

THE RIGHT TO STAY HOME

How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration

DAVID BACON

BEACON PRESS, BOSTON

BERKELEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

ONE

FROM PEROTE TO TAR HEEL

Pushing People out of Veracruz

On some warm nights, Fausto Limon's children wake up and vomit from the smell. He puts his wife, two sons, and daughter into his beat-up pickup, and they drive away from his farm until they can breathe the air without getting sick. Then he parks, and they sleep in the truck for the rest of the night.

Until the beginning of 2011, his mother went with them. Then her kidneys failed, and she went to the hospital, where she died. Limon and his family all had kidney ailments for three years before that. They kept taking medicine, he says, until finally a doctor told them to stop drinking water from the farm's well. After his mother died, they began hauling in bottled water. Once they stopped drinking from the well, the infections stopped too.

Less than half a mile from his house is one of the many pig farms built by Granjas Carroll de Mexico in the Perote Valley, a high, arid, volcano-rimmed basin straddling the Mexican states of Veracruz and Puebla. "Before the pig farms came, they promised they would bring jobs," Limon remembers. "But then we found out the reality. Yes, there were jobs, but they also brought a lot of contamination."

David Torres, a Perote native who spent eight years helping sows give birth in the farm's maternity section, estimates that by 2010 Granjas Carroll had eighty complexes, each with as many as twenty thousand hogs.

The sheds look clean and modern. "When I went to work there, I could see the company was completely mechanized," Torres says. But in back of each complex is a large oxidation pond for the hogs' urine and excrement. Driving through the valley, a plastic cover was

visible on only one of several dozen lagoons. “Granjas Carroll doesn’t use concrete or membranes under their ponds,” Torres charges, “so the water table is getting contaminated. People here get their water from wells, which are surrounded by pig farms and oxidation ponds.”

In a response to an article published in August 2010 in a Veracruz daily newspaper, *Imagen de Veracruz*, Granjas Carroll representative Tito Tablada declared flatly, “Granjas Carroll does not pollute.” And Amy Richards, a representative for public relations firm Charleston Orwig, responding to an inquiry on behalf of Smithfield Foods—Granjas Carroll’s parent company—added, “Our environmental treatment systems in Mexico strictly comply with local and federal regulations that are different than most other countries that encourage use of treated animal waste, at agronomic rates, as a key element of a nutrient management plan. Mexico encourages, and requires, anaerobic digesters and evaporation ponds.”

Ruben Lopez, an *ejido* (communal land) commissioner in Chichicauhtla, a valley town surrounded by hog farms, also charged that there are no membranes beneath the pools. The Commission for the Environment and Natural Resources of the Mexican Congress issued a report in February 2006 in which it accused Granjas Carroll of endangering the sixty thousand inhabitants of the Perote Valley. The dangers it listed included locating the ponds of excrement near sources of drinking water, pumping excessive quantities of water from the aquifer, failure to put membranes under the ponds, producing excessive amounts of methane, causing soil erosion, and undermining air quality with terrible odors. “The farms’ consumption of water is greater than that of the entire population of the region,” it said. According to Antonio Rodriguez, a former municipal councilor in Guadalupe Victoria in the heart of the valley, just one well on a Granjas Carroll property pumps out four hundred thousand liters’ of water a day to supply the pig farms.

Karina de la Paz Reyes, who wrote the article denounced by Granjas Carroll’s Tablada, claims that the problems persist. In July 2011, she wrote that valley residents were up in arms at a Granjas Carroll proposal to expand the farms, alleging that the company had

already acquired more than twelve hundred acres for another eighty shed complexes. “Although the company and local authorities deny responsibility, since this transnational enterprise located here,” she wrote, “there have been persistent skin diseases, diarrhea, and a reduction in the water level in the wells, due to pig raising on an immense scale so close to population centers.”

Granjas Carroll de Mexico is owned in large part by Carroll’s Farms, a division of Virginia-based Smithfield Foods, one of the world’s largest meatpackers. Company spokespeople point to the twelve hundred jobs it created in a valley where employment is scarce. But Limon counters that a third of its young people are leaving: “They don’t see a future, and every year it’s harder to live here.” Carolina Ramirez, who headed the women’s department of the Veracruz Human Rights Commission, says no official agency counts them, “but I’m sure many people have left.”

Migrants departing the valley are joining a huge wave of migration from Veracruz that dates from the beginning of the 1990s—the start of the NAFTA era. The North American Free Trade Agreement took effect on January 1, 1994, the year the pig farms arrived and two years after Smithfield built the world’s largest hog slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, North Carolina. Both operations have had an enormous impact on the lives of the people of Veracruz.

For over two decades, Smithfield has used NAFTA and the forces it unleashed to become one of the world’s largest growers, packers, and exporters of hogs and pork. But the conditions created in Veracruz to help it make high profits, as one of Mexico’s largest pig producers, also plunged thousands of Veracruz residents into poverty.

“In my town, Las Choapas, after I killed a pig, I would cut it up to sell the meat,” recalls Roberto Ortega. “Whatever I could do to make money I did. But I could never make enough for us to survive.” Eventually, he left Veracruz for the United States, where he again slaughtered pigs for a living. This time, though, he did it as a worker in Smithfield’s Tar Heel plant.

North Carolina became the number one US destination for Veracruz’s displaced farmers. Many got jobs in the Tar Heel slaughterhouse, helping Smithfield’s bottom line by working for low wages on

its US meatpacking lines. Some, like Ortega, helped lead a sixteen-year fight that finally brought in the union there. But they paid a high price. Asserting their rights also made them the targets of harsh immigration enforcement and a growing wave of hostility toward Mexicans in the US South.

The experiences of Veracruz migrants and farmers impacted by Perote pig farms show the close connection between US investment and trade deals in Mexico and the displacement and migration of its people. Protecting Mexico's environment, and the rights of migrants displaced by environmental and economic causes, requires making the connection between trade reform, environmental protection, and immigrant and labor rights.

Smithfield Goes to Mexico

In 1994, Carroll's Farms, a giant hog-raising corporation, created a partnership—Granjas Carroll de Mexico—with a Mexican agribusiness company, Agroindustrias Unidas de México. Together they set up the huge pig farm in Perote. Carroll's Farms had a joint partnership for many years with Smithfield Foods, the world's largest pork producer, including a seat on the Smithfield board of directors. In 1999 Smithfield, which now controls 27 percent of all US pork production, finally bought out Carroll's Farms entirely.

