Smith and I were antagonists
rather than collaborators,” he later wrote. He met with Smith to denounce his flying squads,

\textsuperscript{893} One of whom was Lou Krainok. The other appears to have been an UPWA organizer hired by Smith. Mitchell to
Galarza, October 3, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.

\textsuperscript{894} Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 326-327.

\textsuperscript{895} Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 327.

\textsuperscript{896} Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 328; Galarza to Mitchell, August 24, 1959, STFU
Papers, reel 42.
formed from the inhabitants of “skid row.” These most transient of farmworkers could never form the basis of a lasting union, he thought. Instead, AWOC should pursue organization among the most stable members of farmworker communities, the approach Galarza had pursued for a decade. Above all, though, it was Smith’s cooperative stance toward state and federal officials that Galarza could not stomach. As long as “the bracero system flooded the state the weakest link” and best point of attack was the bureaucracy supplying them to growers. According to Galarza, Smith responded by saying “Ernie,…you have to accept [officials] as they are and try to survive under the conditions they lay down for you.”

This was too much to swallow; after all, Galarza had made some of his greatest strides against the Bracero Program by publicly attacking the administration of the program by these very officials. In a formal letter to Smith, he pronounced the NAWU dead. As for the future, he claimed that AWOC-organized farmworkers “will become a part of the structure of the Packinghouse Workers Union,” something he could not accept. He was even more direct with Mitchell. “The price of AFL-CIO support is the deterioration of the NAWU,” he wrote; “they are herding us into UPWA.”

Given the recent turn of events, Mitchell penned a long letter at Smith’s request laying bare NAWU’s institutional concerns about AWOC and UPWA. The NAWU had just celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its predecessor, the STFU, and it was beginning to look like the movement that was born in Arkansas cotton fields and traveled to California with the migrant workers after World War II would not last another year. The facts seemed to substantiate Galarza’s charges that the NAWU was being replaced. AWOC had hired the “academic” Henry

897 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 327-328.
898 Galarza, Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 329.
899 Galarza to Smith, October 14, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
900 Galarza to Mitchell, October 24, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
Anderson as research and education director instead of giving the post to Galarza, with his “outstanding” track record in this area.\textsuperscript{901} Anderson, a research sociologist, had recently been dismissed from the University of California-Berkeley following grower opposition to his graduate work on braceros’ health.\textsuperscript{902} Furthermore, AWOC had absorbed the officers of NAWU locals and placed them on AWOC’s paid staff, and union dues “were being held in a special fund.”\textsuperscript{903}

Ultimately, the real concern was UPWA’s growing influence. Mitchell acknowledged that AWOC had been formed to organize both agricultural and allied workers, and that NAWU officers understood AWOC’s purpose was also to help build UPWA. That had been the basis for the two unions’ agreement to cooperate on the campaign. Still, it seemed undeniable that the NAWU’s position had declined in this arrangement. Mitchell pointed to Smith’s hiring of Krainok to head AWOC’s public relations, despite the NAWU president’s “reservations about him.” Taken as a whole, Galarza seemed to be right. “A new structure is being built,” Mitchell agreed. He closed by asking for some clarification and noting that any mergers would only take place with the ratification of the union’s members.\textsuperscript{904}

In a last ditch effort to save his union, Mitchell called upon AFL-CIO officers “to clarify the relation” of AWOC, NAWU, and UPWA.\textsuperscript{905} Believing that AWOC had already absorbed the

\textsuperscript{901} Mitchell to Smith, October 23, 1959, Collections of the United Farm Workers of America, Papers of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, 1959-1966 (Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media, Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), microfilm, reel 4.
\textsuperscript{902} Anderson worked on his research project from 1956 until 1958. The final product, a 750-page study titled “The Bracero Program in California: With Particular Reference to Health Status, Attitudes and Practices,” came under scrutiny by the university and his advisory committee after growers alerted officials of the California Farm Bureau, California Department of Employment, and regional Department of Labor to Anderson’s field investigations. The university allowed him to produce a 326-page censored version of the report, which the university never had bound, and the original and uncensored report on deposit with his department was incinerated. For more on Henry Anderson’s experience at the University of California, see Gonzalez, 113-141.
\textsuperscript{903} Mitchell to Smith, October 23, 1959, AWOC Papers, reel 4.
\textsuperscript{904} Mitchell to Smith, October 23, 1959, AWOC Papers, reel 4.
\textsuperscript{905} NAWU, “Statement on AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in California,” October 27, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
NAWU organization in California, he wrote to Walter Reuther asking if the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department would consider giving the union a direct grant to organize farmworkers in the South, but the IUD took no action.\(^{906}\) By December, NAWU leaders began dusting off old plans to merge with the Amalgamated should the need arise.\(^ {907}\) Galarza believed it was already too late. “The big decision about us was made last spring and that was that,” he concluded.\(^ {908}\)

Galarza’s conclusion proved all too true. As 1960 began, the internal politics of the AFL-CIO and the historic ambivalence of national organized labor toward the NAWU created a recipe for the union’s destruction. Walter Reuther, who had not long before seemed friendly to the NAWU, struck first. At a meeting held in the Industrial Union Department office, Reuther and A. Philip Randolph informed Mitchell that AFL-CIO officers had decided his union “should be dissolved and or/merged with the United Packinghouse Workers of America if the AFL-CIO is to continue its current program.” AFL-CIO leadership believed that UPWA’s more stable resources and organization throughout California would translate into a more effective AWOC campaign rather than dividing organization with NAWU. As for the NAWU’s two most important officers, Reuther said Meany thought Mitchell’s talents would be better used in “public relations and lobbying for remedial legislation for the nation’s farm workers,” though Galarza could stay on with AWOC.\(^ {909}\) Afterward, NAWU officers prepared for the worst. Mitchell refused to recommend that NAWU members join UPWA, given the two unions’ past

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\(^{906}\) Mitchell to Reuther, October 29, 1959; Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November 12, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
\(^{908}\) Galarza to Mitchell, December 13, 1959, STFU Papers, reel 43.
\(^{909}\) Mitchell, Memorandum: The Decision of the AFL-CIO Leadership on Agricultural Workers,” January 12, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
jurisdictional feuds and Mitchell’s “questions as to the influence of the Communist Party.”

Instead, Mitchell traveled to Chicago to renew merger talks with the Amalgamated, whose president, Pat Gorman, had already received word from George Meany that unless NAWU went to UPWA quietly, the “AFL-CIO was going to cease its organizing campaign.” Still, Gorman showed some respect for Mitchell, telling him he was willing to consider a future merger if AFL-CIO leaders dropped their opposition.

Meanwhile, Walter Reuther kept the pressure on the NAWU. He dispatched his brother Victor to the union’s February 6 executive board meeting. The younger Reuther scoffed at the union’s hope to merge with the Amalgamated. UPWA had the “know-how and personnel” to organize farmworkers, not the Amalgamated, he said. F.R. Betton disputed that claim. One of the original members of the STFU and the NAWU’s point of contact for aging members in Arkansas, Betton recalled the STFU-UCAPAWA conflict of the 1930s. “Mr. Donald Henderson tried to break it [the STFU] up,” he recalled of the debacle. Given the ongoing animosities over the years, he could not accept that AFL-CIO intended for the union to “go in with that group.” Victor Reuther was unmoved. “It is only through a merger with UPWA that this financial aid from AFL-CIO continues,” he pronounced. Given the stakes and the pressure on it, the executive board passed a resolution recommending that NAWU join a larger union, provided that union was chosen democratically by the membership.

According to Mitchell, Walter Reuther questioned this approach a few weeks later in a meeting with Mitchell, Galarza, and UPWA President Ralph Helstein. Reuther questioned why a membership referendum “would be

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911 Mitchell to Galarza, January 19, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
912 NAWU, Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, February 5-6, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
913 NAWU, Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, February 5-6, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
necessary,” since the union’s officers should be able to “make a final decision without further reference to our members,” Mitchell reported.\footnote{Mitchell, Memorandum Re: Meeting with Walter Reuther, February 25, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.}

Cornered, Mitchell decided to take the dispute directly to George Meany to play one last card; perhaps the AFL-CIO president could be convinced that the Reuthers were maneuvering the CIO bloc for greater power by using AWOC to build UPWA strength. When Mitchell presented Meany with the minutes of the NAWU executive board meeting, Meany found them “almost unbelievable.” Some of Victor Reuther’s statements about AFL-CIO positions were “outright lies and half-truths.” Meany apparently could not believe Victor would make such statements on Walter’s behalf, but Mitchell assured him that the elder Reuther had confirmed those statements at the late February meeting.\footnote{Mitchell, Memorandum Re: Meeting with George Meany, March 3, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.} Apparently convinced that the Reuther brothers were attempting some small coup, Meany threatened to suspend the entire organizing campaign on March 8. Although the threat was not made public, it was serious enough that Norman Smith came to Washington to meet with Mitchell. “Do as Walter wants,” Smith told him, and “let the Union go to Packinghouse.”\footnote{Mitchell to Galarza, March 9, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.}

But even his rivalry with Reuther was not enough to keep Meany in the NAWU camp. The details of the next few months of maneuvering remain unclear, but by May Meany, Reuther, and the rest of the AFL-CIO leadership closed ranks against NAWU. Galarza had denounced Smith’s recent direction and close alliance with UPWA publicly and had left to join the Amalgamated in the early spring of 1960. Mitchell hoped Galarza’s statements might “get Meany aroused” over the Reuther threat again, but Meany now considered Galarza the threat.\footnote{Mitchell to Galarza, May 3, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.} Norman Smith had reported to the AFL-CIO that Galarza was taking his old NAWU locals into
the Amalgamated, and the AFL-CIO Executive Council swooped in to crush the risk of dual unionism. On May 6 Meany called Mitchell to inform him, “The AFL-CIO is spending $100,000 a year in California and we intend to protect our investment from being sabotaged.” The council had revoked NAWU’s charter, Meany reported coldly. “You will be notified officially of the decision,” he said as he hung up.

In the wake of this decision, there was little hope for NAWU survival without it being labeled a dual union in an officially united labor movement. As he rushed to implement the backup plan to merge with the Amalgamated, Mitchell settled on a realization that Reuther had been the problem all along. “It was not George Meany with whom we were having problems, but Walter Reuther,” he wrote to the Amalgamated’s president. By June, the NAWU had conducted a membership referendum on the Amalgamated merger. Out of 3,294 mailed ballots, the union received 1,159 replies, with 96.4% voting for the merger. Now restructured as a semi-autonomous department in the Amalgamated—the Agricultural and Allied Workers Union Local 300—Mitchell’s union vainly protested AWOC’s and UPWA’s jurisdictional claims as the California campaign continued. Frustrated and tired, Galarza left the Amalgamated late in 1960 to advocate for farmworkers and a growing Mexican American movement independent of

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918 Galarza disputed these charges at the time, and later in his book Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 331.
919 Mitchell, Memorandum: Re: Decision of AFL-CIO to Take Away Charter of National Agricultural Workers Union, May 6, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
920 Mitchell to Pat Gorman, May 26, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
921 The final tally was 1,117 in favor, 38 opposed, and 4 void. NAWU, Report of the Executive Board, June 26, 1960; Mitchell to All Local Unions, July 18 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
922 NAWU claimed that because it never agreed to return its charter and with it its jurisdiction over agricultural workers, when it joined the Amalgamated, it transferred its jurisdiction to its new parent union. Eventually, the Amalgamated surrendered its California jurisdictional claims to AWOC. Norman Smith to Mitchell, June 2, 1960; Ralph Helstein to Mitchell, June 6, 1960; Galarza to Mitchell, June 13, 1960; Mitchell to Galarza, June 14, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43; Mitchell to Dewitt Tannehill, October 10, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 1.
organized labor. H.L. Mitchell stayed with the Amalgamated until his retirement from the labor movement in 1972.⁹²³

Thus, the National Agricultural Workers Union’s twenty-seven-year history ended with a whimper. Born as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union during the New Deal, the union survived landlord hostility in the Jim Crow South only to witness the declining importance of sharecropping and the rising migrancy of landless workers in agriculture. Reformulating itself as a National Farm Labor Union and later as the NAWU, the union followed some of the Okies and Arkies west to California, but its efforts to organize stood little chance of success given its weakness and growers’ use and abuse of braceros. Throughout the 1950s, the union helped define and publicize the Bracero Program’s failings and its effects on farmworkers, and by the late 1950s, its efforts had helped produce a growing coalition of liberals and religiously inspired reformers to pressure organized labor for a campaign to organize the nation’s farmworkers. Having survived for so long, and having succeeded in its ultimate goal of convincing the AFL-CIO to commit to farmworkers, the union and its leaders now found themselves cut off from the drive they—more than anything or anyone else—had helped create. The nation’s labor leaders had informed them that the future of organizing belonged to others.

