

CONTRACT LABOUR IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF TANYA BASOK'S *TORTILLAS AND TOMATOES: TRANSMIGRANT MEXICAN HARVESTERS IN CANADA*

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Between the mid 1960s and mid 1970s the Canadian government entered into agreements with Mexico and various Caribbean nations—the largest being Jamaica—to supply contract workers to farmers in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and Manitoba. The government was responding to powerful agricultural lobbies that had pushed for years to secure something more than stop-gap measures to rectify what they claimed was a chronic labour shortage. The program made it possible for Third World workers and peasants to spend between six weeks and eight months annually in Canada, working mainly in tobacco, greenhouses, and open field fruits and vegetables. Perhaps because of its small size (until recently less than 10,000 workers annually), reputed success as measured by the high percentage of return migrants, and geographically limited reach (southern areas of four provinces), the program attracted little attention from Canadian politicians, the Canadian public, or academics (though see Cecil and Ebanks, 1991, 1992).

Public and academic interest in Canadian contract labour has increased since the late 1990s.¹ Not only has the number of offshore

workers skyrocketed in response to global competition and the drive toward flexible work forces, but in Canada contract labour has begun to expand into nonagricultural sectors. Construction Recruitment for External Workers (CREWS) is a new Canadian work program that allows employers to request foreign workers for one-year contracts in the construction industry; according to Marr (2002), "HRDC [Human Resources Development Canada] has made such programs a central plank of its policy." It is within this context that Tanya Basok wrote *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada*, the first book-length study of the Caribbean and Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program.

In order to give some focus to what could have otherwise become an overly broad and potentially amorphous examination of the program, Basok elected to centre her research on one industry (the greenhouse industry in southern Ontario) and the role played by one national group (Mexican workers) in that industry's progressive expansion since the beginning of the 1990s; she also interviewed 565 contract workers, 411 of them contacted through snowball samples in 11 of the largest sending communities in Guanajuato and Tlaxcala during 1997 and 2000 (Basok 2003, 10; 2002, 103). In this essay I discuss Basok's methods and her principal findings as entry points into a broader discussion of the program based on the results of my own research in three northwest Tlaxcalan communities heavily dependent on Canada-earned incomes. The material to which I will make comparative reference derives from 197 semi-structured interviews carried out in late 2001 and early 2002 in three rural Tlaxcalan communities, which, given their high levels of participation in the program, were almost certainly among the six Tlaxcalan towns sampled by Basok in 2000. All of my informants had applied at least once to the Canadian program. Finally, I supplemented work in Tlaxcala with a month's fieldwork in Ontario during August–September of 2003.² While about 20% of interviewees worked in the greenhouse industry and more than 80% in Ontario, the agricultural work experience of people included in the (nonrandom) sample covered the full range of opportunities available to Mexican contract workers: 20% worked on tobacco farms during their last trip to Canada, 34% on open field vegetable farms, 11% on fruit farms, 5% in packing plants, and 4% in nurseries, where conditions are similar to those in the greenhouse

industry. As I hope to demonstrate below, the research findings complement those of Basok, even as they add additional insights and suggest a broadening of investigation into transnational social fields.

One of the great strengths of *Tortillas and Tomatoes* is the manner in which it maps the contours of contemporary global agricultural competition and elucidates the role of contract labour within it. On the basis of an examination of industry documents and interviews with 45 Leamington (Ontario) greenhouse owners, as well as a brief survey of postwar Ontario agricultural labour supply problems, Basok concludes that offshore contract workers have become “structurally necessary” to the health of the greenhouse industry as opposed to a “preferred and helpful solution” for capital because they display qualities which render them superior in economic terms to other categories of workers (2002, 13). Greenhouse owners assert that domestic workers are unreliable because they have the right to move about the labour market more or less at will, are frequently distracted from work by family or religious matters, and resist working weekends and long overtime days during the harvest season. In contrast to “free workers,” offshore contract workers form a “captive” labour force that is always available and exceptionally reliable as a function of what we could call its “unfreedom.” Mexican workers are assigned to specific employers, and if they attempt to quit, abandon the work site without permission, or are dismissed, they are subject to immediate deportation; permanent blacklisting from the program generally follows. They live on or near the farm in housing provided by the employer, for which reason they are physically and socially separated from the resident Canadian population, and receive low hourly wages and no overtime pay. Some Canadian community (mainly church-sponsored) outreach programs do exist, mainly in areas with significant concentrations of Mexican workers—Leamington and Bradford among them—but language differences, limited community participation, and a lack of free time on the part of workers limits their effectivity. Interviews and observations in southern Ontario in August and September of 2003 indicate that most contact between Mexican migrant workers and Canadian citizens involves marketplace transactions, and that organized activities tend to revolve around religious services (Spanish-language mass held late Sunday afternoons) and official Mexican holidays.³

Combined with the heavy burden they bear for maintaining households, often quite extensive ones, in Mexico, most Mexican contract workers seek as many hours as the employer is willing to grant. Indeed, most of my Tlaxcalan interviewees tended to complain more when employers provided too little work, defined by most as less than 50 hours weekly, rather than too much.