In 2004, the expansion of the swine sheds through the previous decade finally provoked a social movement that swept the Perote Valley. Pueblos Unidos—or United Towns, a coalition of local farmers—began in Xaltepec, where local residents started collecting signatures on a petition in protest. Verónica Hernández was a teacher at the secondary school in La Gloria, the Perote Valley town where she was born. She was concerned about her students, who told her coming to school on the bus was like riding in a toilet. “Some of them fainted or got headaches,” she charges. “In the morning, when it was time to eat, many couldn't because they still felt sick.”

Hernández not only signed the petition, she began to write leaflets urging Valley residents to get involved. “We said they weren't treating the pig excrement in a sanitary way,” she recalls, “that they

would leave dead pigs in the open air, which would attract flies. The flies were a potentially dangerous source of illnesses.”

Jorge Morales Vasquez, a reporter for the Mexico City daily *Milenio*, later investigated the farms in 2009. He wrote that the anaerobic digesters referred to by Smithfield spokesperson Amy Richards were actually “just pits with a metal cover, where they throw the bodies of sick pigs or those that have been injured in fights or squashed in the sheds. In these holes dug in the earth, the bodies decompose, which becomes a source of contamination and the proliferation of flies. Carried on the wind, they travel into the community of La Gloria, where they then start living in people's homes.” One resident, Maria Dolores Herrera, told Vasquez the flies were the size of killer bees.

The lack of any response from government officials increased the anger among Perote farmers. On April 26, 2005, hundreds of them blocked the main highway from Xalapa, Veracruz's capital, to Puebla. People from sixteen towns confronted the police and only lifted the blockade when officials said they'd talk with Granjas Carroll management.

That had no effect. The following November a construction crew in Chichicauitla, about to build another shed and oxidation pond, was met by a thousand angry ranchers. Police rescued the construction crew, but when they returned to the site, the people had disappeared with all the construction materials. In February of 2006, Atanasio Garcia Duran, Veracruz deputy for the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution, tried to inspect some of the Granjas Carroll facilities together with local farmers and a representative of the Federal Prosecutor for Environmental Protection, Francisco Briseno Cortes. Garcia Duran told reporters that he was threatened by guards, who followed the delegation and filmed the farmers who'd come to make complaints to the officials.

Finally, at a meeting in 2007 between the presidents of many valley towns and company officials, Granjas Carroll's Tito Tablada signed an agreement blocking any new expansion. The protests clearly worried the company, however. The following year Granjas Carroll filed criminal charges against Victoria Hernández and thirteen other leaders in the state courts of both Veracruz and Puebla.

All were charged with “defaming” the company by accusing it of pollution.

One farmer, sixty-six-year-old Guadalupe Serrano, was denounced by the company as one of the troublemakers who’d blocked the highway. On April 8, 2008, federal agents came to his home, disguised as workers. The Perote mayor’s personal secretary, Omar Hernandez, accompanied them. He got Serrano to leave his house by telling him the mayor wanted to appoint him director for public works. Once Serrano had walked out of his door, however, he was handcuffed and taken to jail in Xalapa, the Veracruz state capital. There was such a scandal over his arrest that the mayor fired Omar Hernandez.

In Veracruz, the charges were dismissed quickly, when a judge agreed the activists were exercising freedom of speech. “You can’t negate the effects of the pig farms because the people are suffering from them,” Veronica Hernandez explained. “That was the evidence, the reality test. Plus, we could show that the water table was dropping.” Nevertheless, the fourteen had to spend the next two years registering with the court in Cholula, Puebla, every two weeks, to avoid being locked up. While those charges eventually were also dropped, they scared the farmers, and the protest movement diminished. Even several years later, Serrano, Veronica Hernandez, and their codefendants expressed great anxiety about the power of the company. “People saw us going through all of this, and it was very intimidating,” she recalled. “They knew what it was about. They were afraid that if they continued protesting they’d be taken to jail too.”

Then, in early 2009, the first confirmed case of swine flu, the AH1N1 virus, was found in a five-year-old boy from La Gloria, Edgar Hernandez. Two infants also died of what was diagnosed as pneumonia.

Pickup trucks from the local health department soon began spraying pesticide in the streets to kill the omnipresent flies. Health workers with backpack sprayers went house to house. Nevertheless, the virus spread to Mexico City, then to California. By May, 2,254 non-fatal US cases had been reported, while in Mexico forty-five people had died. Mexican schools closed, and public events were cancelled.

Smithfield denied the virus came from its Veracruz hogs. Mexican officials were quick to agree. A government statement claimed, “Neither in the farm, nor in the homes, did we see sick pigs or people. Neither did we see signs of respiratory disease.” Tablada’s statement to *Imagen de Veracruz* asserted, “Our company has been totally cleared of any links with the AH1N1 virus,” and “the official position of the Secretary of Health and the World Health Organization leaves no room for doubt.”

Meatpacking companies breathed a sigh of relief at Smithfield’s exoneration. The US National Hog Farmer website reported that fear of the virus led to losses of \$8.4 million per day for the first two weeks of the global scare.

In the valley, though, “no one believed it,” Perote resident Limon recalls. “We all knew that such a brutal concentration of animals could result in illnesses. But we had to go on living here.” Laura Carlson, journalist and director of the Mexico City-based Americas Program, warned, “The centrality of foreign investment in the Mexican economy creates a climate where transnational corporations with large investments can exercise coercive power over government agencies on all levels.”

In August of 2011, however, Granjas Carroll representatives convinced Felipe Cortes Hernandez, the municipal president of Guadalupe Victoria, to grant a permit for building new hog farms. According to the lawyer for Pueblos Unidos, Abigail Marin, the director general for the state of Puebla, Laura Escobar, warned farmers not to get in the way. Nevertheless, representatives of eighteen town councils signed a declaration denouncing the new expansion plans. Referring to the 2007 agreement, they declared that “state and municipal authorities are trying to ignore and supplant the majority will of our communities . . . including even the threat to use public force [*granaderos*, heavily armed police] so that the company can continue to expand, against our will.”

“It doesn’t do any good to threaten to kill us,” said one farmer. “We’re already dying anyway. We’re not going to let them build any more sheds. What we really want is for GCM [Granjas Carroll] to leave the valley.”