The union was caught in the internal machinations of a labor movement torn between the desire to consolidate labor’s postwar strength and to expand the base of its power through wider organizational campaigns. Reuther’s CIO was half the size of the AFL at the time of the 1955 merger, and it soon became apparent in the following years that his hopes for expansion had been defeated by the forces of consolidation. Given those facts, it should have been no surprise

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⁹²³ Pat Gorman to Mitchell, November 1, 1960; Mitchell to Gorman, November 1, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43. Mitchell eventually returned to the South with his new department in the Amalgamated, enjoying some success organizing sugar cane and rice workers, as well as fishermen. For more, see Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 296-323.
that Reuther tried to use AWOC to shore up the CIO’s position. Indeed, the AWOC effort was one of the few major drives Reuther had secured, hamstrung as he was by George Meany’s consummate business unionism and the chilly relations between the two men. Mitchell’s and Galarza’s protestations about UPWA’s inexperience and their red-bating tactics mattered little in this context, and Reuther—whose rise in the United Auto Workers was achieved through his own battles against Communists—was perfectly willing to undercut fellow anti-Communist Mitchell. Still, the NAWU had succeeded in getting a farmworker commitment out of the labor movement by using its contacts in the liberal, civil rights, and religious reform communities to join together in the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor.

**Bracero Program Reforms Accelerate, 1959-1960**

Although the union had become a victim of its own success, the fight against the Bracero Program that it more than any other organization had helped engender was gathering steam. Emboldened by the Department of Labor’s 1957 and 1958 enforcement drives, and spurred on by labor leaders’ recent actions on farmworkers, farmworker reformers pressed for the continuation and strengthening of efforts to reign in the Bracero Program. These voices came from an increasingly diverse group that included the labor movement, an emergent Mexican American civil rights movement, religious organizations, and liberal reform groups. Together, these groups gave Secretary of Labor James Mitchell the mandate he needed to increase enforcement and expand the department’s regulatory authority. In response, growers denounced what they viewed as new bureaucratic meddling in their affairs.

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924 See Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, for a discussion of these issues. For Reuther’s weakness on the organizing push in the AFL-CIO, see 322-23. For example, as merger talks proceeded, even the Industrial Union Department, which was intended to fund organizational campaigns, saw its proposed funding via a per capita tax on union members slashed by 60%. On the relationship between Meany and Reuther, see 333-35, 353-55, and 366-67. Lichtenstein’s broader discussion of Reuther and the merger occurs in 322-52, which should be paired with Zieger, Chapter 13 for a comprehensive account of the merger and its aftermath.
Union activists continued their calls for improving farmworkers’ conditions, as well as
better enforcement of the Bracero Program’s protective measures. At the 1959 AFL-CIO
convention, the labor movement called upon Congress to end farmworkers’ exclusion from “the
National Labor Relations Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Social Security Act
provisions providing unemployment insurance.” The labor movement also demanded that the
nation become “once again self-sufficient in meeting its agricultural labor needs,” and blasted the
local and state officials responsible for certifying labor shortages as “serving solely the interest
of large-scale corporate finance.”925 Similarly, the Joint U.S.-Mexico Trade Union Commission
called for better Department of Labor efforts on domestic farmworker employment, as well as
increased enforcement of existing Bracero Program protections.926 Moreover, the AFL-CIO’s
creation of AWOC seemed to indicate that labor had finally committed to organizing
farmworkers in California.

At the same time, Mexican American civil rights organizations joined the reform chorus.
The American G.I. Forum called upon Congress to abolish the Bracero Program outright, or to
pass strict enforcement amendments should it be renewed in the future.927 Similarly, when
growers challenged the Department of Labor’s regulatory authority over the program in the
summer of 1959, G.I. Forum president Hector Garcia wrote to Attorney General William Rogers

praising his recent statements in support of the legality of recent Bracero Program-related measures “concerning the wage and living standards required for migrant workers.”

Prominent Catholic clergy also became more insistent in their demands for reform, and they forged an alliance with Secretary Mitchell, who had been appealing to their desire to improve the lot of domestic farmworkers. Mitchell gave the keynote address at a Catholic Council on Working Life conference on migrant workers, in which he called farmworkers the “Excluded American” whose conditions were “offensive…to our public commitment to individual worth.” In 1959, when Mitchell asked a team of four consultants to study the Bracero Program and make recommendations for reform, he deepened the ties between the Catholic community and his department. Mitchell requested that Msgr. George G. Higgins, director of the Social Action Division of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and former member of the Truman Commission on Migratory Labor, to serve as one of his consultants.

The consultants’ final report, issued in October, called for significant reform, but Higgins and other Catholic leaders on the farmworker question felt that it had not gone far enough in criticizing the program and the plight American workers. In June, Higgins helped author a preliminary report for the consultants’ committee that called for a vast expansion in the Secretary of Labor’s statutory authority over domestic farmworker recruitment and braceros’ wages and working conditions. Furthermore, it recommended a system of labor contractor registration, a rural development program, and farmworkers’ inclusion under the nation’s labor laws.

Higgins forwarded a copy of this draft report to Archbishop of San Antonio Robert Lucey, head

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928 Hector Garcia to William Rogers, July 14, 1959, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1959, Box 684, Folder LABOR, Mexican, 1 of 3.
930 Craig, 153-54; Effland, 94-95.
of the Bishops Committee for the Spanish Speaking, which had concerned itself with the farmworker issue throughout the 1950s.

Lucey responded with a long letter voicing his support. “So long as the bracero program is continued,” he wrote, “the domestic labor force in American agriculture will never be organized.” The nation’s growers were using a claim of permanent labor market emergencies, he complained, and the Bracero Program only worsened the situation. “If more satisfactory wages and conditions of work were to be offered,” he noted, “domestic farm labor” would take the jobs. Lucey praised the draft recommendations, but noted that they would probably have to be tempered in the final report, since there were many powerful “growers who wish to behave like savages.”932 In the end, Lucey was right; the recommendations for increased Department of Labor authority were weakened, while those seeking farmworker inclusion in national labor law were dropped altogether.933

Nevertheless, the forces seeking changes to the Bracero Program were growing and becoming more vocal, partly led by the liberal and civic organizations that rounded out the expanding reform coalition. The National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor’s conference in February 1959 had shone a spotlight on the Bracero Program and prompted the AFL-CIO to act, and the group continued its publicity and pressure tactics throughout the year. It also gave reformers in Secretary Mitchell’s Department of Labor some cover and prompted like-minded citizens to form similar groups. Shortly after the conference, Assistant Secretary of Labor Newell Brown noted “growing national interest” in the Bracero Program in a meeting with department

officials.\textsuperscript{934} The Advisory Committee built on that growing interest in July, releasing a fifty-nine-page report on U.S. farmworkers’ legal position at both the state and federal level. It characterized substandard labor conditions on the nation’s largest farms as “an unquestioned fact” and considered farmworkers’ exclusion from labor and social welfare legislation outright “discrimination.”\textsuperscript{935}

By the summer, smaller like-minded citizens groups started to form in Texas and California, copying the Advisory Committee’s example. In June, Ralph Castillo of the American Citizens Social Club of Victoria, Texas wrote to Lyndon Johnson in support of reform, appealing to his “good Christian conscience” to act against “interests that cheat and victimize American citizens.”\textsuperscript{936} Similarly, in California, the Citizens Committee for Agricultural Labor formed and began making suggestions to the State Department of Employment on bracero certifications, wages, and domestic farmworker recruitment.\textsuperscript{937}

The new California civic organization joined existing religious and Mexican-American groups already active in the state’s fields, demonstrating the proliferation of groups interested in improving farmworker conditions in the late 1950s. The American Friends Service Committee, Migrant Farm Ministry, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and the Community Service Organization all offered to help California officials with the labor supply problem in an attempt to show that domestic farmworkers were available to do the work. Ed Hayes, head of California’s Farm Placement Service, received so many offers that he created a form letter for his

\begin{footnotes}
\item[936] Castillo to Johnson, June 9, 1959, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1959, Box 684, Folder LABOR, Mexican 2 of 3.
\end{footnotes}
field staff to use to “notify local organizations who have expressed interest in job opportunities for domestic farm labor.” Overall, then, a reform coalition of unionists, Mexican-Americans activists, reform-minded clergy, and liberals was coalescing against the Bracero Program at both state and national levels.

James Mitchell’s Department of Labor used the growing pressure on the Bracero Program as a popular mandate for continuing the department’s enforcement efforts from previous years. To the housing, payroll, and food service inspections of 1958, department compliance personnel in 1959 added safety inspections for vehicles used to transport braceros from their camps to their worksites. The results showed that growers continued to openly flout Public Law 78’s guarantees. In Bureau of Employment Security Region X (California, Arizona, and Nevada) and in Texas, compliance personnel conducted a total of 15,687 investigations in 1959, finding violations in 4,190 cases, for an overall violation rate of 26.7%. The new transportation regulations caught growers off guard and were even more revealing; inspectors discovered violations in more than half of their investigations. (See Tables 6.1 and 6.2).

Table 6.1: Bureau of Employment Security Housing and Payroll Inspections, Region X and Texas, 1959

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<th>Payroll</th>
<th>Violations</th>
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<td>2108</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>6652</td>
<td>1319</td>
<td>19.8</td>
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</table>


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939 Data for Nevada were not included in the BES statistics. State officials compiled the statistics because the state’s growers contracted few braceros.
Table 6.2: Bureau of Employment Security Food Service and Transportation Inspections, Region X and Texas, 1959

<table>
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<th>Transport.</th>
<th>Violations</th>
<th>% Deficient</th>
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<td>343</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Wagner-Peyser Regulations

Although the inspections were important, Secretary Mitchell’s most assertive action to date came in the form of regulations to reduce the program’s adverse effect on domestic farmworkers and force growers to stop relying so heavily on braceros. In December 1958, following the formation of the Advisory Committee, Assistant Secretary Newell Brown warned growers of coming changes in an address before an Imperial Valley Farmers Association meeting. “The American public and Congress may not indefinitely tolerate foreign labor programs,” Brown declared, especially “if the living standards, conditions of employment, and wages of our migratory workers, sharecroppers and other underemployed farm workers remain seriously substandard.”942 Furthermore, Secretary Mitchell himself threw down the gauntlet at the Advisory Committee’s February 1959 conference, stating, “We will continue to the direct attack on specific problems” influencing farmworker conditions.943

Nonetheless, nothing could have prepared bracero users for the sweeping regulations governing domestic farmworker recruitment that Secretary Mitchell proposed in the spring of 1959. The Secretary of Labor used his authority under the 1933 Wagner-Peyser Act in an effort

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24, Box 2, Folder 8: Texas Employment Commission, Misc. Rec.—1959-1961, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
941 Ibid.
943 James Mitchell, Address to National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, February 5, 1959, Box 413, Folder 12, Hayden Papers.
to put teeth into the department’s mandate to protect American farmworkers from “adverse
effect” and prevent domestic farmworker displacement. The Wagner-Peyser Act created and
governed the nationwide network of federal and state Employment Service offices, organized
under the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Employment Security that, among other things,
advertised job vacancies. Under Public Law 78 growers could not receive braceros until they
posted job advertisements at the local Employment Service office. When no workers applied for
the jobs, local and state officials certified a labor shortage, which was then approved by the
Bureau of Employment Security, and the grower could begin contracting braceros. For most of
the Bracero Program, this system operated in a decentralized manner, allowing growers to
advertise wages domestic workers would refuse, thus ensuring a labor shortage.

