

challenge for the unions; they had to present their arguments within the context of a diplomatic agreement. Moreover, they did not directly represent the farm workers, those most affected by the bracero program, nor did their jurisdiction extend beyond the US border. Yet the existence of the bracero program challenged the very foundation of organized labor in the United States. In effect, under cover of a diplomatic agreement, powerful agricultural employers avoided negotiating with domestic workers and the unions that might represent them in order to develop a foreign source of labor.

American organized labor chose a strategy to broaden its influence, with the potential of redefining its role in US political life. The leadership sought more open and official collaboration with Mexican organized labor to insert its position into domestic and international public discussions.

Joint United States-Mexican trade union committee

In 1953, the AFL-CIO and the *Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos* (CTM) began discussions regarding their mutual interest in problems associated with the bracero program and attendant illegal migration; in December of that year, delegates from both countries held a "Conference of US-Mexican Trade Unions on Agricultural Labor" at the CTM headquarters in Mexico City.

The bi-national conference was the first meeting of what would be the Joint United States-Mexican Trade Union Committee. While short-lived, the organization's activities expressed union concerns in both countries about the bracero program and the fate of Mexican migrants, both legal and illegal. Moreover, it is significant that the bracero program coincidentally provided a vehicle for both US and Mexican unions to present a joint position in an international context.

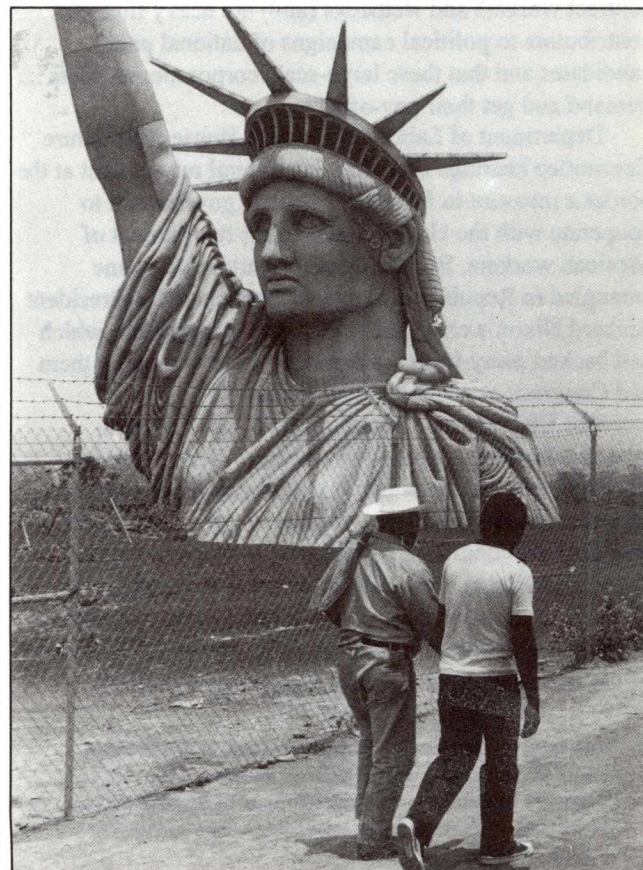
Indeed, the 1953 conference issued a statement that reflected an accurate analysis of the bracero program and its implications, and highlighted their agenda. The Joint Committee acknowledged that the traditional migration of Mexican agricultural workers, both legal and illegal, had profoundly affected both countries and that, in fact, some US employers had become dependent on Mexican farm workers.

The World War II bracero program intensified this dependence, and reinforced long standing, unsatisfactory living and working conditions for Mexican farm workers. Moreover, the loss of agricultural workers in Mexico had already affected the availability of certain products, and the unsupervised emigration of other workers, such as *ejidatarios*, and skilled workers, caused by the bracero program, threatened serious repercussions for the Mexican economy. The Joint Committee also made it clear that Mexican and American union representatives should participate in any negotiations concerning the recruitment

of Mexican labor for the United States. Lastly, the Joint Committee was to strengthen relations between the unions of both countries and "seek the solution of common problems affecting them."

The Committee, further, resolved to request strict enforcement by both governments of individual work contracts under the bracero program. Both countries should review their labor legislation and adopt the better of the two to guide the bracero program. The Mexican government should take a more assertive role in monitoring and controlling the emigration of its workers to minimize adverse domestic economic ramifications. The unions also suggested that Mexican workers who left gainful employment to join the bracero program be sanctioned. The Joint Committee also insisted that undocumented migration be controlled by agencies of both countries, and that officials that did not cooperate be punished.