By 2008, the Perote operation was sending close to a million pigs to slaughter every year—85 percent to Mexico City and the rest to surrounding Mexican states. By locating in the mountains above Veracruz, Mexico's largest port, trains could bring in imported corn for feed—two-thirds of the cost of raising hogs. US pork producers benefit from below-cost soybeans and corn, the key components of feed, which are subsidized in congressional farm bills. "After NAFTA," says Timothy Wise of the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University, "corn was priced 19 percent below the cost of production." Lower feed costs, unavailable to Mexican producers, gave Granjas Carroll's hogs a competitive advantage.

But Smithfield didn't just import feed—it imported meat as well.

According to Alejandro Ramirez, general director of the Confederation of Mexican Pork Producers, Mexico imported 30,000 tons of pork in 1995, the year NAFTA took effect. By 2010 pork imports, almost all from the United States, had grown over twenty-five times, to 811,000 tons. As a result, pork prices received by Mexican producers dropped 56 percent. US pork exports are dominated by the largest companies; Wise estimates that Smithfield's export share is significantly greater than its 27 percent share of US production.

Imports had a dramatic effect on Mexican jobs. "We lost four thousand pig farms," Ramirez estimates. "On Mexican farms, each one hundred animals produce five jobs, so we lost twenty thousand farm jobs directly from imports. Counting the five indirect jobs dependent on each direct job, we lost over a hundred twenty thousand jobs in total. This produces migration to the United States or to Mexican cities—a big problem for our country."

John Womack, a professor of Latin American history and economics at Harvard, explains that NAFTA precipitated an economic crisis following its implementation in 1994. "Mexicans thought they could use the agreement to open up US markets, but once the dust settled, all of its banks belonged to US or Spanish investors," he says. "Mexico no longer had control over its economic policy. Foreign capital moved in, which changed the conditions of production and led to a vast wave of bankruptcies. Smithfield was one of many who saw opportunity in that."

Pork imports were still causing economic dislocation in 2012. In Queretaro, one of the main states for pig raising in Mexico, imports lowered pork prices so much that 70 percent of its production could no longer be sold locally—in fact, farmers have found the prices they receive per hog are now \$19 to \$25 less than the cost of raising them. "We're selling at competitive prices, but the US sells their [pork] products at very low prices in Mexico, and we really can't compete in Queretaro," said Alejandro Tinoco Ugalde, president of the state's Association of Pork Producers. "The imports are increasing every day more and more. We shouldn't prioritize imports without considering the state of small pork producers."

Corn imports also rose, from about 2 million tons to about 10.3 million tons from 1992 to 2008. Once Mexican meat and corn producers were driven from the market by imports, the Mexican economy was left vulnerable to price changes dictated by US agribusiness or US policy. "When the US modified its corn policy to encourage ethanol production," Alejandro Ramirez charges, "corn prices jumped 100 percent in one year."

"Small Mexican farmers got hit with a double whammy," Wise explains. "On the one hand, competitors were importing pork. On the other, they were producing cheaper hogs." Smithfield was both producer and importer. Wise estimates this one company supplies 25 percent of all the pork sold in Mexico.

Granjas Carroll enjoyed another advantage. The *Mexican News* online business journal explains that "production cost is very low because of the high ratio of pigs to workers. . . . The preparation of food and feeding of the pigs is completely automated, along with temperature control and the elimination of excrement."

Workers aren't employed directly by Granjas Carroll, however, according to David Torres. "Since we work for a contractor, we're not entitled to profit-sharing or company benefits," he says. "Granjas Carroll made millions of dollars in profits, but never distributed a part of them to the workers," which is required under Mexico's Federal Labor Law. Torres was paid 1,250 pesos (\$110 US) every fifteen days and says the company picked him up at six every morning and returned him home at five thirty each night, often six days a week.

In Perote, the company was investing in an area where it wouldn't face the environmental cleanup costs it was forced to pay in the United States. In 1997, federal judge Rebecca Smith imposed the largest federal pollution fine to that date—\$12.6 million—on Smithfield for dumping pig excrement into the Pagan River, which runs into Chesapeake Bay. Smithfield then had to upgrade the local water treatment facilities to handle the effluent from two plants.

That year the state of North Carolina went further, passing a moratorium on the creation of any new open-air hog waste lagoons, unless they were built with new, expensive waste-disposal technology. Smithfield had to agree to a production cap at its Tar Heel plant. Environmental groups advocated even stricter limits.

In 1998, the Environmental Protection Agency also proposed rules for animal-waste runoff. And in 2000, then state attorney general Mike Easley forced Smithfield to fund research by North Carolina State University to develop hog-waste treatment methods more effective than open lagoons. These requirements were criticized by Earl Bell, president of the North Carolina Pork Council, who claimed that “more regulations drive up the cost of production . . . [and] will hurt America's ability to export pork.”

North Carolina is hardly a regulation-friendly state, but the outcry from communities enduring the stench and flies from the lagoons was so great that business lobbies retreated. In 2007, when Mike Easley (by then governor) signed SB 1465, a permanent ban on new lagoons, the Pork Council supported it.

In Perote, Smithfield didn't have to worry about US regulations. NAFTA had a side agreement, supposedly to raise Mexican environmental standards and increase their enforcement. No complaint was ever filed or action taken about hog farms, however. “The company can do here what it can't do at home,” the Veracruz Human Rights Commission's Carolina Ramirez concluded bitterly.

And Veracruz Migrants Come to the United States

By the time of the swine flu epidemic, migration from Veracruz to the United States already had a two-decade history. The motivating

force pushing people to leave was their need to survive. The World Bank, in a 2005 study made for the Mexican government, found that the extreme rural poverty rate of 35 percent from 1992 to 1994, prior to NAFTA, jumped to 55 percent between 1996 and 1998, after NAFTA took effect—the years when Roberto Ortega left Mexico. This could be explained, the report said, “mainly by the 1995 economic crisis, the sluggish performance of agriculture, stagnant rural wages, and falling real agricultural prices.”

By 2010, fifty-three million Mexicans were living in poverty, according to the Monterrey Institute of Technology—half the country's population. About 20 percent lived in extreme poverty, almost all in rural areas.

Pork and corn imports were just part of a series of economic changes brought about by NAFTA and neoliberal reforms to the Mexican economy, such as ending land reform, that were made during the same period the treaty took effect. Companies like Smithfield benefited, but poverty increased also, especially in the countryside.

The growth of poverty, in turn, fueled migration. In 1990, 4.5 million Mexican-born people lived in the United States. A decade later, that population more than doubled, to 9.75 million, and in 2008 it peaked at 12.67 million. About 11 percent of all Mexicans now live in the United States. About 5.7 million were able to get some kind of visa, but another 7 million couldn't and came nevertheless.