Seizing his administrative prerogatives, Mitchell’s regulations stipulated certain
prevailing wages and working conditions for job advertisements posted in Employment Service
offices, in effect asserting his authority over the decentralized system. Prevailing wages varied
by crop activity and state, but the goal was to prevent the de facto authorization of braceros by
forcing growers to offer higher wages before declaring a labor shortage.944 The new Wagner-
Peyser regulations also required Employment Service officials to ensure that growers could
provide “hygienic and adequate” housing that would “accommodate available domestic
agricultural workers,” and that they would make “transportation arrangements for workers.” This
last provision was sweeping in scope. In addition to recruiting locally and within their own
states, growers were also required to use the Employment Service for interstate recruitment of
domestic farmworkers within a “reasonable” distance determined by the Department of Labor,
something the department had advocated earlier but now threatened to enforce with the new

944 The prevailing wages varied by state and crop activity, but the goal was to increase farm wages and prevent the
de facto certification of braceros by forcing growers to offer higher wages before declaring a labor shortage. Craig,
153.
In effect, Secretary Mitchell not only used the Wagner-Peyser Act to raise standards; he also used it to consolidate federal authority over the state Employment Service officials who frequently directed their personnel to act according to growers’ wishes in their states. The days of quick bracero certifications at low prevailing wages were beginning to end.

This was no empty threat. The department strongly encouraged domestic farmworker employment and forced local and state officials as well as grower associations to comply. In June, it reminded field staff that domestic workers should always be referred “to employment nearest their place of residence,” since it was receiving complaints that family and other work crews were “being split up and are thus unable to use their own transportation.”946 A few days later, the Bureau of Employment Security sent a memo to its staff summarizing the obligations of growers associations seeking braceros. These guidelines were designed to force growers into better compliance with housing and facilities standards as well as proper record keeping to comport with program requirements.947

Growers resisted Secretary Mitchell’s assertive stance. They complained loudly that they were already struggling from the department’s criticisms and proliferating regulations. Even the relatively mild suggestions of the Consultants’ Report irritated them. At a meeting of a bracero users’ subcommittee established by the Bureau of Employment Security’s Special Farm Labor Committee, farmer representatives faulted the Consultants’ Report because it failed to “reflect

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945 Department of Labor, News from the Department of Labor, USDL-2886, August 12, 1959, Box 13 Folder 3: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, July-Dec 1959, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.


the advancements made by growers in many areas since the inception of Public Law 78 in 1951, in working and living provisions for braceros.” According to users, they were making voluntary improvements as fast as possible.

Growers reserved their full fury, however, for the Secretary of Labor’s new regulations, which they viewed as bureaucratic overreach into their affairs. The discontent from Texas growers quickly made its way to the state capitol building in Austin as soon as the department began circulating drafts of the new regulations in the spring. The Texas legislature passed a grower-sponsored resolution denouncing the department for “its practice of stripping the state agencies of their Constitutional and Statutory powers and authority.” Governor Price Daniel even entered the fray, “convinced that the Secretary’s proposal would do great damage to Texas farmers.”

The state’s growers pressed their case with Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, flooding his office with angry letters. Writing from west Texas, Doyle Ziler summarized growers’ primary concern. The Department of Labor was “trying to implement Public Law 78 into an instrument to force us to federal regulation of farm wages and hours,” he wrote, and it was doing it simply “to satisfy the demands of the labor unions, professional ‘do-gooders,’ and fellow-travelers.” Farther down the Rio Grande, C.B. Ray, executive manager of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Farm Bureau, requested congressional action in his letter to Johnson. Growers in the valley had plenty of cause of concern. At the end of 1958, four counties’ growers were barred from bracero contracting for their violation of the department’s recent 90-10

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prevailing wage formula. Ray suggested the need for a “full scale congressional investigation of the Labor Department,” which he thought would be “most revealing.” Johnson, who owed his 1948 Senate election victory to ballot box stuffing in grower-dominated South Texas, was sympathetic. He later personally escorted some of his state’s largest growers to a meeting with a Department of Labor advisory board to voice their discontent.

Calls for some kind of official intervention against the department proliferated across the Southwest as growers demanded that their representatives and senators question the legality of the new Wagner-Peyser regulations. Most of them needed no encouragement. On March 11, New Mexico Senator and Agriculture and Forestry Committee member Joseph Montoya helped take up the cause, writing to a grower constituent to tell him triumphantly that over thirty congressmen had “converged on Secretary Mitchell in mass [sic]” the previous day to give him their “thinking about the absurd proposals.” Tempers flared at the meeting; Senator Bob Poage, one of the co-authors of Public Law 78, “charged very forcefully that the regulations were illegal, impractical and immoral.”

Congressmen representing the farm bloc argued that the Secretary of Labor was using the Wagner-Peyser Act illegally to regulate the working conditions of domestic farmworkers who

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952 The ruling was issued to ensure that at least 90% of braceros employed at piece rates met the International Agreement’s 50¢ hourly minimum wage. For more, see Chapter 5; Goodwin to All Employers of Mexican Contract Labor, Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy Counties, December 31, 1958, Johnson Papers, Senate Papers, 1949-1961, Subject Files, 1959, Box 684, Folder LABOR, Mexican 3 of 3.


956 Reports of the number of congressmen in attendance varied. Montoya claimed over thirty, while E.C. Gathings, in a letter to Clarence Cannon, claimed over forty. See footnote 117 for the Gathings letter.

957 Joseph Montoya to A.W. Langenegger, March 11, 1959, Box 13, Folder 2: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, Jan-June, 1959, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.

had been excluded from the nation’s labor legislation since the New Deal. Arkansas Representative E.C. Gathings, a member of the House Committee on Agriculture, prodded his colleague Clarence Cannon, who chaired the House Appropriations Committee to review the Labor Department’s recent appropriations request, which sought a budget increase to enforce the proposed regulations. Gathings asked Cannon to “remove from the funds appropriated to the Department of Labor any money which could be used for the administration of such regulations.” Secretary Mitchell was flaunting “the clear intent of Congress that agricultural workers shall be exempt” from federal regulation, he wrote.

Meanwhile Senator Montoya mulled a legal challenge, asking the American Law Division of the Congressional Research Service for an opinion on the regulations’ legality under Wagner-Peyser. He was delighted when the chief of the division informed him he could find no explicit authority for Secretary Mitchell’s proposals. By July, though Attorney General William Rogers disappointed the senator. In a letter to Mitchell, Rogers upheld the secretary’s authority. “That in the [Wagner-Peyser] act itself there is no express or necessarily implied delegation of power to the Secretary to establish referral standards does not establish a lack of power,” he wrote. Furthermore, the attorney general continued, “The regulations you have in mind cannot be said to be in themselves unreasonable as imposing undue or arbitrary burdens

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961 Wilfred C. Gilbert to Joseph Montoya, March 12, 1959, Box 26, Folder 11: Labor: Migrant/Farm/Bracero Labor, 1959, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
upon employers. The new Wagner-Peyser regulations entered the Federal Register on August 12.

The new regulations compounded growers’ frustrations with the federal government, especially in light of recent congressional action on migrant workers. On August 5, the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare had voted to create a Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, chaired by liberal New Jersey Democrat Harrison A. Williams, Jr., who made no secret of his intentions; he immediately scheduled public hearings featuring farmworker advocacy groups such as the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor and the National Council on Agricultural Life, which coordinated among other advocacy groups such as the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches and the National Child Labor Committee, among others. Senator Williams also directed his subcommittee staff to study possible legislation on working conditions, housing, transportation, and migrant health and education. Growers had always received a relatively amicable hearing in Congress, and the House and Senate labor committees had almost always deferred to the agriculture committee when it came to farm labor matters. Now, it appeared growers were losing their grip.

Still, the Wagner-Peyser regulations were the most immediate concern for bracero users, and growers and their congressmen continued to object strenuously. In Arizona and New Mexico, growers argued that recruiting domestic farmworkers from across state lines would destroy their profit margins. Growers would have to offer domestic farmworkers’ free transportation to their farms before being authorized for braceros, but once they arrived, the grower-transported workers might not accept the work, they said. Braceros, on the other hand,

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964 Effland, 81-84
signed their contracts before being transported to the farms. Furthermore, growers had no suitable housing for American farmworkers, only dormitory-style bracero bunks. A grower committee that advised the Arizona State Employment Security Commission passed a resolution predicting financial ruin if growers had to “provide attractive family housing and pay the transportation costs of families” in their efforts to obtain domestic labor. In New Mexico, a grower complained to Montoya that he might leave the business if Department of Labor bureaucrats continued their “trend toward Socialism and then Communism” through regulation. The head of the state’s Employment Security Commission agreed, arguing that growers needed time “to voluntarily meet” the standards. Montoya and Arizona Senator Carl Hayden pressed Secretary Mitchell on the interstate transportation requirements of the regulations, and the department held hearings to consider grower concerns. But the new regulations were on the books, and Mitchell intended to stand behind them.

By the end of 1959, Assistant Secretary Newell Brown reflected the department’s changed tone toward growers and the Bracero Program. A year earlier, he had politely warned the Imperial Valley Farmers Association of the coming changes. Now he was more blunt. In an address before the Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers Convention, he charged growers with defending the old Bracero Program status quo against an increasingly vocal reform coalition who demanded change for the nation’s migrants who took to the roads as braceros chased them out season after season. These growers saw “nothing wrong with maintaining piece rate earnings of braceros at the 30-35 cent per hour level,” saw “no objection in maintaining such

965 Carl Hayden to James Mitchell, September 11, 1959, Box 91, Folder 12, Hayden Papers.
966 Minutes of the Arizona State Farm Labor Advisory Committee, Growers Associations, and Growers Meeting, April 3, 1959, Box 413, Folder 2, Hayden Papers.
967 C.W. Stringer to Joseph Montoya, August 19, 1959, Box 13, Folder 2: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, Jan-June, 1959, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
968 Richard J. Pino to L. Lane Hart, August 26, 1959, Box 13, Folder 2: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, Jan-June, 1959, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
969 Carl Hayden to James Mitchell, September 11, 1959, Box 91, Folder 12, Carl Hayden Papers.
competition for American workers,” and resisted “bitterly governmental rules designed to prevent this type of adverse effect.” To what must have been a cold reception, Brown concluded by quoting his boss, Secretary Mitchell: “There will be change; the American public should and will demand it; and it will be imposed if it does not evolve voluntarily.”

Growers vs. Reformers: The 1960 Bracero Program Renewal

Throughout 1959, James Mitchell had positioned the Department of Labor to use the Bracero Program as a lever to raise domestic farmworker standards, drawing partly on the presence of increasingly vocal reformers interested in improving agricultural labor conditions and ending the Bracero Program. While reform advocates cheered on the department and lobbied for further improvements, growers denounced and challenged Secretary Mitchell. In 1960, the Bracero Program came up for reauthorization, and both reformers and growers directed their attention to Congress to try to enact their agendas. The fight for the program’s renewal and continued Department of Labor reforms revealed not only the emergence and expanding strength of the reform coalition, but also growers’ ability to hold it at bay or escape its effects altogether.

Congress had reauthorized Public Law 78 in 1958 through June 30, 1961, which meant the program was scheduled to expire in the middle of the 1961 harvest season. The effort to renew the program in 1960 demonstrated just how much the terms of the debate had changed. In January 1960, congressmen representing bracero users proposed two bills that would prevent the secretary of labor from using the Bracero Program to regulate domestic farmworker employment conditions (H.R. 9875) and that would divide authority over adverse effect determinations

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Reform advocates countered with a bill by South Dakota’s Representative George McGovern (H.R. 11211). McGovern’s bill would enact the recommendations of the Consultants’ Report and expand the secretary of labor’s authority over prevailing wages and adverse effect, as well as restrict braceros to unskilled labor. It also demanded that growers do more to compete for domestic farmworkers by offering them better employment terms, and it called for the Bracero Program’s eventual termination. The stark divide between the proposals extended to Eisenhower’s Cabinet. When the president asked for a recommendation on the bills, Secretary Mitchell and Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson vehemently disagreed. The two men had fought repeatedly over agricultural labor questions during the 1950s, and this was no exception. Mitchell felt the grower-sponsored initiatives would thwart Public Law 78’s “protection of American workers,” while Benson favored restricting Mitchell’s authority.