Although she does not represent it directly as such, Basok analyzes “captive labour” as involving an integrated set of social and even cultural relations that work to the benefit of capital. One feature of this system of social relations, discussed earlier by Preibisch (2000) as well as Cecil and Ebanks (1992), involves the development of paternalistic relationships between the Canadian employer and migrant workers, which enhance the control of the former over the latter. Whereas Mexican consuls posted to nearby cities are supposed to ensure that contract workers receive fair treatment, most workers believe—and Basok presents several case studies that document the fact—that the consuls generally favour employers.⁴

Contract work would be less problematic if Canadian-earned income were invested productively in Mexico so as to obviate the need for migration in the future, that is, if contract labour involved a limited number of episodes in a longer working life. However, migrant workers tend to be recruited from extremely poor and needy households located in impoverished rural communities that present few investment possibilities. About 25% (141 of 565) of Basok’s interviewees had made productive investments, but “[m]ost considered these investments as supplementary, and they felt they had to continue working in Canada to meet their family needs” (2002, 135). Basok notes that a considerable percentage of remittance income goes for housing and children’s education. Material standards of reproduction do improve, but at the cost of involving the productive males in a vicious cycle of migration—referred to by Reichert (1981) as the “migration syndrome”—whereby only international labour migration provides the monetary income to sustain the levels of consumption that migration-based incomes made possible in the first place. Basok concludes,

the very criteria used by the Mexican Ministry of Labour to select participants for the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program inadvertently ensure that these workers do

not become landowners or successful business owners and instead, by growing dependent on incomes earned in Canada, become locked into the cycle of transmigration. Since it is important for most Mexican workers participating in the Canadian program to return to Canada in the years to come, they do not wish to jeopardize their continued participation by refusing to work when their patrones demand their labour. (2002, 138)

Economic "captivity" in Canada or elsewhere depends on the absence or limited character of alternatives in the home country, for which reason it might be considered another manifestation of international development and underdevelopment. If conditions in most of rural Mexico were not so deplorable, workers and small agriculturalists would be less willing to subject themselves to a contract that so clearly favours capital over labour. As it is, the Mexican Ministry of Labour, which recruits for Canadian farmers, seeks out males from rural areas who are in good physical condition, possess little or no land, resources, or nonagricultural marketable skills, and who are generally married and responsible for maintaining several dependents. The criteria favour rural people with few domestic opportunities whose desperation for work ensures that they will form a relatively docile and pliable labour force.

Short Contracts, the Three-Year Rule, and Captive Labour

Basok chose well when she decided to focus on the greenhouse industry, among the most dynamic sectors of Ontario agriculture. Greenhouse workers, however, whose work is unencumbered by climatic changes, receive substantially longer contracts than workers in tobacco or open field fruits and vegetables. Basok states that the average contract in the program runs between 18 and 19 weeks, but generally treats the (maximum) eight-month contract as her analytical baseline (2002, 34, 131). Among Tlaxcalan informants, mean contract length for their last migration (usually in 2001) was 4.8 months (19 weeks), but more than a fifth of the workers received contracts of 3.0 or fewer months, too little time in which to earn the money necessary to meet household obligations in Mexico. An exclusive focus on the greenhouse industry,

where the average contract was 6.8 months, makes it difficult to capture this dimension of the contract labour experience.

Short contracts generate disgruntlement on the part of workers, many of whom seek the first opportunity to transfer to farms offering longer ones. However, in order to please Canadian employers interested in a relatively stable labour force, the Mexican Department of Labour enforces an informal three-year rule on the basis of which it denies requests for transfer until a worker has completed three consecutive work seasons with the employer to whom he was first assigned.⁵ Before a request for transfer will be considered, workers who receive initial six-week or two-month contracts—which is particularly common on tobacco farms—have no option but to return for two additional seasons to the same employer (and contract) if they wish to remain active in the program. However, my current understanding, based on interviews in Tlaxcala and more recently on informal conversations with workers in Ontario, is that due consideration of that request merely places the worker back in the contract lottery, as a result of which he may or may not receive a longer assignment.