As an agricultural state, Veracruz suffered particularly from Mexico's abandonment of two important policies. First, neoliberal reforms did away with Tabamex, a national marketing program for small tobacco farmers. A similar program for coffee growers ended just as world coffee prices plunged to record lows. Second, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the country's most corrupt president, pushed through changes in Article 27 of the Constitution in the late 1980s, dismantling land reform and allowing the sale of *ejidos*, or common lands, as private property.

Waves of tobacco and coffee farmers sold their land because they could no longer make a living on it. Many became migrants. Granjas Carroll, however, could not only buy land for its swine sheds but also found a ready supply of displaced rural labor to staff them.

Simultaneous changes in the United States accelerated migration. In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, expanding the existing H2 visa program and creating the current H-2A program, which allows US agricultural employers to bring in workers from Mexico and other countries, giving them temporary visas tied to employment contracts. Growers in North Carolina became large users of the program, especially through the North Carolina Growers Association. Displaced tobacco farmers from Veracruz became tobacco workers in the Carolinas.

"Many Veracruzanos came because we were offered work in the tobacco fields, where we had experience," remembers Miguel Huerta. "In Veracruz, we spent our lives working in hot, tropical weather in the tobacco fields. The tobacco harvest here in North Carolina takes place in extreme heat too, and we're used to that." Huerta also points out that growing families were trying to make a living from a limited amount of land. Since families were already living close to survival, with only very limited help from the government, the pressure of a growing population also fueled migration.

"The majority of the people from Veracruz live off of the land," he explains. "Many families have simply outgrown their plot of land. The family size continues to grow, but the land doesn't, and it isn't enough to feed the new members of the extended family. This forces the family to move and look for other options. The land is fertile and perfect for agriculture in Veracruz, and there is a lot of work, but it isn't enough for everyone." His own migration to North Carolina had its roots in that pressure. "I come from a family of *ejidatarios* [farmers who share communal land rights]. When you have a ten-acre parcel of land, that's only enough for one family. But my parents had seven children, and we had children. Our family could survive off of the land, but not get an education. This is why we came to this country. Our son was able to go to school and now has a good job."

Once people began working in North Carolina's tobacco fields, they began to put down roots. "Then people who'd been contracted just stayed, because they didn't have anything in Mexico to go back to. After the tobacco harvest, workers spread out to other industries," Huerta recalls.

As the pool of Veracruzanos grew in North Carolina, it attracted migrants like David Ceja. He was eighteen and living on a ranch outside Martinez de la Torre, two hours from the Perote Valley. Ceja remembers that when he was a small child, his family had ten cows, as well as pigs and chickens. Even then, he still had to work, and they sometimes went hungry. "But we could give milk to people who came asking for it. There were people even worse off than us," he recalls. "Sometimes the price of a pig was enough to buy what we needed, but then it wasn't. Farm prices were always going down." His family had no money to plant trees or crops. "I didn't really want to leave, but I felt I had to," he recalls. "I was afraid, but our need was so great."

In 1999 his parents sold four cows and two hectares of land, and came up with enough to get him to the border. There he found a *coyote*—someone who smuggles people across the border—who took him across for \$1,200. He arrived still owing for the passage. "I couldn't find work for three months. I was desperate," Ceja says. He feared the consequences if he couldn't pay, and took whatever jobs he could find on the street until he finally reached North Carolina. There he found friends, got the identification he needed for a real job, and went to work at Smithfield's Tar Heel packinghouse. "The boys I played with as a kid are all in the US," he says. "I'd see many of them working in the plant."

Roberto Ortega remembers that there were hundreds of people from Veracruz in the Tar Heel plant when he worked there in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They'd have community get-togethers, eat seafood, and play their state's famous *jarocho* music on wooden harps and guitars. "Almost the whole town [of Las Choapas] is here," he says. "Some are supervisors and *mayordomos*, and they bring people from the town."

As an academic in the 1990s, Carolina Ramirez studied migration to North Carolina before taking her position at the Veracruz Human Rights Commission. Labor recruitment was a big factor, she found. "There were recruiters in many Veracruz towns," she remembers. "There were even vans stationed in different places, and a whole system in which people were promised jobs in the packing plants. It was an open secret."

Smithfield spokesperson Amy Richards responds, "With one exception [a management trainee program], Smithfield Foods does not travel to, nor advertise in, other countries or outside of our local communities to actively recruit employees for our various facilities around the country."

"These companies are very powerful and can do anything," Veracruzano Miguel Huerta responds. "They hire legally and illegally. They can go to Mexico and bring as many employees as they want and replace them when they want." Poverty, though, was the real recruiter. It created, as Ceja says, the need. "We all had to leave Veracruz because of it," Ceja emphasizes. "Otherwise, we wouldn't do something so hard."

The Union Campaign in Tar Heel

The Tar Heel slaughterhouse kills and dismembers thirty-two thousand hogs every day. Meatpacking is demanding and dangerous work. People stand very close together as animal carcasses speed by, cutting the hogs into pieces. In their white aprons, hairnets, and masks, workers wield extremely sharp knives, slicing through meat, sinews, and bone with the same motion, hundreds of times each hour.

The plant's first workers were mostly African Americans. From the moment it opened in 1992, many objected to the high line speed, and the injuries that proliferated as a result. Even in North Carolina, where union membership and wages are low, Smithfield's wage level gave the company problems. It was hard to attract local workers, especially with a growing reputation for job-related injuries. Once people were hired, many quickly wanted more money for such exhausting and dangerous labor. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) began helping workers organize a union almost as soon as the lines started running. What followed was one of the longest and most bitter fights in modern US labor history.

In 1994 and 1997, the UFCW lost two union representation elections, the latter thrown out because of company intimidation tactics. In 1997, the head of plant security, Danny Priest (later a Smithfield

general manager), told local sheriffs he expected violence on election day. Police in riot gear then lined the walkway into the slaughterhouse, and workers had to file past them to cast their ballots. At the end of the vote count, according to charges filed with the National Labor Relations Board, union organizer Ray Shawn was beaten up inside the plant.

Priest and the other security guards were later deputized and maintained a holding area in a trailer on the property, which workers called the company jail. During the campaign, one couple was "arrested" when security discovered a pair of smoldering gloves in a trashcan. "They took us to a jail the company had," one recalled, and then to the county lockup. "It was to intimidate us since we were both actively organizing in the plant. They wanted to get rid of us."