Given the irreconcilable positions, Eisenhower instructed both men to remain neutral. Congress was suffering no dearth of opinions as both sides weighed in. Bracero users argued that Secretary Mitchell threatened to become “a complete dictator, and the American Farm Bureau Federation lobbied for the Gathings bill. The reformers were more vocal, though, backed by citizen, religious, and civil rights organizations. James Murray of the California Citizens Committee for Agricultural Labor said reforms were necessary to remove the Bracero

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971 H.R. 9875 and H.R. 9871, Box 13, Folder 4: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, Jan-June 1960, Joseph M. Montoya Papers; Craig, 155.
972 Craig, 154-56.
973 Effland, 95-97. Mitchell and Benson had fought previously over the two departments’ authority over agricultural labor. For a discussion of these previous disputes, see Effland, 66-75.
975 Craig, 156.
976 J.C. Johnson to Joseph Montoya, Box 13, Folder 4: Agriculture Committee: Labor Including Mexican Farm Labor/Bracero Program, Jan-June 1960, Joseph M. Montoya Papers.
Program’s “moral stains.” Fay Bennett, executive secretary of the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, called Eisenhower’s decision to stay neutral “most disheartening,” citing average farmworker earnings of $961 in 1958. Coming at the debate from a moral angle, the Catholic Church began a broad mobilization against the program. The Catholic Council for the Spanish Speaking asked Lyndon Johnson to oppose renewal without the Consultants’ Report recommendations. An editorial in the February issue of Catholic Rural Life contrasted the positions of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference with those of the American Farm Bureau Federation and concluded, “The time has come to speak out.” The appeal worked, as lay organizations began to protest to Congress. Protestants joined in as well. The Migrant Ministry of the National Council of the Churches of Christ opposed the Farm Bureau’s proposals and offered its assistance to Secretary Mitchell. Finally, Mexican-American civil rights organizations continued their push against the program. The American G.I. Forum voiced its support of the McGovern bill in March, but by August, it sought outright termination. In California, the Community Service Organization opposed the program through publicity. It reprinted an article from the Catholic Charities Review quoting Cesar Chavez. Chavez credited a CSO community organizing drive with securing an “investigation of a...
number of the top officials in the State Farm Placement Service” that exposed grower-compliance officer collusion, though he left out the fact that AWOC had helped research and publicize the collusion issue.985

Organized labor added its voice to the renewal debate as well, having gained new credibility from the AWOC campaign. AWOC’s Director of Public Information Louis Krainok illustrated the Bracero Program’s effects on the availability of family housing for farmworker crews. He used a California Department of Employment report to show that the share of farmworker housing suitable for families in the state had declined from 82.6% in 1951 to 26.7% in 1959. Krainok demanded legislation for farmworkers covering minimum wages and establishing farmworkers’ legal right to and machinery for collective bargaining. Farmworkers needed “due process” so they could reestablish “a true free labor market in which no bracero nullifies the workings of across the table negotiations, and in which the basic earnings of both small farmers and workers are not established by a corps of licensed serfs brought from a foreign land.”986 More broadly, Andrew Biemiller testified for the AFL-CIO against farmworkers’ systematic exclusion from the nation’s labor laws as the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor began to consider legislation Sen. Harrison Williams sought.987 Biemiller urged Congress to “undo an old injustice” that excluded farmworker children from the Fair Labor Standards Act.


987 Effland, 82-83.
In addition, the AFL-CIO sought federal licensing and regulation of farmworker labor contractors, and legislation to bring farmworkers under minimum wage and hour laws.\footnote{Andrew Biemiller, Statement before the Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, May 12, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 5.}

As growers and reformers made their cases and the various legislative proposals moved through Congress, Secretary Mitchell’s Department of Labor continued its reforms, and growers continued to howl. The department implemented the consultants’ recommendation that braceros be restricted to unskilled labor, and Mitchell announced that the “Specials” program would end in July. Specials were skilled braceros (often veteran ranch hands or farm machine operators) that growers could recontract annually without waiting for the usual bureaucratic machinery. Moving forward, growers would have to find American workers for such jobs, which meant they would have to offer higher wages.\footnote{E.S. Mayer to Albert Fay, March 15, 1960, Box 104, Folder 1960—Migratory Farm Workers (May-June) (2), James P. Mitchell Papers.} Growers protested any efforts to increase their domestic farmworker recruitment. An Arizona grower complained that finding one qualified U.S. worker required sifting through up to fifty “white trash, city folks running away from reality, winos, escapees from prison, or misfits.”\footnote{Grant Anderson to James Mitchell, July 28, 1960, Box 412, Folder 21, Hayden Papers.} State officials reflected the concerns of their states’ growers as well. For example, when the Department of Labor reversed New Mexico Employment Service wage findings for Doña Ana County by refusing to certify braceros until growers advertised a 75¢ hourly rate to domestics, the officials protested on growers’ behalf.\footnote{Newell Brown to H.M. Rickman, March 15, 1960, Box 26, Folder 12: Labor: Migrant/Farm/Bracero Labor, 1960, Joseph Montoya Papers.}

The department experienced similar recalcitrance in Texas, where state administrators readily helped employers find a way around Secretary Mitchell’s actions by replacing braceros with machines. Mitchell used the new Wagner-Peyser regulations to raise prevailing wages and encourage domestic farmworker employment in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where growers
raised cotton. As they readied their crops for harvest, Mitchell refused to certify labor shortages anywhere growers paid less than $2.50 c.w.t., a 20¢ increase over 1959 rates. Archbishop Lucey applauded the move against “greed and dishonesty” among the valley’s “vicious” employers.⁹⁹²

Growers in the valley disagreed and took Mitchell to court, but their most significant response was to abandon the program with the help of compliant state officials. Growers asked the Texas Employment Commission, the state agency charged with advertising job vacancies, to help them arrange rentals of cotton harvesting machines to pick the crop. Growers in the Valley had deferred purchasing the machines, in wide use throughout other parts of the nation, because braceros were cheaper. The Commission reported that it was happy to go “all out to serve these employers.” The effort was so successful that 60% of the valley’s cotton crop was mechanized in 1960, while statewide bracero employment at harvest peak declined 78% over 1959.⁹⁹³

Back on Capitol Hill, the department’s actions, growers’ resistance, and reformers’ demands all conditioned the legislative proceedings. The House Committee on Agriculture first considered splitting authority between the secretaries of agriculture and labor, but given the chance this would scuttle the entire renewal by inviting liberal opposition, it reported out a bill on June 22 calling for a simple unamended two-year extension. That bill passed the House unchanged on June 29, and farm bloc congressmen hoped the Senate would follow suit quickly.⁹⁹⁴ However, Senator Eugene McCarthy had introduced a renewal bill with the McGovern proposals, which dragged out the proceedings. The Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, chaired by Public Law 78 co-author Allen Ellender, deadlocked until August 23,

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⁹⁹³ At harvest peak in 1959, the state reported contracts with 137,000 braceros. In 1960, it reported 250,000 total workers at peak: 126,000 local workers, 95,000 migrant workers, and the “remainder,” 29,000, braceros. Texas Employment Commission, 1959 Annual Report; 1960 Annual Report, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.
⁹⁹⁴ Craig, 157-58.
when the committee reached a compromise. The bill reported out of committee called for an unamended extension of just six months, extending the program until December 31, 1961 and promising a renewal of the growers vs. reformers dynamic after the 1960 election. The Senate approved the measure on August 31, and pro-Bracero Program forces in the House, fearing a conference committee reconciliation process that could scuttle the whole thing, assented the same day.\textsuperscript{995} The final bill passed both chambers on the last day of the legislative session.

Surveying the growing influence of the anti-Bracero Program coalition, Ernesto Galarza was hopeful. As he later wrote, “The liberal conscience was stirring.”\textsuperscript{996} The Wagner-Peyser regulations and the 1960 renewal battle engaged this conscience, and both revealed growers’ fury over the fact that they seemed to be losing the firm control that had given them easy bracero access for years. After eighteen years, the Bracero Program had become truly controversial and divisive; yet, it remained relatively intact as growers secured extension of the program and avoided what they regarded as the worst of the reform proposals. As they moved forward, reformers resolved to keep the pressure on an increasingly emboldened Department of Labor and make good on their commitment to improve farmworkers’ lives.

**AWOC’s Failure to Organize California Farmworkers**

Part of that commitment was the AFL-CIO’s AWOC project. If the dissolution of the NAWU proved disappointing to Mitchell and Galarza, who had championed the farmworker cause for so long, Norman Smith and other AWOC organizers found reason to be cheerful. They had simplified jurisdictional concerns with NAWU’s ouster, and it seemed the AWOC investment was beginning to pay dividends. At the beginning of the campaign, Louis Krainok advised Smith that a successful organizing campaign could only be achieved through the use of

\textsuperscript{995} Craig, 159-60.

\textsuperscript{996} Galarza, *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California*, 315.
flexible tactics, publicity in farmworker communities, and above all well-trained volunteer
organizers—“the cadre,” as he called them. Without these, AWOC would never overcome the
“lack of leadership” and “lack of organization” that had marked NAWU’s past efforts.997 By
spring 1960, after spreading the word through flyers and radio broadcasts, reactivating Galarza’s
organizers, and recruiting new ones, AWOC began flexing its muscle.

While NAWU officers were waiting to learn their ultimate fate, AWOC and UPWA
launched a series of quick strikes to test their power. In April, an AWOC press release proudly
announced that a sit-down strike of Oxnard, California celery workers had succeeded in
removing braceros “from behind the picket lines of UPWA” by state officials responsible for
their clearance.998 These quick strikes by the “flying squads” sometimes succeeded in raising
wages in crops like cherries and peaches. For instance, Smith could point to as much as 20¢
piece rate increases in cherries and 3¢ in peaches as a genuine success.999

He could also promote the fact that after years of stalling, Sunkist had finally signed a
contract with UPWA covering five of the company’s affiliates in Ventura County. Workers
had voted for the union there in 1953, but Sunkist and its contracted growers delayed negotiations
through “a seven-year marathon of company stalling.” Smith was sure that AWOC’s recent
organizing activity and his own involvement in negotiations persuaded growers there was no
alternative but to finally sign a contract. With this “beachhead of union organization,” he
announced, “AWOC will push to expand its membership.”1000 Soon UPWA and AWOC were
preparing a drive for the tomato farms of the San Joaquin Valley.1001 Overall, by the end of 1960

998 AWOC, Press release, April 25, 1960, STFU Papers, reel 43.
999 According to Galarza, piece rates increased by up to 20¢/pail in cherry fields, and 3¢ per lug in peaches. Galarza
Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947-1960, 327
1000 AWOC, Press release, April 26, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 7.
1001 Clive Knowles to Norman Smith, September 1, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 7.
Smith claimed not only that AWOC activity had raised total California farm wages by $12 million through strikes both actual or threatened, but that it had also recruited some 25,000 farmworkers to its cause, though this number seems exaggerated to impress AFL-CIO leaders.\footnote{Dues-paying membership never reached those numbers. “The Fight to Organize Your Help,” \textit{Farm Journal} (February 1961): 32, in AWOC Papers, reel 3; Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 327.}

Moreover, after NAWU’s dissolution, AWOC appeared to be entering a new period of institutional stability designed to minimize jurisdictional conflicts. In June 1960, George Meany gave AWOC formal status as a full organizing committee “for the purpose of accepting into AFL-CIO membership workers employed in the cultivation and harvesting of fruit and vegetable crops in the State of California.” Local unions organized under the newly formalized AWOC would become direct affiliates of the AFL-CIO, hopefully eliminating the turf battles that had plagued the organization to that point. Meany named Smith as director, chairman, and secretary-treasurer. Other members of the committee included Franz Daniel of the AFL-CIO Organizing Department; Daniel Flanagan, the AFL-CIO’s regional director; and Thomas Pitts, secretary-treasurer of the California State Labor Federation. Meany’s letter also included formal rules and regulations for AWOC.\footnote{Meany to Smith, June 7, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 3; Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California}, 332.} By formalizing AWOC, the nation’s labor movement presented a united front that could better deliver on its promises to farmworkers.

\textit{Floundering}

Nevertheless, such support could not mitigate the effects of AWOC’s blunders as it moved ahead. As AWOC sent its pickets to various farms, growers struck back by securing temporary injunctions against picketers and restraining orders against the State Department of Employment from certifying labor disputes. The most damaging legal maneuver, however, came
when Krainok and Smith dusted off an old copy of *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*. The AFL’s Hollywood Film Council made the film in 1948 during the NFLU’s DiGiorgio strike, depicting the company in a negative light. The DiGiorgio Corporation sued for libel at the time, winning a judgment that prohibited screening it in the state. In a move that substantiated some of Galarza’s charges about AWOC disorganization and inexperience, Krainok and Smith began showing the film at organizing meetings. They were unaware of the court order, a fact that perfectly symbolized the tremendous loss of institutional memory when Galarza and Mitchell were forced out of the campaign. DiGiorgio pounced. The company’s new libel complaint demanded $2 million in damages, though the judge in the case ruled that AWOC’s share was $100,000 (later reduced to $60,000 on appeal). Undoubtedly AWOC committee members and George Meany in particular were displeased at this waste of a huge portion of the committee’s budget.1004

Opportunities for criticism mounted in 1961, as Galarza’s most pessimistic predictions about AWOC’s tactics, as well as his theory that organized labor would walk away from farmworkers at the earliest convenience, came to pass. UPWA and AWOC had launched a joint organizing campaign in the Imperial Valley, where UPWA-organized members were being displaced as growers moved lettuce packing from the sheds to the fields.1005 The Imperial Valley Farmers Association had imported “some 5,000 braceros” to do the work, but UPWA hoped to organize domestic farmworkers to do it. UPWA spokesman Clive Knowles claimed that “moving the work out into the fields did not remove it from U.P.W.A.’s jurisdiction,” and that with AWOC’s help the union would eventually establish a $1.25 minimum hourly wage.1006


1005 The conversion to “field-pack” had begun in Imperial in the mid-1950s shortly after UPWA crossed NAWU picket lines protesting braceros’ and undocumented workers’ employment.