Many workers who remain in the system eventually do obtain contracts more to their liking. In their “most recent” contract, Tlaxcalan participants with three or fewer years working in Canada received a median 4.4-month offer, compared to 5 months for people with four to eight years’ experience and 6 months for those who had made nine or more trips. These differences result partly from a policy that disproportionately assigns new migrants to agricultural sectors (e.g., fruit and tobacco) in which short contracts predominate, but are also likely affected by the movement of experienced workers toward farms that provide them better contractual, working, and living conditions.⁶ Far from contradicting Basok’s main point about captive labour, the presence of the three-year rule subordinates labour even more forcefully to particular employers than Basok indicated.

Migration Alternatives in Rural Tlaxcala: Canada versus US H2A

An important aspect of captivity concerns the lack of alternatives to the Canadian program. Most domestic alternatives were closed off with the Mexican economic crisis and neo-liberal policies that de-

prive agriculture (and rural areas in general) of government assistance, and few poor, rural households are able to amass the tens of thousands of pesos charged by coyotes to guide undocumented migrants across the US border. Even if the option were available, Basok indicates that Mexican migrants to Canada and their families would prefer continued legal migration to Canada over undocumented migration to the United States because of the program's low entry costs, subsidized travel, and free housing (Basok 2002, 96–98). Undocumented migrants in the United States generally earn higher hourly wages than contract workers in Canada, but the high housing, transportation, and other costs leave much less available for remittance to the Mexican household.⁷

Nonetheless, evidence from northwest Tlaxcala suggests a degree of competition between the United States and Canada, with respect to undocumented migration and contract labour. Even in these communities, social networks have formed to link origin sites in Mexico and destination sites in the United States; through such networks, some potential migrants gain access to monetary loans, information, and other forms of assistance that make it possible for them to test their luck in El Norte, a point acknowledged by Basok (2002, 104). Of equal importance, some northwest Tlaxcalans rate the Canadian program as inferior to undocumented US migration, mentioning higher wages in the United States, as well as the possibility of upward economic mobility, greater freedom of movement, the absence of a fixed contract (which gives the worker some control over the length of stay), and the presence of Latino communities. A few people have shifted from contract labour in Canada to undocumented labour in the United States. Although undocumented US migration has yet to gain significant ground in communities whose residents are heavily committed to the Canadian program, it may do so in the future, particularly if Canadian labour demand stagnates or contracts as a function of the changing fortunes of southern Canadian farmers in national and international markets.

While Basok does discuss undocumented US migration, she overlooks completely the role of the US H2A program, through which Mexicans and other foreign nationals work in agriculture and related fields mostly in the US southeast, northeast, and along the eastern seaboard. The program is available in northwest Tlaxcala and prob-

ably in some other areas that also supply workers to the Canadian program. Private labour recruiters working for the San Antonio-based Del Alamo Corporation serve as gatekeepers of H2A. The program has an entry cost of 5,000 pesos, several times that of the Canadian program, but age, health, and other prerequisites are more flexible, and overall demand is several times greater. H2A represents a viable option for those unable to meet the stringent requirements of the Canadian program or for those whose Canadian experiences proved unpleasant or unprofitable.

H2A offers transportation (via bus) from recruitment centres in northern Mexico to the work site (usually North Carolina, in the case of Tlaxcalans), as well as free housing and other amenities. The hourly wage is significantly higher than its Canadian provincial counterpart as a result of the “adverse effect wage rate,” established on a state-by-state basis by the US Department of Agriculture in order to ensure that offshore workers do not constitute unfair competition for domestic workers (United States Department of Agriculture 2001). In 2001, the adverse effect wage rate varied from a low of \$6.60 per hour in several southern states to a high of \$8.17 per hour in New York and New England, 30% to 60% higher than hourly wages paid in Canada when 2001 exchange rates are taken into consideration.