The Joint Committee suggested that "prevailing wages", the concept used in the bracero program to establish pay schedules, be determined through Department of Labor hearings. The implication being that those who negotiated the agricultural bracero program had no basis on which to fix fair wages; in non-unionized industries, such



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Open borders... a mirage?

as agriculture, "prevailing wages" fluctuated according to supply and demand, local conditions, etc.

The unions wanted to force the US government to account for the wages it established for agricultural braceros. Nevertheless the effect of the bracero program was to cede the power to establish "prevailing wages" to powerful, agricultural employer associations. It should be noted that in the short-lived railroad bracero program of World War II the "prevailing wages" were defined by negotiations between the Maintenance of Way Brotherhood and the railroads.

The following April, the American committee members, supported by Walter Reuther of the CIO, George Meany of the AFL, John Owens of the UMW and George Leighty of the Railway Labor Executives Association, requested President Dwight Eisenhower to grant the Joint Committee official consultative status.

In fact, the union leaders accused Eisenhower of completely abrogating the bracero program with his signature to a bill authorizing unilateral recruitment of farm workers at the border, and questioned his motives for, in effect, cancelling an international agreement with a friendly, contiguous nation.

The US members of the Committee attributed it to pressure from "...the big growers who employ Mexican contract workers and wetbacks (and) are heavy financial contributors to political campaigns of national party candidates and that these large-scale corporation farmers ... demand and get their pay-offs."¹

Department of Labor witnesses at House Agriculture Committee hearings considered unilateral recruitment at the border a measure to force the Mexican government to cooperate with the United States in the recruitment of Mexican workers. But unilateral recruitment became entangled in Republican Congressional and Vice-President Richard Nixon's criticism of the State Department, which had backed away from the measure, thereby making them and Congress as a whole "look foolish."²

The US Joint Committee delegation, along with religious leaders, proposed to Attorney-General Herbert Brownell that sanctions be imposed against employers of undocumented workers as a measure to guarantee the living and working conditions of Mexican workers in the US. They insisted that sub-standard conditions for Mexican workers would inevitably result in sub-standard conditions for domestic workers, an observation confirmed by officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

¹ Press Release, *US Members of Joint US-Mexican Trade Union Committee*, issued by Gardner Jackson, for release April 15, 1954. Documents pertaining to this committee can be found in the Irwin De Shetler Collection at the Labor and Urban Affairs Archives of Wayne State University in Detroit.

² "Statement by US Members, Joint US-Mexican Trade Union Committee on Migratory Labor," April 14, 1954, p. 2.

Brownell indicated that the Department of Justice was already drafting a bill to that effect, although it should be noted that employer sanctions were not instituted until the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Clearly, the American delegates were using the Committee not only to improve the lot of the Mexican braceros but also to draw the attention of American public opinion to the plight of domestic farm workers as well.

The Committee recognized the relationship between the free availability of Mexican farm workers and the deteriorating prospects for American migrant workers.

Although the Joint Committee had developed its own agenda and identity, the Third International Conference in San Diego in August of 1955 focused basically on the same issues that had originally brought the Committee together.

The Committee condemned United States efforts to fence certain parts of the international boundary, claiming that "artificial barriers" were useless in preventing illegal immigration; the labor movements of both countries should promote an open border where citizens of both countries could cross legally.

Organized labor in both countries should collaborate to improve working conditions and strive to eliminate wage differences, recognizing in particular the Texas State Labor Federation and Mexican border state CTMs.

Most significant of all, the Joint Committee adopted a position on the bracero program. It agreed in principle with the concept of the bracero program, that is, administered migration, when properly carried out.³

The Committee commended the efforts of the INS to reduce illegal migration, and insisted that Congress allocate more funds for the INS and for contract enforcement. It recommended that state labor organizations be consulted to verify "prevailing wages" that according to Public Law 78 would now be established with input from workers and employers. Finally, the Committee again insisted that they be given consultative status regarding future developments of the bracero program.

The activities of this Committee constitute undeniable proof that organized labor in both countries was, indeed, concerned with the plight of Mexican workers employed under the bracero program. Its establishment, moreover, demonstrates that unions could be innovative in developing bi-national channels to force both governments to seriously consider their positions. Although the Committee was short-lived, and its influence on the bracero program limited, it remains a significant precedent in the history of Mexican migration to the United States ✎

³ For more information, consult *Merchants of Labor* by Ernesto Galarza. A classic study of the bracero program by a member of the Joint Committee, *Merchants* remains one of the most informative and readable analyses.