Before the campaign even began, however, jurisdictional concerns emerged once more. Even though the formal chartering of AWOC provided that all AWOC-organized workers would become direct affiliates of AFL-CIO, UPWA claimed that “workers engaged in field packing” as a result of the campaign “will be turned over to UPWA during the present season,” despite the fact that funds to organize such workers came mostly from AWOC. UPWA was thus asking for AWOC’s assistance and support, then requiring that workers organized through the campaign be immediately turned over, contravening the rules laid down by the AFL-CIO.

Both the arrangement and the strike failed. Braceros were never removed from struck farms, negating the strike’s efficacy. To make matters worse, the Teamsters who transported the produce refused to honor AWOC or UPWA picket lines. Soon, UPWA members who still had work began crossing AWOC’s picket lines, leading AWOC to appeal directly to UPWA members by blasting their union officers for asking “AWOC pickets to drop their picket signs so that they may enter a picketed establishment.” Thomas Pitts, secretary-treasurer of the California State Labor Federation and an AWOC committee member, questioned Smith’s strategy in Imperial as the strike fell apart. Smith could only weakly protest that it would have proved too costly for AWOC staff “to have acquired the knowledge that the UPWA have of that area.” To the $60,000 DiGiorgio damages, AWOC now added $25,000 in legal fees, fines and a frayed UPWA alliance.

The AWOC committee members charged with overseeing the campaign were not impressed. These men were charged with examining “the status, condition, and progress of the organizing campaign,” its finances, the director’s decisions, and the collection and use of dues

1007 Clive Knowles to Norman Smith, January 11, 1961, AWOC Papers, reel 7.
1009 Smith to Pitts, February 3, 1961, AWOC Papers, reel 2.
money, all of which they reported back to the AFL-CIO.\footnote{AFL-CIO, Rules and Regulations of A.W.O.C., June 7, 1960, AWOC Papers, reel 3.} Their reports to AFL-CIO leaders must have looked grim: disorganization, failed strikes, expensive lawsuits, a handful of collective bargaining agreements, and few dues-paying members. The nation’s labor leaders ordered Smith to trim his expenses to $3,000 per month, and he began closing field offices and dismissing staff.\footnote{Galarza, \textit{Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947-1960}, 336.} In July, the AFL-CIO Executive Council pulled the plug and cancelled the campaign, citing only 3,500 workers organized into AWOC out of a workforce that the AFL-CIO estimated at 250,000.\footnote{This number seems high, but it illustrates the general lack of information labor organizers had about agricultural labor conditions. Fay Bennett to Norman Smith, July 6, 1961, AWOC Papers, reel 4.} His appropriations exhausted, Smith sent the final checks to his staff at the end of November.\footnote{Smith to Members of the Staff, November 22, 1961, AWOC Papers, reel 3.}

As the official commitment from organized labor waned, AWOC began to collapse. Existing AWOC locals went semi-independent under volunteer organizers who had been drawn to the campaign, and even struck successfully on isolated occasions. In addition, several locals cultivated relationships with religious, citizen, and civil rights reform groups (including the CSO), laying the groundwork for future mobilizations under Cesar Chavez.\footnote{Majka and Majka, 161} The AFL-CIO stepped in to prevent AWOC from dissolving entirely as these locals continued under their own direction. Meany later reorganized AWOC in 1962, replacing Smith with C. Al Green, an AFL loyalist from the Building Trades. Green recentralized authority and continued organizing in fits and starts, enjoying only limited success in the face of grower opposition, uncooperative state agencies, and the ever-present braceros. Presented with these barriers, Green did what Ernesto

AWOC’s decline did not signal an end to farmworker militancy. Indeed, AWOC’s presence in California alongside Mexican American activists who were increasingly interested in farmworker conditions helped contribute to agricultural labor unrest. The same year AWOC launched the Imperial Valley campaign, Cesar Chavez (then an organizer with CSO) led a march of the unemployed onto bracero-users’ fields outside of Oxnard. Overall, there were 148 agricultural strikes in California between 1960 and 1962, which served to further focus national attention on farmworkers.\footnote{Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 129; Majka and Majka, 162.} Although more thorough and durable farmworker organization would have to await AWOC’s merger with Cesar Chavez’s National Farm Workers Association, which formed the United Farm Workers under Chavez’s leadership on August 22, 1966, this militancy demonstrated that agricultural workers wanted better wages and conditions. Moreover, it only underscored just how serious questions about the Bracero Program’s impact on farmworkers had become in the national discussion.

**Ending the Bracero Program, 1961-1964**

The militancy flaring across California between 1960 and 1962 provided the backdrop to the final assault on the Bracero Program. When congressional forces representing grower interests sought to renew the program under the Kennedy Administration, they did so in a changed climate created by the reform coalition of labor, liberals, and religious and Mexican American activists who had been mobilized by the NAWU. Even the national media had begun paying close attention. Major publications like *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *New York Times* all...
published accounts of farmworker conditions. However, the most damning piece, or, as Cindy Hahamovitch puts it, “the final nail in the coffin of growers’ image,” came on November 21, 1960 in the form of the CBS primetime documentary, *Harvest of Shame.*

Trusted broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow spent an hour in a brutal exposé of farmworker conditions. The documentary began by showing clips of a shape-up of farmworker crews in Florida, labor contractors hawking promises of good earnings to workers. As a truck crammed full of some twenty migrant workers drove away, Murrow quoted a farmer: “We used to own our slaves. Now we just rent them.” After an hour of detailing the hardships suffered by migrant workers and highlighting the fact that those very same workers had harvested the food that viewers had eaten the previous night for Thanksgiving dinner, Murrow closed the program with an appeal to action. “The migrants have no lobby,” he said. “They do not have the strength to influence legislation. Maybe we do.”

The reform coalition had achieved what was unthinkable just a few years before; they had helped make questions about farmworker justice part of the national conversation.

Just as important, though, was the new political context enjoyed by reformers thanks to the election of reform-minded Democrat John F. Kennedy. The new president’s previous votes on the program indicated his coming policy directives. He had voted to end the program in 1951 and had voted against unilateral recruitment in 1954. And during the 1960 campaign, the Democratic Party’s platform included a plank promising the inclusion of farmworkers under labor legislation, as well as a “comprehensive program” to provide health, housing, education,

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and welfare services to migrant workers. Furthermore, Kennedy’s choice of former labor lawyer Arthur Goldberg as Secretary of Labor indicated the administration had little interest in negotiating with growers or their representatives. “The present administration has taken the position that the time for study has passed; that the time for action is now,” Goldberg stated. He then put the issue in a Cold War context, arguing that without reform the rest of the world would soon realize that “we are exploiting both the poor of the Unites States and Mexico in order to perpetuate an anachronistic labor system in American agriculture.”

As Congress prepared to resume the 1960 battle over the Bracero Program, the Kennedy Administration considered termination only a matter of time, and plenty of urban and northern Democrats were increasingly confident in breaking with the segregationist Southern wing of the party that continued to support the program with their GOP farm bloc allies. Still, Kennedy favored further reform and extension rather than an abrupt end to the program to smooth the transition to domestic labor and avoid tensions with Mexico early in the new president’s first term.

Ever the growers’ champion, Representative Gathings introduced H.R. 2010 early in the new Congress’s first session. The bill would have extended Public Law 78 for four years without amendments. Secretary Goldberg informed the Committee on Agriculture that the Gathings bill was patently unacceptable to the administration. If growers wanted extension, they would need to swallow four amendments. The administration’s proposals were as follows. The secretary of labor would have the power to limit the total number of braceros employed by individual growers. Second, growers would have to offer domestic workers the same employment, transportation, and housing conditions offered braceros. Third, braceros would be barred

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1021 Effland, 109-10.
1023 Kennedy sought to avoid Mexican tensions in exchange for support for his Alliance for Progress. Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 130; Kiser, 203.
statutorily from operating tractors and other machinery. And fourth, growers would have to pay wages at least equal to the lesser of the state or national average hourly rates for farm work.\footnote{Craig, 164.}

During debate on the Gathings bill, growers found themselves defending against an ever-larger reform coalition. In addition to those that had weighed in during the 1959 reforms and 1960 renewal fight, new groups now joined the chorus. The Department of Labor found itself so overwhelmed with requests for information by farmworker advocacy groups that it issued a staff bulletin to help keep things straight. The bulletin counted eleven national organizations and nine state-level groups interested in improving farmworkers’ lives.\footnote{National groups: American G.I. Forum, Bishops’ Committee for Migrant Workers, Bishops’ Committee for the Spanish Speaking, Community Service Organization, Migrant Children’s Fund, National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, National Child Labor Committee, National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, National Sharecroppers Fund. State groups: California Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers, Colorado Citizens Committee on Migrant and Child Labor, Illinois Citizens Committee on Farm Labor, Indiana Citizens Committee on Farm Labor, Michigan Citizens Committee on Agricultural Labor, Pennsylvania Citizens Committee on Migrant Labor, Texas Committee on Migrant Farm Workers, Washington Committee for Migrant Legislation, Wisconsin Citizens Committee on Migrant Labor. Department of Labor, Bulletin 236: Programs of National Organizations for Migrant Farm Workers and Their Families, December 1961, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Correspondence with Federal Agencies, 1957-1969, AR 278, Series 11, Box 2, Folder 14 “Migrant Labor,” University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.}

A veritable farmworker interest group network had been created since the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor’s conference, and the Advisory Committee coordinated much of the action. Most of the nine state organizations had been formed by state governments under the umbrella of a reinvigorated President’s Committee on Migratory Labor, an interagency committee on farmworkers that had been impotent in the 1950s because of the feud between Secretary of Labor Mitchell and Secretary of Agriculture Benson.\footnote{Effland, 121.} Despite the government auspices, however, the Department of Labor bulletin listed the state committees under the Advisory Committee’s name. The bulletin
also indicated that staff could use the Advisory Committee to communicate with the state bodies, since the Advisory Committee issued monthly newsletters to keep its allies informed.\textsuperscript{1027}

Gathings’ bill faced criticism from this expanding reform coalition as Congress held hearings on the measure, but reformers found their congressional support limited in the face of the farm bloc’s ability to unite most of the Republican Party with Southern Democrats. Reformers argued once again that the Bracero Program contributed to rural poverty among displaced migrant workers and held down farmworkers’ wages. In testimony, various religious organizations groups labeled it a “slave labor” program.\textsuperscript{1028} Nevertheless, the House Committee on Agriculture reported the bill out in late April by a vote of 25-3.\textsuperscript{1029} On the House floor, administration supporters offered as amendments provisions from Secretary Goldberg’s proposals that had died in committee, but Bracero Program supporters defeated them and passed a two-year unamended extension on May 11.\textsuperscript{1030} It passed 231-157 on a bipartisan vote including most Republicans and half the Democrats.\textsuperscript{1031}

Reformers were more successful in the Senate, where Senator McCarthy introduced the administration’s bill (S. 1945). The Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee incorporated McCarthy’s aims in its bill. Employers would have to offer the same wages and conditions to braceros and American farmworkers, and braceros would be barred from operating machinery. However, it failed to extend bracero contract provisions covering housing, subsistence, and work guarantees to American farmworkers. Secretary of Labor Goldberg complained to McCarthy that prevailing wages would continue to be meaningless without the administration proposal tying

\textsuperscript{1027} For examples of these newsletters, see Box 11, Folder 10: Natl Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, 1958-1963, Galarza Papers.
\textsuperscript{1028} Kiser, 198-9; Craig, 171; Hawley, 173.
\textsuperscript{1029} Kiser, 221.
\textsuperscript{1030} Craig, 167. The alternate bill was H.R. 6032, introduced by Rep. Merwin Coad (D-Iowa).
\textsuperscript{1031} Kiser, 226-7.
wage determinations to state or national minimums. In response, McCarthy won an amendment on the Senate floor requiring no less than 90% of the lesser of the state or national average farm wage before receiving braceros. The measure narrowly passed before the final bill won easy approval in September. In addition, Senator Harrison Williams proposed five bills that, although defeated, illustrated how far reformers hoped to reach on farmworkers. The bills called for a ban on child labor, a system for migrant child education, a migrant health service, the registration of farmworker crew leaders with the Department of Labor to better structure and regulate the labor market, and the creation of a National Council on Migratory Labor.