In the mid-1990s, the percentage of immigrants in the slaughterhouse began to rise. As new migrants, people from Veracruz were desperate and hungry. Most were undocumented. Keith Ludlum, one of the plant's few white workers, was fired for union activity in 1994. He says, "After Smithfield ran through the workforce around here, you started seeing a lot more immigrants working in the plant. The company had to make that happen. They thought, the undocumented will work cheap, they'll work hard, and they won't complain."

Carolina Ramirez describes the Veracruz immigrants as "docile at first, because they didn't have the experience." For employers, she explains, "these people were a safe workforce. They didn't understand their rights or the system here. But they got the message—don't organize. Don't think for yourself. If you comply, your job is assured. They would work fast for fear of losing their jobs, because there was no alternative."

Nilsa Morales, a Veracruz native, slipped and fell on the greasy floor in 2004, twisting her arm and shoulder, which were already injured from using an electric knife all day. The company doctor forced her to return to work, a common complaint. "I kept on working in spite of the pain," she remembers, "because I needed the money. People depend on me. But there came a moment when I just couldn't stand the pain anymore." She left her job, and the

company cut off her insurance. "Many workers put up with the pain and keep on working. They don't say anything because they're afraid of being fired."

"They pressured you so you'd work faster and produce more," Ortega recalled. "You felt like knifing the foreman. Many wanted to throw their knives at his feet and just leave. But if you are the support of your family you put up with it. 'I am not going to leave my work,' you say to yourself. 'Who will pay me then?'" Eventually, people didn't put up with it. In the early 2000s, the UFCW sent a group of organizers, who began helping workers find tactics to slow down the lines. They set up a workers' center in Red Springs and offered English classes after work. When Ortega was fired on trumped-up charges, he began making visits to the homes of other workers. In 2003, the night cleaning crew refused to work, keeping the lines from starting the following morning. David Ceja helped organize another work stoppage a year later.

By 2006, Mexican workers made up about 60 percent of the plant's five thousand workers. As immigrant protests and demonstrations spread across the country that April, hundreds left the plant and marched through the streets of Wilmington. On May Day, only a skeleton crew showed up for work.

That spring, Smithfield enrolled in the Department of Homeland Security's IMAGE program, in which the government identifies undocumented workers, and employers agree to fire them. The program enforces a provision of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, employer sanctions, which prohibit employers from hiring undocumented workers. All workers in the United States since then have had to fill out I-9 forms declaring their citizenship or immigration status when they're hired. Employers can now check the information provided by consulting an electronic database called E-Verify. Smithfield spokesperson Amy Richards says, "We do all that the law requires, and more, in assuring that our workforce is authorized to work in the US. In addition to complying with the Form I-9 process, all of our plants are members of E-Verify."

In October 2006, Smithfield announced it intended to fire over three hundred workers, alleging they had bad Social Security num-

bers, presumably because they were undocumented. When terminations started, hundreds of other workers walked out, forcing the company to rescind the firings temporarily.

Just months before, after a twelve-year legal battle, the company had been forced to rehire Keith Ludlum. "It was really empowering to see all those workers stand up together," he recalls, "probably one of the best experiences of my life." It had an effect on African American workers too. They collected four thousand signatures, asking the company for the day off on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. When managers refused, four hundred black workers on the kill line didn't come in. With no hogs on the hooks at the beginning of the lines, no one else could work either. The plant shut down again.

Nine days later, agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained twenty-one Smithfield workers for deportation, questioning hundreds more in the lunchroom. Fear was so intense that most immigrants didn't show up for work the following day. A few months later, another raid took place. Some of the detained workers were later charged with federal felonies for using bad Social Security numbers.

Meanwhile, ICE agents swept through Mexican communities, detaining people at home and in the street. Ludlum and union organizer Eduardo Peña followed the ICE agents with video cameras, but they couldn't stop the terror the raids engendered. Ludlum, Peña, and other union activists believe the company cooperated in the IMAGE program and immigration enforcement because the Veracruzanos were no longer useful. "The workforce that was in the shadows was expecting rights, expecting to be part of the community," Ludlum says. "That's not what they wanted. They wanted a workforce that would be quiet and do what they were told."

Terry Slaughter, an African American union supporter, calls it "a tactic by Smithfield, a dirty low blow. The company knew who they were hiring."

Eventually, the immigrant workforce shrank by half as people left. Union organizing stalled. But then, led by Slaughter, African American workers stopped the plant again by sitting all day in the middle of the kill floor. They put union stickers on their hard hats

and began collecting signatures demanding union recognition. Helped by widespread community support and impending lawsuits, the company agreed to a union election that would bar its old bare-knuckle tactics. When the ballots were finally counted on December 11, 2008, the union won. Today Ludlum is president of UFCW Local 2208, and Slaughter is secretary-treasurer.

A Veracruzana, Carmen Izquierdo is on the union executive board. "In the union it doesn't matter if you're undocumented, if you have papers or not," she says. "We should all be respected because we are human beings, and because of our work. All the workers here, whether or not we have papers, have rights." Ludlum and Slaughter say line speed is slower now, and workers can rotate from one job to another, reducing injuries. They no longer fear company doctors will send them back to work if they're hurt. David Ceja felt the union gave workers a tool to change conditions. "I'm glad it came in," he said. "We worked hard to get it."

But he's not there to enjoy it. Now he works as a mechanic in a local garage, and his band plays weddings and quinceañeras. His brother Marcos wants him to come back to Veracruz, where the family used the money David sent from his job at Smithfield to plant fruit trees on their ranch. Roberto Ortega and his wife, Maria, left North Carolina when the hostility toward immigrants got worse, and they couldn't find work. Juvencio Rocha, head of the Network of Veracruzanos in North Carolina, says bitterly, "After we contributed to the economy, they didn't want us here anymore. They even took our driver's licenses away."

Demands for Change, on Both Sides of the Border

Smithfield didn't invent the system of displacement and migration. It took advantage of US trade and immigration policies, as well as Mexican economic reforms. And at crucial moments in each country, it found cooperative governments willing to bend those laws and policies for its benefit.

For a while, farmers in Perote Valley were able to stop expanding swine sheds. Migrant Veracruzanos did help to organize a union in Tar Heel. But there was no balance of power in this system. Today,

those farmers and migrants continue to face that same imbalance as they try to defend their land, their jobs and their rights.

"From the beginning NAFTA was an instrument of displacement," says Juan Manuel Sandoval, a professor at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City and cofounder of the Mexican Action Network Opposing Free Trade. "The penetration of capital led to the destruction of the traditional economy, especially in agriculture, and produced a huge labor reserve in Mexico. People had no alternative but to migrate. The system helps corporations make profit, which is relocated to the United States. And it produces displaced people, who are needed by the US economy."