Oversight is minimal as a function of the strong role exercised by private growers’ associations (such as the North Carolina Growers Association) and an almost total lack of involvement by Mexican government representatives. Far more abuses occur on H2A farms than those documented for the Canadian program, and in North Carolina the growers association has been involved in a running dispute and repeated legal suits with the North Carolina Legal Aid Association (Smith-Nonini 2002; Yeoman 2001; Ward 1999). The point that I wish to make, however, is that H2A *does* represent a viable alternative to the Canadian program for a broad strata of rural Mexicans unable to amass the thousands of dollars that smugglers charge to guide them across the US border. A few enterprising peasants and workers with contacts in the United States have even strategically employed H2A as a kind of border pass, avoiding both smugglers’ fees and the possibility of apprehension and deportation by the US Border Patrol. As H2A recruits they cross the border legally courtesy of the US employer and the US government, but abandon the farm

soon after arrival and disappear into one or another rapidly growing East Coast Latino community. More than 1 in 20 interviewees in three northwest Tlaxcalan communities with migratory experience to Canada had also participated in the H2A program.⁸ Indeed, northwest Tlaxcala displays the full range of available migratory options: undocumented migration to the United States, H2A contract labour, and Canadian contract labour.

Creeping Mexicanization in Contract Labour Systems

In recent years contract labour programs in both the United States and Canada have been shifting from Caribbean-area contract workers to Mexican contract workers. The Canadian government extended contract labour opportunities to Mexico in 1974, eight years after the recruitment of the first Jamaican worker. The Mexican contribution to the overall program increased from a mere 5% at the beginning to about 25% in 1987. A more significant shift occurred during the 1990s when, according to Weston, “the numbers from the Caribbean fell by 4%, while from Mexico they rose by 70%” (2000, 2). The trend continued so that by 2001, Mexicans represented more than half the contract labour force (Commission for Labor Cooperation 2002, 8). A similar dynamic took place in the United States, as H2A Caribbean-origin sugar cane harvesters in Florida gave way in the 1990s to a predominantly Mexican contract labour force in tobacco, cucumbers, and other crops in North Carolina and other southeastern states.

In Canada, Mexicans fill most new slots generated by the program’s expansion and are taking over positions on farms that formerly employed Caribbean-origin workers. Several Tlaxcalan interviewees able to communicate with Spanish-speaking Canadian employers stated that they were among the first generation of Mexicans working on farms that had formerly employed *Jamaiquinos*—Mexican migrant slang for all Caribbean-origin workers—and out of an exaggerated (and, I would argue, counterproductive) national pride, readily accepted Canadian employers’ claims about the superior resistance and durability of Mexican workers. According to Mexicans from Tlaxcala, many Canadian farmers regarded migrants originating from the Caribbean area as aggressive, troublesome, demanding, and poorly motivated, stereotypes shared among significant

sectors of the nonfarming public in southern Ontario (see Brauder, Preibisch, Sutherland, and Nash n.d.).⁹ Basok's focus on Mexicans prevents her from investigating the issue in depth, although she does suggest that workers from the Caribbean see migrant work as more of an adventure than an economic necessity, perhaps because they tend to be more educated and better off economically than Mexicans (2002, 137–138). But Basok also thinks that employers might view English-language competence of workers from the Caribbean region as a liability:

It is possible that Canadian growers regard the inability of Mexican workers to speak English as an advantage, since they are less likely to talk back to their employers and demand improvements in their working and housing conditions. Furthermore, there is virtually nothing to distract them from their total commitment to work. Whereas West Indian workers can easily communicate with Canadian residents in English and have made friends with some of them ..., Mexican workers, who cannot do so, are less likely to socialize with people off the farm. (2002, 33)¹⁰

Accordingly, Basok implies that resistance on the part of West Indian workers to perceived violations of their rights is expressed more directly, which I understand to mean that complaints often become part of the "public transcript" as opposed to remaining offstage, out of the sight and hearing of the employer and other authority figures (see Scott 1990). I don't doubt that West Indian workers' historical memory of and resistance to slavery have contributed to a greater propensity to "talk back" when relating to Anglos, even when power relations are heavily skewed in favor of the latter, but why did it take Canadian employers almost two decades to discover this?

Whatever the reason or reasons, this process of national/ethnic replacement merits systematic investigation. That Basok did not assume the task by no means detracts importance from her research, which would have lost in depth what it might have gained in breadth by considering the variety of national/ethnic relationships on and off the farm. On the other hand, further examination of the matter may reveal that some farmers, at least, provoke competition among work-

ers of different national/ethnic origins in order to raise work intensity and productivity levels. Unlike US employers of H2A labour, who regularly pay piece wages and adjust recorded work time downward in order to make it appear that they are paying adverse effect wage rates when they are not (Thompson 2001), most Canadian farmers pay at least the minimum hourly rate mandated by authorities. Paying for time worked as opposed to by the piece or by the task means that employers must employ other strategies in order to raise worker productivity above the domestic norm. The report issued by the employer, which can ensure a worker's continued employment, lead to his transfer to another farm, or result in his dismissal, is a powerful institutionalized mechanism for pushing contract workers to exercise maximum effort.¹¹ But insofar as employers view competition in national/ethnic and not just individual terms, it, too, can drive workers to work harder and faster.