The House-Senate conference committee’s final bill weakened some of the reform measures and eliminated the McCarthy amendment on wages, but growers were required to make “reasonable efforts” to hire domestics at wages, hours, and conditions comparable to those offered to braceros. Braceros could only be used for seasonal work except in cases of extreme hardship, and they were barred from using or working on machinery. The Senate received the conference report more coolly, passing it 41-31, while the House passed the bill by voice vote. President Kennedy signed it on October 4, 1961, though he noted he would have preferred more stringent amendments. The administration extended the international agreement with Mexico without incident in January of the following year.

While growers avoided the worst of the reform proposals during the 1961 renewal, it was clear that the tide had begun to turn. Secretary Goldberg continued the anti-Bracero Program momentum by continuing the work of his predecessor as the legislation moved through Congress. R.H. Hancock, Executive Secretary of the Doña Ana County, New Mexico Farm and

1032 Ibid., 227-8; Craig, 168.
1034 Jerry Holleman, Remarks to Board of the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, October 10, 1961, Box 412, Folder 23, Hayden Papers.
1035 Craig, 169; Kiser, 234.
Livestock Bureau, complained that relations with the department were “deteriorating rapidly.” He complained that Goldberg had “adopted a highly critical attitude” and demanded “stricter adherence [sic].”  

Throughout 1961, the Department of Labor targeted the New Mexico growers association for poor record-keeping, something Hancock considered “nit-picking.” Goldberg no doubt saw it differently. The Bureau had been providing braceros to farmers who were not members of the contracting association for years, a clear violation of Public Law 78.

Secretary Goldberg intended to continue the synergy between the reform coalition and the department, seizing the mandate by putting teeth into regulations that protected domestic workers from adverse effect. Compliance personnel continued the housing, food service, and payroll inspections, and Goldberg expanded the transportation safety inspections. But it was Goldberg’s assistant secretary and former Texas AFL-CIO president, Jerry Holleman, who indicated the department’s ultimate ends. With the AFL-CIO organizing in California under AWOC and renewal battles focusing attention on farmworkers, “popular support” was rallying to the department’s crusade, Holleman observed. He believed the end was in sight: “I have told growers that their source of Mexican labor is going to stop, and they had better begin now making preparations to rely on sources other than Mexicans for farm work.”

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1036 R.H. Hancock to Dennis Chavez, May 8, 1961, Box 168, Folder 4: Departments: U.S. Department of Labor: Bracero Program, 1961, Dennis Chavez Papers, University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
1040 Jerry Holleman, Remarks to Board of the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor, October 10, 1961, Box 412, Folder 23, Hayden Papers.
1041 The Los Angeles Examiner, October 22, 1961, transcription of article in Box 412, Folder 23, Hayden Papers.
In fact, growers had been preparing since 1959’s Wagner-Peyser regulations under Secretary Mitchell; the number of bracero contracts began to decline almost as soon as the regulations were published. In New Mexico cotton fields, the number of braceros employed at harvest peak declined by 27 percent from 1960’s figure as machines replaced braceros in the rows. In 1959, state officials with the New Mexico Employment Security Commission estimated that 40 percent of the crop was harvested mechanically. In 1961, the commission estimated that proportion at 75 percent of the crop was machine-picked, though it suggested 90 percent on the high end. The trend toward mechanization was evident in south Texas as well. In 1961, the Lower Rio Grande Valley’s growers once again called upon the Texas Employment Commission to help them acquire the use of cotton harvesters. The commission estimated that between 60 and 70 percent of the valley’s crops were machine-picked, and bracero employment declined 55 percent.

Harvest mechanization could only go so far, though, given the machines’ cost, limited supply, and inapplicability to many fruit and vegetable crops that still required the human touch. Growers who could not mechanize their production still needed a labor force, which they found by switching to workers admitted through the Immigration and Naturalization Service employer-sponsored H-2 visa program used for labor supply from areas other than Mexico during the Bracero Program. More broadly, however, most simply reverted to hiring Mexican workers who illegally entered the United States illegally without documentation. This trend of declining braceros and rising alternatives accelerated rapidly (See Table 6.3).

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1042 In 1960, the New Mexico Farm Placement Service reported 11,330 braceros employed at the peak of the cotton harvest. In 1961, it reported 8,242.
1044 The 55 percent decline was compared to the already-reduced 1960 levels. Texas Employment Commission, 1961 Annual Report, University of Texas-Arlington Special Collections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
<th>Visas</th>
<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>437,643</td>
<td>23,061</td>
<td>45,336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>315,846</td>
<td>32,684</td>
<td>70,684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>291,420</td>
<td>41,632</td>
<td>88,823</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 signaled to both reformers and growers that the effort to reform or end the Bracero Program could not be turned back. Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg intended to continue developing the synergy between reform voices and the Department of Labor in an effort to address farmworkers’ substandard conditions and employment prospects. The 1961 renewal fight and continued department enforcement indicated that the expanding reform coalition was winning important victories, even as on-the-ground organizing efforts by labor and Mexican American groups proceeded in fits and starts in California. Reformers and growers had drawn the battle lines in 1959 and 1960, and reformers had advanced in 1961. All that now remained was for the fight over the Bracero Program to come to its conclusion. Between 1962 and 1964, the Bracero Program wound down as the Department of Labor grew ever more vigorous in regulating the program, growers continued to vent their frustration and flee the program, and the reform coalition kept pressing its case. The program faced one last renewal fight in 1963, a confrontation between reformers and the farm bloc that nearly killed the program and set up the final struggle to end it. The stage for that battle was the 88th Congress, the same Congress that would pass the landmark Civil Rights Act one year later.

*Victory at Long Last, 1962-1964*

With the Bracero Program secured for an additional two years, the administration continued its push against it through administrative action during 1962 by confronting the prevailing wage and adverse effect problems head-on. Instead of allowing growers to offer rates
that domestics would refuse out of hand, Secretary Goldberg conducted wage hearings in areas using braceros. Both growers and farmworkers gave testimony at the hearings, after which the Department issued its determination. The result was the creation of new adverse effect rates for 1962 in 24 states. In practice, hourly wages determined under this procedure varied from a low of 60¢ in Arkansas to $1.00 in California. Texas growers were forced to pay 70¢; New Mexico growers, 75¢; and Arizona growers, 95¢. As Bracero Program scholar Richard Craig noted, the new formula forced employers “to bid higher for the services of domestic farmworkers.”

In case “bidding higher” was insufficient, the department decreed stricter mandates forcing growers to employ domestic workers. Bureau of Employment Security Director Robert Goodwin informed state employment security agencies in May that “an employer is under an obligation” to offer “wages at least equal to those paid to his Mexican workers.” “An effort made to attract domestic workers at a wage rate lower than that stated in the secretary’s determinations will not be considered a reasonable effort,” he emphasized. Some growers responded to department denials of braceros by claiming exception under the special “undue hardship” criteria, but the new Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz (who replaced Goldberg in September following his elevation to the Supreme Court) announced stringent conditions that growers had to meet to obtain the certification. These included offering free transportation to domestic

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1045 Craig, 178-9; Kiser, 245.
1047 Craig, 178-9; Kiser, 245.
farmworkers, free housing and occupational insurance, inexpensive meals, and a guarantee of employment for 75 percent of the workdays in the period for which they were hired.\(^{1049}\)

In California, AWOC tested state officials’ adherence to the department’s rules and regulations. Organizers with AWOC charged the state Farm Placement Service with inefficiency and taking “the easy way out” when it came to matching farmworker requests for work with available jobs.\(^{1050}\) It also alleged that state officials and growers were engaging in “over certification” of braceros in a bid to keep domestic farmworkers away from the fields. By overestimating labor needs and flooding the fields with braceros, growers were trying to harvest their crops quickly before AWOC and others could protest and demand the jobs for American workers.\(^{1051}\) Most to the point, however, was an observation of the Stockton Farm Placement Office that AWOC organizer George Seratt conducted between April and October 1962. Seratt spent every morning in those months tallying the number of jobless farmworkers left behind following morning recruitment. The daily totals ranged from one hundred to one thousand, and Seratt concluded that between April 24 and August 1, 56,682 workers were left without work. He also noted that the Farm Placement Office got much more efficient when inspectors with the U.S. Department of Labor came by. On one such occasion, the number of buses used to transport farmworkers almost doubled as the office tried to demonstrate that the labor shortages it routinely reported to the department were genuine.\(^{1052}\)

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\(^{1049}\) Department of Labor, press release, October 12, 1962, File Operating Procedures, Policy and Releases, and RFMs, 1960-62 [1 of 2], Office of the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.

\(^{1050}\) Mary Lou Ruibal, Memorandum re: Farm Placement Office, May 16, 1962, AWOC Papers, reel 18.

\(^{1051}\) Norman Smith to Victor Karnacki, September 5, 1962, AWOC Papers, reel 18.

In response to the growing number of strikes in California led by AWOC locals and publicity of farmworker issues by Cesar Chavez in the Community Service Organization, the Department of Labor also began to increase its enforcement of Public Law 78’s anti-strikebreaking provisions.\(^{1053}\) It instructed field staff against “a tendency to ‘skim’ over the facts hurriedly,” and advised “great care” before making “any determination” about whether struck farms belonged to growers associations that employed braceros. Such determinations could have serious impacts on an individual employer’s or even an entire association’s right to continue employing braceros during a labor dispute.\(^{1054}\) The department continued its scrutiny of the program in early 1963, when it revealed it had conducted investigations of illegal actions by some of the largest bracero users.\(^{1055}\)

Taken as a whole, 1962 witnessed a broad push to continue reforming the program as labor unrest in California and the reform coalition kept the pressure on growers to use domestic farm labor. The department refined the administration of the program further in 1963 as growers continued to reduce their participation in the program. Where mechanization was not an option, growers who now found the program onerous appeared to be returning to their old habit of unregulated, undocumented labor, and I.N.S. apprehensions ticked upward in response (See Table 6.4). In the spring, the department began to wind down some of the physical plant of the program by closing border reception centers for braceros in Nogales, Arizona and Hidalgo, Texas in response to the shrinking numbers.\(^{1056}\) In the summer, it attempted to forestall growers’ attempts to use the H-2 visa system to obtain Mexican farmworkers by implementing new

\(^{1053}\) Calavita, 145.