Sandoval sees that many US industries are now dependent on this army of available labor. "Meatpacking especially depends on a constant flow of workers," he says, "because of the very intense system of production, and the high rate of injuries. Mexico has become its labor reserve." The Mexican government, meanwhile, has a growing stake in sending workers abroad, Harvard historian Womack believes. "Mexico has no economic policy anymore," he says, "no plan or goal of directing investment toward industries which would hire Mexican labor." According to Tim Wise and Betsy Rakocy of the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University, "The confluence of agriculture, trade, immigration, and labor policies have pushed cheap commodities south and driven people north."

The remittances (money sent home) by the 11 percent of Mexico's population living in the United States, which were less than \$4 billion in 1994 when NAFTA took effect, rose to \$10 billion in 2002, and then \$20 billion three years later, according to the Bank of Mexico. Even in the current recession, Mexicans sent home \$21.13 billion in 2011. Remittances total 3 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product, according to Frank Holmes, investment analyst and CEO of US Global Investors. They are now Mexico's second largest source of national income, behind oil.

Those remittances support families and provide services that were formerly the obligation of the Mexican government. This alone gives the government a vested interest in the continuing labor flow. Raul Delgado Wise, a professor at the University of Zacatecas, charges that "rather than a free-trade agreement, NAFTA can be de-

scribed as . . . a mechanism for the provision of cheap labor. Since NAFTA came into force, the migrant factory has exported [millions of] Mexicans to the United States.”

But today, on both sides of the border, people are demanding change in the laws and policies that contribute to that displacement. Fausto Limon’s right and ability to stay in Mexico, on his ranch in the Perote Valley, depends on ending the problems caused by the operation of Granjas Carroll. He has become a leader of Pueblos Unidos and hopes to find a counterweight to the company’s influence by joining forces with other Mexicans who’ve also suffered environmental destruction from corporate mines and dams. In July of 2011, he went to Acapulco for the seventh national assembly of *Afectados Ambientales* (Environmentally Affected). The *Afectados* declare their mission is to build a national movement “to fight for life in our homes, our lands, our waters, and our territories.” It’s part of a broader movement connecting similar groups throughout Latin America.

But Limon has no money for planting, and his family was driven out of the government’s PROCAMPO program of payments to farmers when the protests started. He shares the poverty created by meat and corn dumping, followed by price spikes to consumers, with farmers throughout Mexico. The trade system that allows this state of affairs to continue will inevitably produce more migrants—if not Limon himself, then perhaps his children. The fabric of sustainable rural life at his Rancho del Riego is being pulled apart.

In the United States, many migrant rights networks believe rational immigration reform must change US trade policies that contribute to displacing people. The TRADE (Trade Reform, Accountability, Development, and Employment) Act, proposed in Congress by Representative Mike Michaud (D-ME), received support from many of those groups because it would hold hearings to reexamine the impact of NAFTA. Such hearings might cover provisions like the treaty’s environmental side agreement, which did nothing to restrict the impact of Granjas Carroll on Perote Valley. The bill would also ban negotiations of new trade agreements that lead to the violation of environmental and labor rights.

Another proposal, called the Dignity Campaign, goes one step

further and would ban agreements that lead to displacement, like that caused by pork imports or the cross-border investments that created the Perote pig farms. Instead it proposes an alternative immigration bill based on human and labor rights. It would also repeal employer sanctions, the immigration law that led to firing and driving so many Veracruz migrants from the Tar Heel plant.

“Employer sanctions have little effect on migration,” says Bill Ong Hing, a law professor at the University of San Francisco, “but they have made workers more vulnerable to employer pressure.” Hing investigated the impact of employer sanctions and raids in the Swift meatpacking plants, located across the country, for the UFCW. “The rationale has always been that this kind of enforcement will dry up jobs for the undocumented and discourage them from coming,” he explains. “However, they actually become more desperate and take jobs at lower wages. This can lead to an overall reduction in the average wage level for millions of workers, which is, in effect, a subsidy to employers.”

“When you make someone’s status even more illegal,” Carolina Ramirez adds, “you just make their living and working conditions worse. Jobs become like slavery. And if there are no remittances, kids in Veracruz can’t go to school or to the doctor. All the social problems we already have get worse. And all this just provokes more migration.”

“We would be much better off if we ended employer sanctions and changed our trade and economic policies so they don’t produce poverty in countries like Mexico,” Hing concludes.

The walkouts in Tar Heel and the marches in the streets of Wilmington in 2006 show a deep reservoir of support for basic changes in the conditions facing immigrants. In Perote Valley, farmers are equally determined to prevent the expansion of pig farms and the destruction of their environment. In many ways, their efforts are linked together, not just by the fact that they’re carried on by people from the same state, facing the same transnational corporation. They’re fighting the same system.

“We are fighting because we are being destroyed,” said Roberto Ortega. “That is the reason for the daily fight, to try to change this.”

A Union for Tobacco Workers

As a hot August sun beats down on a field in Nash County, North Carolina, Manuel Cardenal moves down his row almost at a run. He pauses for a second in front of each tobacco plant, breaking off the new shoots at the top. He calls them "*rotoños*." They have to be removed so that the growing strength of the plant will flow into the leaves below, making them broad and heavy. Cardenal understands the way tobacco plants grow, and knows what must be done to make them productive. He used to have a farm of his own in Esteli, the best-known tobacco region of Nicaragua, a country famous for cigars.

Five other workers like him race down their own rows, deftly choosing and plucking out the right parts of the right plants. To do this well, rancher Corey (they don't know their employer's full name) says they have to use their bare hands. Gloves would be too encumbering, he says, and might damage the plants. In addition, they're being paid a piece rate. The workers have to work fast just to make the minimum wage. Corey says the whole field has to be finished by the end of the day.

By one in the afternoon, the temperature has reached 102 degrees. Cardenal's arms shine with sweat. Since six that morning, when they went into the field, the hands of all six workers have been covered with a sticky green tar—the residue of tobacco juice and gum from the leaves. The same thing that gives cigarettes and cigars their kick, the nicotine, is not just present in the tar but also permeates even the dust in the air. Anyone walking into the field starts to feel that heady sensation you get from smoking the first cigarette of the day. "I feel it as soon as I start work," Cardenal says. "Then, after my body gets used to it, I can hardly feel it at all. But I know I'm absorbing it all day." The other workers say they still feel light-headed, even though hours have passed since they started work. When the heat reaches its peak, they sometimes feel nauseous as well.

