

The Mirage of the North

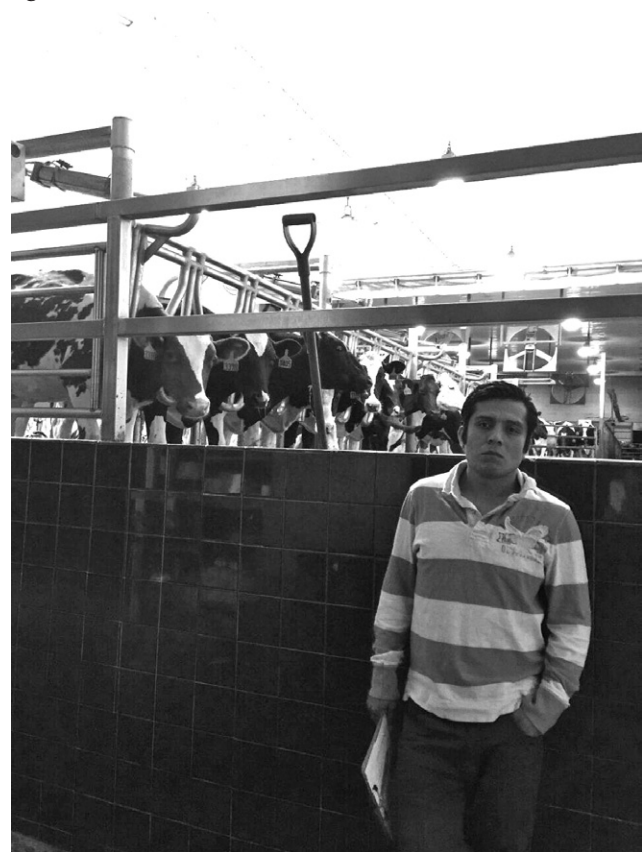
The Story of a Former New York State Dairy Worker

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My name is Agustín Omar Rodríguez Juárez. I live in the state of Morelos, Mexico. I'm 33 years old and a university student. Due to serious economic need, I had to go to work in the United States, where I joined the Workers Center of Central New York (WCCNY) after being subjected to severe labor abuses. In this account, I explain my experience there and my contact with the WCCNY, and how the center was decisive at a time when I found myself alone and didn't know who to ask for help.

I grew up in a family of merchants and peasants: my great grandparents lived in poverty and marginalization, documented by an anthropologist named Oscar Lewis in his book *Pedro Martínez*.¹ Later, my grandparents continued in the same circumstances, though with less deprivation. In an attempt to help the family get on, my mother emigrated to the United States where she worked for more than eight years. By sending back money and investing it in local businesses, she managed to get enough money together to be able to do medium-scale farming and large-scale apiculture and open a small corn mill. This notably improved the family situation for a time. Then my mother married and I grew up in a family that, while not rich, did enjoy slightly better circumstances.

Everything went on like that until I was 13, and we began to have financial problems. Corn mills stopped being a basic need in the town, and the new modern way of doing things meant that young wives no longer made tortillas by hand, as had been the tradition; this meant the business went bust. My grandfather died a few years later, and then my grandmother. Since the family business wasn't being managed properly, this led to a situation that, while not as bad as in



Courtesy of the author

the time of my great-grandparents, was still very precarious. That was when I had to start working in a company that didn't belong to the family.

I had always lived among peasants and workers, though I have relatives who are teachers and other kinds of professionals. It began to be hard for me to keep studying, and that's how things went until the university. I had to stop studying several times to go to work, but I always went back.

In Mexico, nationally-owned companies don't give young people much of a chance when they first set out looking for a

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job. It's very common to hear that you won't be hired for this or that job "because of lack of experience." Another reason is not having recommendations, because of nepotism, or corruption and influence trafficking. This forces many of our compatriots to emigrate to the United States and Canada. In my case, I had to emigrate to the United States.