\(^{1055}\) Kiser, 247.

procedures requiring local employment service agents “to determine in each case whether
domestic workers are available.”1057 In the fall, it again clarified policies governing referral of
workers to farms engaged in labor disputes, this time extending the prohibition to labor
contractors growers used to weaken strikes.1058 The department also infuriated California
growers by advising them to contact AWOC for referral of domestic farmworkers before asking
for bracero certification.1059

Table 6.4: Bracero Contracts, Mexican Immigrants Admitted on Permanent Visas, and INS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bracero Contracts</th>
<th>Visas</th>
<th>INS Apprehensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>194,978</td>
<td>55,291</td>
<td>92,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>186,865</td>
<td>55,253</td>
<td>88,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>177,736</td>
<td>32,967</td>
<td>86,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>N/A (program ended)</td>
<td>37,969</td>
<td>110,371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data adapted from Kitty Calavita, Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration,

With the program scheduled to expire at the end of 1963, and with the program’s current
operation much to growers’ dissatisfaction, the farm bloc once again tried to secure extension
and to roll back reforms during 1963. Representative Gathings proposed a two-year extension
that would have repealed the 1961 reforms (H.R. 2009), and Secretary Wirtz denounced the bill.
Still, the Kennedy Administration stopped short of calling for outright termination, instead
favoring a one-year extension and additional reforms to facilitate an orderly end to the

Immigrants, July 1, 1963, File Mexican Labor Program, General Correspondence, 1961-65 BES [2 of 3], Office of
the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program,
1950-64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
1058 Robert Goodwin to Regional Administrators, memorandum: Farm Labor Contractors in Farm Labor Disputes,
September 20, 1963, File Mexican Labor Program, General Correspondence, 1961-65 BES [1 of 3], Office of
the Solicitor, Regional Attorney, Region 9, DOL, Records Relating to the Mexican Labor (“Bracero”) Program, 1950-
64, Box 7, RG-174, NARA San Bruno.
1059 David McGann, “The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) Campaign to Terminate the
Bracero Program, 1959-1964,” (M.A. Thesis, Wayne State University, 2007), 86, in Proquest Dissertations and
Theses, http://0-
search.proquest.com.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/pqdtft/docview/304808156/36E0F219F41B67D689/
As in 1961, the administration wanted an amendment forcing growers to extend all bracero contract guarantees to domestic workers. The House Committee on Agriculture rejected both the Gathings bill and the administration proposals in May, instead opting for a simple two-year extension without amendments (H.R. 5497).¹⁰⁶¹

As usual, both bracero users and reformers weighed in on the proceedings, but the volume coming from the reform coalition drowned out growers’ demands. Unions and religious, liberal, and Mexican American organizations flooded congressmen’s offices with telegrams opposing extension. In California, Ernesto Galarza reentered the bracero fray by creating an umbrella Information Committee on Public Law 78 to help coordinate action on the program between the G.I. Forum and the Mexican American Political Association, and he traveled to Washington to represent these groups before Congress.¹⁰⁶² Thomas Pitts, an AWOC commissioner and the California Labor Federation’s executive secretary, urged the Senate to end the program. “Nothing could be more patently unfair or more deadly” to farmworkers than to continue the Bracero Program, he wrote.¹⁰⁶³ The push by the reform coalition was so strong that even Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who believed getting Americans to perform stoop labor “very difficult,” admitted to a grower that the “rough sledding” made him “doubt very much that it can be extended for two years.”¹⁰⁶⁴

When the House Committee on Agriculture sent its bill to the floor for debate, reformers and reactionaries argued their positions with vigor. That much was expected, but the vote that

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid., 249; Craig, 183.
¹⁰⁶¹ Craig, 184; Kiser, 251.
¹⁰⁶³ Pitts to Clair Engle and Thomas Kuchel, July 12, 1963, AWOC Papers, reel 11.
followed surprised everyone. In a vote of 158-174 (with 100 abstentions) the House of Representatives voted down the Bracero Program. The farmworker issue had become so polarizing that the vote split both political parties as well as the bracero-using regions. GOP members voted 78-53, and Democrats voted 80-121. Although Texas representatives voted to extend it, the California delegation split 18-12, reflecting rural-urban divides.\textsuperscript{1065} Now enveloped in controversy, the Bracero Program and the coalition that sustained it was falling apart.

While growers turned apoplectic at the prospect of losing their braceros, the Mexican government feared the effects of a sudden end to the program and intervened to argue against an abrupt termination. Ambassador Antonio Carillo Flores sent a dispatch to the Kennedy Administration in June 1963 describing the reasons why ending the program at the end of the year would be ill-advised. First, the “wetback problem” would return in force if Mexico were not given an opportunity to plan better for the end of bracero migration. Second, the number of Mexican permanent visa applications to the U.S. would skyrocket. Third, the Bracero Program allowed the Department of Labor to help regulate domestic farmworkers’ conditions in the absence of protective legislation. Fourth, remittances to Mexico from braceros constituted the third-largest source of foreign reserves for Mexico. Finally, an abrupt end to the program would damage diplomatic relations.\textsuperscript{1066}

With extension defeated in the House, the Senate responded to the domestic and foreign pressure on July 22. The Agriculture and Forestry Committee brought S. 1703 to the floor. The bill extended the program for one year without new reforms. After a procedural challenge and return to committee, the bill was brought to the floor for debate on August 6. It passed August 15 in a vote of 62-25. Senator McCarthy succeeded in adding the administration’s amendment

\textsuperscript{1065} Craig, 184-5; Kiser, 255.
\textsuperscript{1066} Craig, 186-8.
extending bracero conditions to domestic workers.\textsuperscript{1067} The amendment passed narrowly (44-43) over the opposition of Republicans and southern Democrats.\textsuperscript{1068} When the House considered the Senate bill, it refused to countenance the McCarthy amendment, passing an unamended extension 173-160 (with 94 abstentions). On December 4, the Senate agreed to the House version.\textsuperscript{1069}

Although reformers had failed to add new limitations on bracero employment, the program’s days were numbered. The National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor congratulated itself and other reform groups it had helped inspire for the “years of effort” that had produced what was indisputably the final extension of the program.\textsuperscript{1070} Nothing could turn the tide back now, and that sentiment was best expressed by an unlikely messenger. During debate over the final extension, no less than Senator Allen Ellender—the co-author of Public Law 78 in 1951—declared, “All persons will be on notice that, beginning in 1965, other methods will have to be used to provide for stoop labor.”\textsuperscript{1071}

One of the “other methods” growers hoped to use was the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act’s H-2 visa program, which provided for short-term work visas for immigrants. Alarmed at the Bracero Program’s imminent expiration at the end of 1964, growers pressed Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to use his authority over H-2 labor shortage certifications to authorize braceros. In testimony before Congress, AWOC Director C. Al Green made clear the stakes involved in the question. “The Civil War was fought to free the slaves in America. In 1963, the Congress took action to free the domestic farm worker.” He urged the “Department of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1067} Ibid., 189; Kiser, 263.  
\textsuperscript{1068} Kiser, 263.  
\textsuperscript{1069} Craig, 192-3; Kiser, 268.  
\textsuperscript{1070} Fay Bennett, Information Letter #23, September 1963, Box 11, Folder 10: Natl Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, 1958-1963, Galarza Papers.  
\textsuperscript{1071} Ellender, as quoted Craig, 195.}
Labor to keep domestic farm workers free from competing with laborers from other countries. But Green need not have been concerned about the secretary’s position. On December 19, 1964, Wirtz dispelled growers’ illusions. “There will be no administrative extension of the situation existing under Public Law 78,” he said. Instead, growers would have to offer wages ranging from $1.15 to $1.40 per hour, depending on the state, a far cry from rates that were as low as 60¢ and 70¢ in 1962. As for foreign workers in general, Wirtz was emphatic: “All that is warranted is that there be responsible action…to effect an orderly transition to the use of U.S. workers in these areas where reliance has previously been placed on foreign workers.”

Conclusion: Ending the Bracero Program

Between 1959 and 1964 both the NAWU and the Bracero Program it fought came to an end. The creation of AWOC had given Mitchell and Galarza the organizing campaign for which they had advocated since 1955. While that campaign failed in the short term and took the NAWU down with it, it did leave a significant legacy. AWOC built on the organizing activities of the NAWU, and it found allies and comrades-in-arms in other organizations such as Cesar Chavez and the Community Service Organization and later the National Farm Workers Association. Chavez would soon assume the mantle of farmworker organization by uniting AWOC with the NFWA to form the United Farm Workers, which inaugurated an unprecedented campaign to organize farmworkers for economic and social justice.


1073 Department of Labor, news release, USDL-6442, December 19, 1964, Box 284, Folder 30, Carl Hayden Papers, Arizona State University Special Collections, Tempe, Arizona.
More important than the AWOC legacy, though, the NAWU’s activities hastened the end of the Bracero Program, an accomplishment for which Mitchell and Galarza deserved a significant amount of credit. In the face of a large guestworker program that gave growers a tractable and deportable labor force, the union’s organizing tactics had little chance of succeeding. Frustrated in California, Mitchell and Galarza directed their attention to a direct and sustained assault on the Bracero Program as a means of raising awareness of the farmworker question. In their view, any attempt to organize farmworkers first required dispensing with the Bracero Program. Although they failed at their larger task of unionizing farmworkers, they succeeded in the immediate quest to end the Bracero Program by mobilizing reformers, arming them with the research they used as ammunition against the program, and pushing to destroy the Bracero Program as a means to their ultimate end of improving the lives of the nation’s poorest workers.

Thus ended part of a long struggle that began among black and white sharecroppers in Arkansas in 1934. That struggle had produced a union of sharecroppers that fought in vain against wartime labor mobilization programs that trapped its members on their landlords’ plantations. After the war, that union moved west and transformed itself into a union of farm laborers for postwar agriculture with the nearly impossible task of organizing racially diverse California farmworkers into a union that did not enjoy the benefits of the nation’s labor laws. In the face of powerful growers and a long, porous border that neither the union nor governments could effectively control, and battling the presence of a guestworker program that was routinely used against it, Mitchell and Galarza’s union had little chance of success. Nevertheless, they found a way to fight for their members and broader constituency by helping to clear the Bracero Program out of the way for future organizers and by raising awareness of the shameful
conditions suffered by the nation’s poorest workers. Although the future of farmworker
organizing belonged to other leaders and movements, Mitchell, Galarza, the NAWU, and its
members kept the fight alive and tilled the organizing ground for future harvests.
Epilogue: “The Stepchildren of Labor”

Between 1942 and 1964, organized labor was the only force that fought the Bracero Program from beginning to end. The continuous opposition of the National Agricultural Workers Union—and its predecessors the National Farm Labor Union and Southern Tenant Farmers Union—was essential to terminating the program. Indeed, the union learned the hard way that it had no choice but to lobby and mobilize allies against the Bracero Program if the goal of farmworker unionism would ever be realized. As soon as the Bracero Program started in 1942, the union challenged it by claiming it was unnecessary as long as underemployed sharecroppers remained semi-captive on their landlords’ plantations. After the war, it relocated to California and attempted to organize postwar farmworkers in a state closely identified with industrial-scale farming and heavily dependent on the Bracero Program. By the mid-1950s, the union’s leaders determined that traditional organizing would not succeed so long as farmworkers confronted not only growers’ opposition but also a porous border and a guestworker policy that made it easy for employers to import competing labor that they used to break strikes and depress wages.

Accordingly, the union began to agitate against the program in more innovative ways. At first, it tried to build transnational ties with Mexican unions, though that effort fell short given the realities of labor-state dynamics and underemployment south of the border. The union succeeded, however, by turning to publicity efforts that helped rally a growing coalition of liberals, religious reformers, and Mexican American activists to their cause. That coalition found expression in the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, organized by the National Sharecroppers Fund, the union’s old fundraising ally. The National Committee’s hearings helped achieve the NAWU’s bigger goal of getting the nation’s labor movement to commit to a high-profile organizing campaign. Although the NAWU was destroyed in the process of AWOC’s
creation, and although AWOC was never more than marginally successful at organizing farmworkers, the reform coalition that had coalesced by the late 1950s kept up the fight against the Bracero Program and ultimately secured its termination, aided by like-minded secretaries of labor.

In 1954, Ernesto Galarza provided the best summary of the union’s role in the struggle against the Bracero Program. Writing to George Meany to refute his allegation that the union had not accomplished anything despite years of AFL subsidies, Galarza gave an impassioned defense of its efforts. Although it had failed to organize California farmworkers consistently and thoroughly, it had done much more. “It has been our Union,” Galarza wrote, “that has defined the problem, accepted the challenge, fought the abuses of this contract system, brought the irresponsible government officials who have covered up those abuses to heel, and developed a record of what is actually happening to American workers through this device of the bosses.”

Galarza could not have been more correct. The union’s research and publicity efforts were its most important contribution to ending the Bracero Program. It failed to realize its mission to organize farmworkers in postwar agriculture, but it succeeded in contributing significantly to the effort to influence agricultural labor policy by arming Bracero Program opponents with the data necessary to raise awareness of farmworkers’ plight and use in the battle to eliminate the program from the nation’s fields. Indeed, the fact that the union managed to survive at all to achieve this feat represented a significant accomplishment. Mirroring the transformation in the nation’s agricultural economy, it successfully metamorphosed from a New Deal era union of sharecroppers and tenant farmers into a union of postwar farmworkers, all the while confronting members’ migrancy, well-organized grower opposition, indifferent or hostile bureaucrats, transnational labor competition from braceros and undocumented labor, and a labor...

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1074 Galarza to Meany, June 10, 1954, STFU Papers, reel 38.
movement whose leaders often doubted the potential for organizing farmworkers in the first place and who were wary of the risks inherent in trying.