Another component of the sticky tar is the residue of pesticides sprayed on the plants. Growers aren't supposed to send workers into the field for seventy-two hours after they spray. Some do anyway, but

even past that limit chemicals remain on the plants' sticky leaves. "I know I'm getting exposed, but I don't know what I'm exposed to," Cardenal says. "On my own farm I'd at least know what I was using to kill insects. But here I have no idea, and the growers never tell us."

The reason all six workers know so well the operations needed to grow tobacco is that they all come from the tobacco regions of Mexico and Central America. They've all worked in those fields at home. Ruben Barrales and Manuel Buendia come from Veracruz, where tobacco leaves even form part of the coat of arms of Alamo, Buendia's hometown. Maynor Gonzalez, his brother Ismail, and Francisco Escobar all come from Santa Rita in Honduras. That town is an hour from San Pedro Sula and the port of Puerto Cortez, where Honduras manufactures and exports its cigars.

Migration to North Carolina from Honduras and Nicaragua is relatively recent, but the flow of people from Veracruz dates back to the mid-1980s. The Veracruz flow is connected to the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, and later the implementation of NAFTA. Central American migration, with its origin in the exodus of refugees from its civil wars, got a big boost following the passage of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

Once the Immigration Reform and Control Act took effect in 1986, US growers could recruit workers in other countries and bring them to the United States on H-2A work visas. Those workers can only work for the length of their employment contract—less than a year—and then must leave. They can only work for the grower or contractor who hires them.

Importing contract labor to the United States on temporary work permits was halted when the notorious bracero contract labor scheme was ended in 1964. The H-2A visa program, however, reopened the door. Soon after it took effect in 1986, hiring agents for North Carolina growers appeared in Veracruz, offering people the chance to work in the United States on the guest worker visas. In the tobacco regions, they found plenty of takers.

Once their original work contracts ended, many H-2A workers simply stayed in the United States without visas and became undocumented. Over time, others came north on their own to join friends

and relatives already living in North Carolina. A pool of Mexican workers began to grow, most from Veracruz. Eventually they were joined by people arriving from Central America as well, displaced by CAFTA. That agreement took effect in 2005, unleashing the same economic forces NAFTA set loose earlier on rural communities in Mexico.

While recruitment of H-2A workers continues, most farmworkers in North Carolina's tobacco fields today are undocumented. A 2011 report by Oxfam America, *A State of Fear: Human Rights Abuses in North Carolina's Tobacco Industry*, estimates that of the hundred thousand farmworkers in the state, only 9 percent have H-2A visas. Almost all the rest have no legal immigration status, Cardenal and his five coworkers among them. According to the US Department of Labor, 7 percent of the nation's 1.4 million farmworkers have H-2A visas, while 53 percent have no visa at all.

Of the 103 workers interviewed for the Oxfam report, almost all were undocumented. A quarter said they were paid wages less than the legal minimum. A majority reported the same physical symptoms Cardenal and his coworkers describe—a syndrome called green tobacco sickness—and most had no gloves or other protective equipment. Only a third said there were toilets in the fields where they worked. Every year, North Carolina's Department of Labor reports the death of several field laborers from heat exposure. Most farmworkers in North Carolina live in labor camps, which are like small company towns where workers depend on the employer for housing, transportation, and food. Almost all those surveyed complained of problems like dilapidated barracks, inadequate showers and toilets, lack of heat or ventilation, and insect infestations.

Conditions for H-2A workers are better than those described by the undocumented, primarily because most belong to a union, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). In 2004, FLOC signed an agreement with the North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA) and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company. The union had mounted a long corporate campaign against Mt. Olive, since it was a non-union competitor to union pickle producers in Ohio and the Midwest, where FLOC had contracts.

Until the FLOC contract, North Carolina's H-2A workers were held in a form of low-wage bondage. Federal law requires growers to pay an "adverse effect" wage to H-2A workers, supposedly set high enough so that it doesn't depress local wage standards. North Carolina growers, however, were well known for paying less than the legal minimum, and North Carolina Legal Aid filed many complaints against them. Even today, most growers using the program pay the minimum wage or slightly above.

To enforce the low-wage regime, NCGA maintained a blacklist, called in its employee manual a "record of eligibility [that] contains a list of workers, who because of violations of their contract, have been suspended from the program." The 1997 NCGA Ineligible for Rehire report listed 1,709 names. The reasons for ineligibility given most often were abandoning a job or voluntary resignation. Legal Aid, however, charged that when workers were fired for complaining, they were given a paper to sign saying they'd quit voluntarily. Among the names were also many whose reason for ineligibility was given as "lazy," "slow," "work hours too long," "work too hot and hard," or "slowing up other workers." Workers were warned not to talk with legal aid attorneys, according to numerous legal cases, and were even told to burn the pink legal aid know-your-rights books in a trash barrel at the association office.

The NCGA was organized in 1989 by Craig Eury and Kenneth White, who were fired that year as rural representatives of the North Carolina Employment and Security Commission, the state's unemployment office. The two then set up businesses in North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and other states for importing guest workers. In 2003 they brought in over ten thousand workers, recruited in Mexico by Manpower of America, which used local *enganchadores*, or recruiters.

When Mt. Olive signed with FLOC in 2004, NCGA signed as well, since it was the recruiter of the workers employed by the growers who grew the cucumbers for Mt. Olive pickles. As a result of the agreement, FLOC was then able to police the recruitment system. North Carolina is a right-to-work state, which limited the union's power over hiring, however. Today a grower has the right to make a

decision about whom he or she hires, but the union maintains a seniority list. If a worker isn't rehired by a particular grower at the start of the season, the union can get the NCGA to find him or her another job. The union has a grievance system, and workers can make complaints about the kind of health and safety problems they previously had to suffer through in silence and fear. The Oxfam report notes that in 2010 FLOC processed more than seven hundred complaints.

The contract, especially the monitoring of hiring, came at a high price. In 2004, FLOC opened an office for that purpose in Monterrey, Mexico. On April 9, 2007, Santiago Rafael Cruz, sent by the union to staff that office, was tied up, tortured and murdered. To this day, the Mexican government has been unable to bring his killers to justice. There is little doubt, however, that he was murdered because the union was trying to stop the bribes extorted by the *enganchadores* from workers, who had to pay the bribes to get hired.