Labour Cost and Productivity Differences between Domestic and Offshore Workers

Basok repeats employers' assertions that contract labour is not cost efficient, and that they participate in the program for lack of domestic alternatives (2002, 47–57). There is no disagreement regarding the higher cost of contract as opposed to domestic labour, either among analysts of the Canadian program or those who have written on H2A. The question, however, turns around how *much* more money employers lay out on average and whether or not an equal or superior amount is returned to them via the higher productivity of offshore workers (higher intensity and/or efficiency of labour power). Satzewich (1991, 112–113) argued that at the beginning of the program in 1966, Jamaican workers cost employers 50 cents an hour more than domestic workers (Cdn\$1.81 per hour compared to Cdn\$1.31) but that the differences were offset when labour productivity and turnover rates were taken into consideration (a point repeated by Basok 2002, 115–116). But since Jamaican workers were estimated to be only 9% more productive than domestic workers, three-quarters of the cost difference was presumably explained by reduced crop losses attributable to the low turnover rate of Jamaican migrants.¹² Based on anecdotal evidence provided by Basok's interviewees, I want to suggest that pro-

ductivity differences are probably much higher than 9%, and that a detailed examination of labour process in the Canadian program—which remains to be carried out—would reveal productivity differences on the order of 33% to 50% or more. One Leamington greenhouse grower told Basok, “We know, if we separate crews, if we put four Mexicans on something, it will take a minimum of eight Canadians to get the same amount of work done in the same amount of time” (cited in Basok 2002, 116). Another estimated that it took 1.5 Canadian workers to accomplish the work of one offshore worker (2002, 116). These farmers probably know what they are talking about, though in making such statements they seem unaware that they are putting the lie to complaints about the high cost of offshore labour.

If many growers are unable to convert the superexploitation associated with higher than average work intensity into higher profits, it is because many of their competitors in Canada and elsewhere are also dependent upon superexploited, captive, or semi-captive labour. Gary Cooper, president of F.A.R.M.S. (and a farmer himself), asserted once that without offshore workers, “most of the fruits and vegetables in Ontario would not be grown.” He further noted that “Canadians will still eat those fruits and vegetables,” and then asked, somewhat rhetorically, “[S]o why don’t we enjoy the economic benefits of producing them? ... We can take Mexican tomatoes and ship them up here, you can send a Mexican to California to produce tomatoes there and you can ship them up here, or you can send a Mexican up here and you grow the tomato here in Ontario” (cited in Marr 2002, 4). All this simply underscores that in certain sectors of North American agriculture, whether sited in Mexico, the United States, or Canada, the superexploitation of Mexican and other workers has become a permanent requirement—“structurally necessary” in Basok’s terminology—for many enterprises to be able to compete (see Lara, 1998). Even so, the point, discussed here mainly on the basis of anecdotal evidence, merits careful analysis.

Contract Labour in the Americas

While it represents a small percentage of the agricultural work force—10% to 15% in Canada, a much lower 4% in the United States—contract labour plays a key role in some of the most dynamic and

profitable sectors of agriculture in both countries. Despite employer complaints in recent years—probably stronger in the United States than in Canada—about the high cost of state-sponsored contract workers, the programs have rapidly expanded in both countries. The Mexican end of the Canadian program increased from 5,647 in 1997 to 10,275 in 2001, an average annual growth rate of more than 16%. But this increase pales when compared to the tripling of H2A workers (15,117 to 41,827) that took place in the United States between fiscal years 1995 and 1999 (Martin 2001, 3). As contract labour programs expand as one type of capitalist response to real, perceived, or manufactured agricultural labour force supply shortages, they are being discussed and debated by farmers and their spokespersons, journalists, politicians, and migrant watchdog groups. Yet the scarcity of good academic work means that many positions are misinformed or informed by a limited number of anecdotal accounts. It is in this context that Tanya Basok's book assumes its greatest importance: the first full-fledged, ethnographically based examination of Mexican transmigrant harvesters that embraces both work sites and, albeit with less detail, sites of social reproduction. Unfortunately, no similar contemporary study exists for H2A workers in the United States (though see Smith-Nonini 2002, as well as Griffith, Heppel, and Torres 2002), and the changing situations of contract workers from the Caribbean nations have been generally slighted by academics in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere.