In their darkest days of waiting for organized labor to make a decision on farmworkers while their union teetered on the verge of bankruptcy, H.L. Mitchell and Ernesto Galarza had shared their opinions with each other on the labor movement’s relationship to the least of America’s workers. The two men had engaged in this kind of exchange throughout the mid-1950s as they poked and prodded the newly merged labor movement to make a commitment to organize farmworkers. Galarza had always assumed that organized labor would shirk the responsibility of organizing field workers, and he did not mind too much, writing to Mitchell that he would rather build an organization that made “decent and creative use of the talents and abilities of the people you work with” rather than a traditional labor union. He held the “big business unionism” of the AFL-CIO in disdain because he found it ambivalent to the kind of responsiveness to the rank and file that he thought was necessary to create a labor movement among workers unprotected by labor law. Furthermore, he saw little chance that the AFL-CIO would choose the correct strategy to organize farmworkers, if it ever chose to act at all.

Mitchell had little grounds to disagree. He had had plenty of experience with the labor movement’s ambivalence or outright hostility to workers on the land. Back in his Southern Tenant Farmers Union days, the craft unions of Memphis dismissed his biracial organization as nothing more than agrarian radicalism inspired by the socialist Norman Thomas. At the National Farm Labor Union’s 1948 conference a little more than a decade later, George Meany—the very embodiment of craft union conservatism—characterized the labor movement’s attitude toward farmworkers. Meany took the stage and immediately declared, “I don’t believe that the farm

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1075 Galarza to Mitchell, November 6, 1956, STFU Papers, reel 39.
workers of this country can be unionized. I don’t believe any of you want to be organized.”

Mitchell doubted labor’s willingness to do anything even on the eve of the announcement of AWOC. “We are and always have been the stepchildren of Labor,” he bitterly wrote to Galarza. The fate of their union seemed to bear out the truth of Mitchell’s and Galarza’s pronouncements as it was forced from the field in deference of AWOC, which stumbled repeatedly.

For a labor movement based in the industrial core of the Northeast and Midwest, farmworkers were “at best its poor relations,” Mitchell wrote. The New Deal had given that labor movement significant benefits by recognizing labor’s right to organize and collectively bargain. The passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act emboldened countless workers to band together and challenge their employers in a wide variety of industries, in the process producing an energetic industrial union movement. Their efforts helped lead to further reform with the Wagner Act, which enshrined labor’s right to collective action and led to an unprecedented acceptance of labor unions in American industry and life, though it also brought labor disputes under the regulatory aegis of the administrative state.

Congress refused to include agricultural workers under the umbrella of labor legislation, though, because Southern Democrats would not countenance any threat to the Jim Crow

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1076 AFL President William Green, a friend of Mitchell’s and an honorary member of the NFLU, was scheduled to address the conference. When a scheduling conflict prevented his attendance, Green sent Meany. Meany, as quoted by Mitchell in Mitchell, Mean Things Happening in This Land, 223.
1077 Mitchell to Galarza, November 19, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
1078 Mitchell to Galarza, November 19, 1958, STFU Papers, reel 41.
1079 Some of the newfound solidarity resulted from cross-ethnic identity made possible partly through the efforts of business leaders through corporate welfare to make employees band together as part of a larger corporate family. For instance, Lizabeth Cohen has argued that company unions and other corporate welfare policies in the 1920s unified a diverse working class behind the goals of higher wages, fair treatment, and rising expectations. For more, see Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Chapter 4.
order. By leaving farmworkers out, “the government institutionalized farm workers’ separation from industrial workers and reinforced their economic and political powerlessness,” as historian Devra Weber has rightly noted. Thus, the very structure of the New Deal regulatory state that enabled the union movement to expand its base in industry and build its membership rolls also established firm barriers to organized labor’s ability to organize farmworkers, whatever labor leaders’ interest in such a task may have been. They were unprotected by the legislation that bestowed benefits on the rest of the House of Labor, they faced labor competition from across the border, their ranks were filled with poor people who could not reliably pay the dues necessary to fund their own organizations, and even if they could, those organizations would have to enter a no man’s land in national labor law.

Those barriers to organizing farmworkers only strengthened during World War II and the postwar period. With labor pledging unwavering support for a wartime mobilization effort dominated by industry leaders, there was little chance to expand the base of organizing to those in agriculture who most needed it. And just as major industrial employers came to direct the wartime production effort in the cities, the nation’s biggest growers forestalled the potential for labor unrest created by what could have been the end of labor superabundance on their farms by


1081 Weber’s book details farmworkers’ response to the New Deal’s promise of collective bargaining. Agricultural workers in California struck against growers in 1933-34 under the leadership of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union and again in 1938-39 under UCAPAWA leadership. In the former convulsions, the federal government arbitrated the strike but denied union recognition. By the time of the latter strike, farmworkers’ exclusion had been codified clearly, and the federal government stood on the sidelines. Weber, 80-106; 126.

1082 For a comprehensive account of organized labor, its sacrifices, and its gains during World War II, see Brinkley, 180-90, 222-23; Fraser, Chapter 16; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [c 1982]; Zieger, 111-33, 141-46. In addition to organizing successes, Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Commission was also a major victory for civil rights activists within the House of Labor. For the FEPC, see Fraser, 479, and for its limitations, see Clete Daniel, *Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness: The FEPC in the Southwest, 1941-1945* (Austin: UT Press, 1991), chapter 1.
both securing labor importation programs and their control over them.\textsuperscript{1083} As a result, farmworker unionism retreated to defensive battles, cut off from the benefits of organized labor and beaten by growers wielding a club of exploited guestworkers and undocumented labor.

The postwar era proved no better while an alliance of Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans contained labor’s economic ambitions and gave agricultural employers what they wanted. As organized labor came to terms with restrictions on its activity embodied in the Taft-Hartley Act and the business unionism the nation’s labor laws encouraged, its members nonetheless benefited from the contractual bargaining that improved their standard of living in the booming postwar economy.\textsuperscript{1084} But farmworkers fell farther and farther behind as they struggled to compete with foreign guestworkers brought to the United States through programs growers continued to control. In the broader postwar context of restrictions on the union movement, labor’s inability to expand into the fast-growing South and West, and most importantly, the continued manipulation of the domestic farm labor market through the Bracero Program, there was little chance for farmworker unionism to take hold.\textsuperscript{1085}

With the union movement’s assumption of a defensive posture, there was little chance that organized labor would rush to help farmworkers battling a foreign labor importation program. Excluded from the outset from the New Deal regulatory regime that framed labor’s limited postwar aspirations, organizing farmworkers would have been just another burden to the

\textsuperscript{1083} On the “superabundance of labor on American farms during the long agricultural Depression and World War II, see Hahamovitch, \textit{No Man’s Land}, chapter 2.


nation’s labor leaders. Although Walter Reuther hoped the AFL-CIO merger could be used to broaden labor’s base, George Meany largely set the terms of the labor federation’s marriage, and the CIO’s smaller size and membership meant it had little choice but to go along. Thus a postwar labor movement of proscribed aspirations effectively abandoned the effort to organize farmworkers, workers the labor movement could not even begin to understand how to organize, let alone figure out what to do with them should they be successfully unionized given their marginal legal status as workers.

In such a context, the NAWU—the only game in town—waged a heroically tragic battle largely on its own, and its leaders ultimately came to understand that before anyone could undertake farmworker organizing, they would need to help organize a movement of reformers to stamp out the Bracero Program that stood in their way. The union did not last long enough to see its immediate goal realized, though, and the future of farmworker organizing lay with different movements emerging in the early 1960s, movements organizing as part of the broader rights revolution. Cesar Chavez, who as a young man walked his first picket line in a National Farm Labor Union strike, emerged out of the nascent Chicano movement and the Community Service Organization in California to lead the cause of farmworker organization.

Yet even the United Farm Workers illustrated the almost insurmountable barriers to unionizing farmworkers who live and work in a transnational labor market and in the absence of a legal framework that allows organizing efforts to bear fruit. Although the union succeeded in drawing farmworkers to its cause and building upon the increased public attention drawn to farmworker conditions by the reform coalition, its biggest victories came through nontraditional tactics. The strike that brought the union of the AWOC and Chavez’s National Farm Workers Association together to form the United Farm Workers was the Delano grape strike. That strike
began in 1965, led by AWOC, but by 1966 the two groups had merged. However, the new United Farm Workers found farmworker strikes to be almost as impotent as the NAWU had found them, though the increased public and political attention to farmworker issues certainly represented a positive change. Instead, the new union came to rely on consumer boycotts and an appeal to the public conscience in its bid to improve farmworkers’ lives. Even with the power of a consumer boycott behind the effort, though, staunchly anti-union growers took until 1970 to sign a collective bargaining agreement with the union.\footnote{Chavez later tried for state-level legislation to fill the farmworker gap in the nation’s labor laws, but the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act merely tied down the union in legalistic proceedings while neighboring Arizona prohibited strikes during the harvests and outlawed secondary boycotts.\footnote{By the late twentieth century, the promise of the post-Bracero Program farmworker movement had turned to disappointment, frustrated by the lack of a regulatory framework for agricultural labor and a porous border that allowed growers to continue their abuse of foreign workers. Although important in the short term, the NAWU’s work to remove the barrier of the Bracero Program did little to improve the prospects for organizing farmworkers in the end. An embattled and shrinking labor movement had little interest in taking on an additional burden, and the United Farm Workers continued to encounter significant resistance or structural barriers to the innovative strategies it brought to bear on the problem. Although recent scholarship has focused on the shortcomings of Cesar Chavez’s leadership, such accounts miss the fact that} 1086 Chavez later tried for state-level legislation to fill the farmworker gap in the nation’s labor laws, but the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act merely tied down the union in legalistic proceedings while neighboring Arizona prohibited strikes during the harvests and outlawed secondary boycotts.\footnote{Ferriss and Sandoval, 197-209; Meeks, 202-10.}
almost all of the structural barriers that frustrated the NAWU continued to exist after the fall of the Bracero Program. To that list of barriers, growers also added their continuing mechanization of the harvests, which intensified competition for farm work as jobs were eliminated outright.

For those crops that could not be easily or cheaply mechanized, however, the end of the Bracero Program brought not jobs for domestic farmworkers, but rather competition from returning undocumented immigrants, who employers used to hold down wages and deny domestic farmworker crews the work conditions they required, such as family housing. As concerns over illegal immigration once again emerged in the 1980s, the federal government returned to the model of Operation Wetback and the Bracero Program by offering immigration reform paired with the expansion of guestworker programs. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act offered a path to permanent legal status for undocumented immigrants who came forward, but as it moved through Congress, lawmakers responded to growers’ and other employers’ demands for guestworkers by splitting the H2 program into an agricultural H-2A program and a non-agricultural H-2B program. More to the point, as Congress charted a path to legalization for the 3 million immigrants who eventually presented themselves under IRCA, it not only weakened proposed penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers, but it also directed the Department of Labor to rapidly expand and streamline the new H-2A program.

What had been a relatively small guestworker program supplying Florida sugarcane growers with Jamaican cane cutters quickly became a repeat of the Bracero Program by bringing growing numbers of mostly Mexican guestworkers to farms around the nation. The program that governs their labor today is almost identical to the Bracero Program. In fact, it is difficult to read a recent report by Farmworker Justice titled “No Way to Treat a Guest: Why the H-2A Visa Program Fails U.S. and Foreign Workers,” without thinking of Ernesto Galarza’s *Strangers in*...
Indeed, the text would have applied as readily to the Bracero Program as it does to the current H-2A program. The report charges the Department of Labor with negligent oversight on prevailing wage determinations and adverse effects, and it documents growers’ abuse of foreign labor and their use of guestworkers to depress domestic farmworkers’ wages and prevent labor organization in their fields.

Today, the difficult task of farmworker organization faces the long-standing problems of migrancy, poverty, the entrenched power of growers, the lack of legal protections for farmworker unions, continued guestworker programs, and competition from undocumented immigrants who appear unlikely to benefit from comprehensive and employer-neutral immigration reform anytime soon. In this context, it remains difficult to see how justice for farmworkers can be won. Given the historical relationship between organized labor and agricultural workers, compounded by the sorry state of labor organization and law in the twenty-first century, improving the lives of those who harvest the nation’s food requires innovative strategies. The National Agricultural Workers Union once hit upon the right combination: research, publicity, and the mobilization of allies to help force change at a critical reform moment in the nation’s history. It remains to be seen if human agency and historical circumstances can again combine to help accomplish a job begun almost eighty years ago when eleven white and seven black sharecroppers met in a plantation schoolhouse in Jim Crow Arkansas.

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