Six thousand H-2A workers brought to North Carolina every year are the heart of FLOC's membership in the state. When workers fall under the union contract, FLOC represents them, regardless of their immigration status. Some contract growers employ both H-2A and undocumented labor. FLOC members do more than pick cucumbers for pickles, however. NCGA growers also grow tobacco, the state's most important crop. Of FLOC's seven thousand North Carolina members, 80 percent work in tobacco as well as cucumbers. That gives the union a base for organizing the tobacco industry, using the same corporate and boycott strategy it used to gain agreements with Mt. Olive and other multinational food corporations.

This time, FLOC's adversaries are the world's largest cigarette manufacturers—Philip Morris, Lorillard Tobacco Company, and Reynolds American. None of them actually own land or grow tobacco themselves. They contract with growers and buy what they produce, at a price these manufacturers totally control. Some growers contract for workers through NCGA, while others hire workers themselves, usually through labor contractors. The NCGA workers all have H-2A visas, while those working for labor contractors are mostly undocumented.

"Conditions for tobacco workers are worse than those for farmworkers anywhere else in the country," says Baldemar Velasquez, FLOC's president. The fact that union members hired through the NCGA are H-2A workers makes NCGA growers economically uncompetitive, he maintains: "They have to provide better conditions, from the adverse effect wage rate to paying Social Security and workers' compensation." With Mt. Olive, all growers supplying pickles to the company have to abide by union conditions and pay the same wages. Tobacco, however, is a much larger business, in which NCGA growers with the union contract are competing with non-union growers. A union contract for the whole tobacco industry would force growers to pay the same wages, essentially taking labor costs out of competition.

Since the vast majority of the farm labor workforce in tobacco is undocumented, an agreement with the big cigarette manufacturers would have important differences from the first contract with Mt. Olive and the NCGA. One question is whether undocumented workers would be represented by the union if the industry is forced to sign a master agreement. Velasquez says he's out to organize all workers, regardless of status. "Just because someone's undocumented doesn't mean they don't have rights," he declares. Another complexity is the ability of manufacturers to dictate prices to growers. After the US government abandoned its marketing regulations for tobacco, growers lost much of their leverage for negotiating those prices. "Typically, the farmer must sign the contract as written [by the manufacturer] or else lose the chance to grow tobacco during the upcoming season," the Oxfam report notes. One grower told investigators that "[in] 2010 our crop is going to bring us half a million dollars less than it did in 2009." Growers today have only one way to respond to price pressure: get workers to produce more for lower wages, while spending even less on their food, housing and health. That exerts a continuing downward pressure on wages and conditions in the fields.

H-2A workers have become more expensive than undocumented workers in North Carolina, not because of changes in the H-2A program, but because of the union contract. In every other state, where

H-2A workers have no union protection, their wages and conditions are often no different from those of undocumented workers. On many ranches they're employed and housed together.

Some North Carolina growers see advantages in using H-2A workers, especially if competing growers must do the same. One told the Oxfam investigators, "You want to know if you are going to pour all this money into these crops, that if you do everything you are supposed to, you are going to have the labor there till the end of the year to get that crop out of the field. . . . When you hire, you know, a crew leader, an undocumented worker, you are running the risk they are going to leave you before you finish, you run the risk they're going to leave when you need them the most."

What makes the program desirable to employers, however, also makes workers vulnerable to employer pressure. The means used to make workers dependable—the employment contract, grower control of recruiting and hiring, and the ability of employers to deport workers by firing them—deprive workers of power. In 2007 the Southern Poverty Law Center's report *Close to Slavery* said the program was structurally flawed because workers "are bound to the employers who 'import' them. If guest workers complain about abuses, they face deportation, blacklisting, or other retaliation." Regulations to protect workers "exist mainly on paper. Government enforcement . . . is almost non-existent."

The Oxfam report recommends expansion of the H-2A program, claiming this would improve wages and conditions. However, allowing growers to import more workers simply means that more workers will endure the abysmal conditions described in the "Close to Slavery" report. Even in North Carolina, where H-2A conditions are relatively better, the reason for that improvement is not the work visa, but the fact that workers have a union contract. Without a strong union, conditions would quickly return to what they were before 2004. Yet the Oxfam report makes no recommendation that tobacco manufacturers sign a union contract.

In the end, the choice faced by Cardenal and the five other migrants in the Nash County field is simple. Stay home and go hungry, or come to the United States and survive. Bad conditions and lack of

legal status are no deterrent. These workers are not unsophisticated about the situation they face in the United States. Nor do they lack knowledge about the perils of farm labor. They simply have very little power to change their situation other than by leaving home and migrating to North Carolina.

Cardenal asks about dibromochloropropane, or DBCP, an agricultural pesticide that was used by Dole Corporation on banana plantations in Nicaragua for many years. The chemical was found to have caused sterility among farm laborers. He cites it as an example of the possible dangers of working in the United States, where he comes in contact with plants and chemicals without knowing their effects. "Some people got money to settle their legal cases," he explains, "but the price they paid was very high. They never had children. How do I know that years from now some chemical on the leaves here won't cause me a problem like that?"

A strong union would make sure he knows the potential dangers from pesticides. A higher wage, not tied to a piece rate, could allow him to work more slowly using gloves, instead of absorbing nicotine through his bare hands. And a union contract could protect him if he went to rancher Corey and demanded these things, keeping Corey from firing him, evicting him from company housing, and even deporting him. At present, whether Cardenal comes into the tobacco field as an H-2A worker or without any visa at all, he runs the risk of retaliation if he demands better conditions. Undocumented workers can always be threatened with the *migra*—US immigration enforcement—while H-2A workers lose their visa along with their job if their boss fires them.

The choices in this field are very circumscribed. But envisioning a more liberating solution for the workers here is not hard. If NAFTA and CAFTA were renegotiated or repealed, people would have a better chance to earn a decent living at home, making migration only an option, not a necessity. A green card for tobacco workers—a residence visa instead of an H-2A employment contract or no visa at all—would give them greater labor and social rights. Workers with enforceable organizing rights would face less difficulty requiring huge corporations to sign union agreements.

The toxic and deadlocked politics of Washington, DC, call these solutions impossible. At the same time, US immigration policy is largely shaped by the desire of US employers for labor, limiting what's possible for Cardenal and his workmates. But shouldn't migration produce strong communities of people fully able to assert their rights in the United States or Canada? And can't people have a choice between migration and staying home in healthy communities in their countries of origin? Or must displacement and migration be geared to supplying labor to cigarette manufacturers at a price they want to pay?