

Forced labor on Mexican farms

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A recent report by investigative journalist Richard Marosi and photojournalist Don Bartletti of the *Los Angeles Times*, titled "Product of Mexico," chronicled brutal conditions of forced labor on 30 Mexican mega-farms visited in the course of 18 months of reporting. Such farms are a crucial component of Mexico's agricultural sector, accounting for \$7.6 billion dollars of exports to the United States.

The *Times* reported on mega farms such as Bioparques and Rene Produce where journalists witnessed squalid poverty and forced labor. Workers were trapped at farms surrounded by barbed wire, and in most cases had wages held illegally until the end of harvest to prevent them from attempting to leave once they realized how the camp operated. Workers who managed to escape would forfeit their earnings due to these illegal actions.

Workers are lured to mega-farms with promises of decent living quarters, three meals a day, and wages sufficient to provide an opportunity to build up savings, only to arrive to dismal barrack conditions in massive agricultural complexes stretching for hundreds of miles.

Workers face miserable living and working conditions, including meager, low caloric meals and lack of running water and working toilets. Few camp quarters have beds, most are infested with rats and bedbugs, workers sleep on cardboard, are forced to use buckets for bathrooms and wash in irrigation canals.

Most live hand to mouth, and malnourishment amongst adults and children was reportedly endemic. The report documented that after a long day of harvesting, hungry laborers "scavenged for ears of corn in a nearby field." Others dipped crude fishing lines in an irrigation canal. People filled drinking containers from the canal rather than pay for bottled water.

Workers point out the stark contrast between the care with which they are expected to treat the produce and the way they themselves are treated. Those who attempt

to escape the mega-farms are dragged back and beaten by bosses. At the same time, bosses insist on workers trimming their nails and handling produce with clean hands so it suffers no bruises. At Agricola El Porvenir, the *Times* saw that workers "were required to disinfect their hands before picking cucumbers. Yet they were given just two pieces of toilet paper to use at the outhouses."

These commodities make their way from the hands of Mexican workers to the shelves of food giants Walmart, Safeway and Whole Foods to name a few US retail outlets. Nearly half the tomatoes consumed in the US come from Culiacan, the capital of the state of Sinaloa in Mexico, a twelve hour drive south from Tucson, Arizona. In 2014, Rene Produce exported \$55 million in tomatoes supplying grocery stores across the US, including Whole Foods, a company that promotes "its commitment to social responsibility."

Entire families work in the fields, with young children on the backs of their mothers. It was not uncommon to see grade school children picking peppers, tomatillos and other produce alongside adults. This produce eventually makes its way to the US through middlemen. According to estimates in a 2012 study by the World Bank, about 100,000 Mexican children under 14 pick crops for pay.

Additionally, at half of the 30 farms visited, company stores put workers into massive debt by the end of a season as they watched their meager earnings whittled away to nothing by the inflated prices for basic necessities.

One worker told the *LA Times*, "The owners said they will take my son or my daughter if I don't pay my bill." The company store owner told reporters the threat was made in jest, and that workers' claims of being broke were exaggerated. "The laborers all go home with money," he said. "These people are great savers."

In 2014, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto

presented Rene Produce founder Rene Carrillo with an award honoring the firm as a “socially responsible company.” Though the exposure of working and living conditions on the mega-farms is a damning indictment of the PRI administration, they are of little concern to Peña Nieto’s administration or the ruling layers in Mexico generally.

The real political character and function of Peña Nieto’s administration has recently been exposed by the events surrounding the disappearances of the 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teachers college in Guerrero, and the subsequent violent crackdown on peaceful protesters by Mexican state police.

While the *LA Times* report focuses on conditions at farms in Mexico, similar conditions are to be found within the US. In 2007, 500 guest workers emigrated to the US from India to work as welders and pipefitters at Signal International with H-2B temporary work visas. These workers were subjected to fraudulent recruitment practices, squalid living conditions, and threats of serious physical harm, often going into massive debt paying as much as \$20,000 in recruitment fees, in hopes of a better life in the US.

Despite a wide array of anti-slavery laws and NGOs dedicated to the issue, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that today there are at least 20.9 million people in forced labor worldwide, and the problem is not confined to the third world. The agency reports that there are 10,5000 forced laborers in the UK. Human rights organization Free the Slaves estimates 15,000 forced laborers are brought into the US each year. While lawsuits are at times brought against an infinitesimal percentage of criminal traffickers, the driving force behind this super exploitation, capitalist profit interests, remain largely untouched.



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