

Picture This:

California Perspectives on American History

Depression Era: 1930s:

Repatriation for Mexican & Filipino Farm Workers



Mexican and Mexican American migrant farm workers expected conditions like those pictured above as they sought farm work in California and other states in the early 1900s. At that time, the Mexican Revolution and the series of Mexican civil wars that followed pushed many Mexicans to flee to the United States. Many U.S. farm owners recruited Mexicans and Mexican Americans because they believed that these desperate workers would tolerate living conditions that workers of other races would not.

Mexican and Mexican American workers often earned more in the United States than they could in Mexico's civil war economy, although California farmers paid Mexican and Mexican American workers significantly less than white American workers. By the 1920s, at least three quarters of California's 200,000 farm workers were Mexican or Mexican American.

As this rapid shift of Mexico's working population occurred, the first labor agreement between the United States and Mexico was formed. Mexico required that U.S. farm owners provide legal contracts for all Mexican workers guaranteeing conditions such as wages and work schedules. The U.S. government, in turn, enforced the border between the United States and Mexico, checking that all Mexican immigrants had the proper work contract so they would not be exploited.

As the Great Depression took a toll on California's economy during the 1930s, however, Mexicans and Mexican Americans became targets for discrimination and removal. White government officials claimed that Mexican immigrants made up the majority of the California unemployed. White trade unions claimed that Mexican immigrants were taking jobs that should go to white men. In reality, a new supply of white refugees desperate for jobs was flooding California from the Midwest, making up the majority of the unemployed.

At the same time that wages were dropping due to the new white refugee labor, established Mexican and Mexican American farm workers had become a threat by banding together, often with other non-whites, and organizing strikes to protest lowered wages and worsening living conditions. Agriculture in the United States was crippled due to the ongoing Dust Bowl drought in the Midwest, while California was relatively untouched - the farm owners had a chance to profit immensely from the supply of cheap labor, but not if these protests succeeded.

California state and local governments responded to white farm owner pressure and implemented "repatriation" plans to send Mexican immigrants back to Mexico in busloads and boxcars. Many Mexican Americans were also sent out of the United States under these programs, there being no differentiation between Mexicans and Mexican American U.S. citizens. Mexican American U.S. citizens who were children at the time were also deported to Mexico along with their Mexican parents.

Despite a hundred years of effort, economic exploitation of farm workers of all races continues to this day in California and across the United States. As long as farm owners can continue forcing people to live in such conditions, the farm workers' struggle seems doomed to continue.

Standards:

11.6: Student analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government. (11.6.3)

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