In early 2014, I went to Florida and started working picking oranges. I noticed then that lots of labor abuses were taking place, like demanding that a worker pick nine tons of oranges a day. I'm from a mountain town where walking and getting lots of exercise are part of our daily routine, but when I got to that country and was faced with that kind of injustice, the change was extreme.

I had worked for a month and two weeks when a friend invited me to go to New York State, and I went to a dairy farm. I emigrated thinking that in a different state there would be fewer abuses; my hope was to find better working conditions, even if the amount of work wasn't less. Unfortunately, everything was different from what I had hoped.

I should mention that I already had experience as an agricultural laborer in Mexico and in Florida, but in New York, I met up with a whole different situation. When I arrived, it was extremely cold and everything was covered in snow. I went to Central New York, where most people are English speakers. So, I was working in a place covered with snow, where communication was almost completely in English, and I didn't speak it, though I understood quite a lot. And that made me suffer less abuse than the ones who didn't understand any at all. Since I was in an area bordering on Canada, I was afraid I would meet up with the Patrol and my scanty knowledge of the language would make it difficult for me to express myself, especially if I was nervous.

So, suddenly I'm in Lowville, New York, on a dairy farm where a Mexican supervisor meets me. At that time, I hadn't met the people who would be my bosses. They gave me a blanket "to sleep on an armchair in the living room," as the supervisor said, since there wouldn't be a bed for me until the next week. I didn't feel very good, but when I looked out the window and saw the countryside all covered with piles of snow, I had the feeling, at least right then, that I was protected, because I would be sleeping in the living room of the "trailer" (mobile home).

On the first days of work, a boy of about 15 or 16 was the one who trained me—if you can call it that, because it only lasted a day. The next day, two other people, a teenager and a man, trained me. The man said, "You should have

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learned by now; if you haven't, it's your problem; from tomorrow on, you work alone with your partner and you already have to have learned."

On the third day I asked what my wage would be and they answered that that depended on how hard I worked. When I wanted to ask the lady boss when my day off would be, I didn't know how to say it in English. Later they told me they would give me one, but that the wage, like they had said, would depend on how I performed. They told me I was lucky to have a day off because there are ranches where the workers have no day off the first year at all, and they work 120 hours a week.

I should mention that I took several advanced-English courses at the university and that my mother was bilingual since she had worked many years in the United States. In Mexico, my English is considered advanced, but in conversations with native speakers, that English didn't help me much. I don't even want to imagine how people who had no opportunity to take English classes in Mexico got along; they must have suffered more because they didn't understand even the most basic things. In the central part of New York, not understanding the language opens you up to abuse and mockery from the bosses.

In what we called the "parla" (the milking parlor), the work is done very quickly. A lot of the cows were aggressive and had kicked several workers. I milked hundreds a day. Once, when I was about to leave, I had to milk a very aggressive cow, and she suddenly kicked me in my chest around my heart. I felt that the kick was from the boss, who hadn't trained me to protect myself from the aggressive ones. Just by luck, or for reasons I cannot imagine, my heart didn't stop, but at that instant, I felt that its rhythm changed, and after that I suffered from dangerous arrhythmia. A fellow worker told the boss what had happened, but I wasn't taken to the hospital, and I didn't have a car or any possibility to drive there.

I left work and went to my "apartment" on foot. When I left the "parla," I thought getting some sleep would be enough to get better, but that night I couldn't breathe. My

lungs were swollen and I had a hard time taking a deep breath. The boss didn't even come to ask how I was doing! The supervisor told me that I should work the next day, and I did go to work even though I was in pain. But, a few minutes later, I told him that I couldn't, that it was just impossible; I was having difficulty breathing and I had a sharp pain in my chest.

I left the milking parlor and went to the dormitory with those symptoms. In the afternoon, the supervisor came to see me and asked, "Can you move your hands?" And I said that I could, and then he said, "So, you're okay. Tell me if you're going to work or not, so I can get somebody else.... You have a week to find another place to go." Right then, I began to think. I didn't know where to go. I thought about going back to Mexico because of my health after the accident. The decision to not work anymore was simply due to the fact that my condition wouldn't allow for it. The boss told the supervisor that I had eight days to leave the "trailer"; he didn't care about my physical status.

At the last minute I got a call from the Worker Justice Center of New York, and they said they wanted to see me. A friend of mine who was a member of the center had told them about my accident. I was afraid: I thought that the boss would come and pay lawyers and deny any responsibility. But I accepted. I was afraid that the boss would buy people off. I was completely unaware of any worker's rights. The people who are now my *compañeros* and friends at the workers' center took me to the hospital and explained that I had the right for the boss to pay the medical bills because it had been a work-related accident.

I left the hospital and was also afraid that the state police would blame me for the accident. I remembered the corruption in my country and thought they would send me right back to Mexico. Later, they took me to the home of a workers' center leader, Rebeca Fuentes. She put me up in her home and didn't charge me a dime.

The aim of the Worker Justice Center of New York is to empower workers, whether they are U.S. citizens, residents, or undocumented workers, but mainly the latter because

they're susceptible to abuse because of their immigration status. I joined the center and participated in lots of activities. One was a protest on a big ranch in the northern part of the state because the boss's son-in-law, who was in charge, hit a worker because he didn't want to go to work on his day off. That's why the Worker Justice Center of New York organized that protest, which got some attention in the press. We arrived there and organized a caravan that was filmed by a local New York television station; other journalists from local media were there, too. We protested by shouting and chanting slogans in favor of the workers. I should mention that that day, many of them were closed up in their "trailers" and ordered not to come out. They tricked them making them believe that the *migra* [immigration authorities] would be coming that day.

The Worker Justice Center of New York gave me moral support when I needed it most. They gave me lodging and trained me in my labor rights, which I can say I know better than a lot of my fellow migrants. But that's not because I'm smarter than they are; it's because many of them don't demand their rights because they're afraid. Their bosses have scared them, and they're afraid to investigate or ask. I hope that someday, the workers on the enormous dairy farms are given more humanitarian treatment, since the bosses get rich at the expense of the suffering of Latino migrants. They lose their families and sometimes leave everything behind to seek the opportunities they cannot find in their home countries, and they meet up with a group of ranchers who use them.

As long as they're treated like slaves, they're not called "undocumented," but as soon as they demand their rights, like a fair wage and decent treatment, then they're reminded that they're undocumented. In conclusion, the work of immigrant workers in the United States is by no means easy. It implies leaving behind their families, giving up everything to make someone else's dream a reality: far away and alone, immersed in a very different culture, where it's very hard to feel a part of things.

The exploitation of migrant workers can be seen on many dairy farms and in the apple orchards, among other places. They do work that is rarely accepted by U.S. citizens, very often because of the idea that a foreign employee is harder working and will do it because he needs it more. Migrant workers seem a convenient option to them because they work long hours, accept greater demands, and also, because they convince them that their immigration status means they have to accept being exploited, ignoring the fact that an un-

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documented worker has almost all the same rights as a person with documents.

I have told my story, starting with the time of my grandparents, to show that in Mexico there have always been families that have wanted to get ahead, but, that when you live in an exclusionary society that doesn't offer opportunities to the most vulnerable, you find yourself in the painful necessity of having to look in another country for what you cannot find in your own. I also mentioned my academic background, not to brag, since I do not have a high IQ and I'm an average student. The reason was to express how many of us Mexicans desperately refuse to give up, and sometimes, there, in the fields of the United States, although we even cry often, we

have no choice but to keep working; and how we leave our youth, the best years of our lives, in the dairies of New York, in pursuit of a mirage, for that thirst to be taken into account and not be ignored. Once we get there, we are disillusioned by that mirage, and we have two options: either we suffer the humiliations and say nothing, or we join with other workers and demand our rights. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Random House, 1964). [Editor's Note.]