While I believe that more and varied case studies of the sort developed by Basok are necessary to redress the situation, I believe even more strongly that we require studies of the different social and political fields—local communities, government bureaucracies, work situations in Canada and the United States—in which contract workers of all nationalities and ethnicities operate and interact. In short, we need collaborative work that embraces the ramifications of contract labour programs for participants in Mexico, the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada: a series of transnational studies that situate contract labour vertically, in terms of the political and economic conditions of the agricultural (and nonagricultural) industries that use contract labour, and horizontally, in relation to the impact of such labour forms on the communities from which the workers come as well as upon those in which they work.

Such an approach is justified by the fact that, despite substantive differences in agricultural labour force composition between Canada (90% domestic workers) and the United States (70% foreign-born and over 55% undocumented), a similar dynamic is unfolding in the two countries: that is, both show increasing dependence on contract labour, Mexicanization of the contract labour force, and sectoral expansion of low-wage contract labour into construction, tourism, and other industries. As these programs expand, they become accessible to growing numbers of Mexican rural poor, as well as the rural poor of other countries. As I pointed out earlier, potential migrants in northwest Tlaxcala have a number of international alternatives from which to choose: they can apply to work in Canada through the Tlaxcala State Employment Office; they can apply directly to one of three private statewide labour recruiters to cut tobacco in North Carolina or another southern state in the H2A program; and, if they have the contacts and can amass the resources, they can slip into the United States and join several million undocumented migrants there. Northwest Tlaxcalans are aware of these alternatives. They are savvy about the potential risks and potential gains of each one, and information about salaries and exchange rates circulate through local networks and play a role in migrant decision-making. Focussing on Canada *or* the United States (or treating each separately) captures only a part of the very complex transnational reality that impinges on areas such as northwest Tlaxcala.

None of what I have said negates Basok's basic point about contract labour as captive labour. On the contrary, I have sought to deepen the concept, by pointing to additional factors (the three-year rule, ethnic competition in some instances) that contribute to labour force captivity, and to broaden its application, by noting its relevance to the US H2A program. By no means do I wish to suggest that the presence of alternative migration destinations be equated with real freedom. As I have pointed out elsewhere, contemporary interest in household decision-making processes and the options among which households and their members choose comes precisely at a moment when structural constraints have become more confining than at any point in recent memory (Binford 2003, 321–324). Whether in Canada or the United States, contract workers occupy a legal status that ties them to their assigned employer. Sponsoring governments meet protests or

efforts to organize with deportation to the country of origin and expulsion from the program, as occurred with Caribbean sugar cane cutters in Imaloki, Florida, in 1986 and with Mexican contract workers in Leamington, Ontario, in 2001. Finally, as Basok makes clear (2002, 149–151), the weak bargaining position of contract workers means that improvement in working and living conditions, as well as salaries, will require the active support of domestic organizations such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (Canada) or the Farm Workers Organizing Committee (United States).

Notes

1. Muñoz (1999), Vanegas (2000a, 2000b, 2001), and Verduzco (1999, 2000) offer general analyses of the program. Colby (1997), Preibisch (2000), and Binford (2002) report on the results of fieldwork carried out in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala, respectively. Smart (1997) carried out a limited number of interviews on one farm in southern Alberta. Barrón (1998, 2000) interviewed female participants in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Brauder and Corbin (2002) report on the results of discourse analysis of five years (1997–2002) of newspaper articles from Ontario, while Brauder et al. (n.d.) provide a preliminary discussion of the impact of offshore contract workers on two receiving communities in Southern Ontario. Sandoval and Vanegas (2001) offer a comparative political and historical analysis of contract labour in Canada and the United States. Prior to the book discussed here, Basok published several articles, among them one treating productive investment of Canada-earned incomes (2000a) and another comparing the Canadian program with the Bracero (Migrant Worker) Program, particularly in terms of their relationship to undocumented migration (2000b). Apart from these journal articles and research reports, a number of students completed MA and PhD theses addressing one or another aspect of the program. In Mexico these would include Caloca-Rivas's PhD thesis (Universidad Iberoamericana, Santa Fe) on San Lucas Ticopilco, a Tlaxcala sending community (1999), Xiomara Marinka Mellado's BA thesis on legal issues related to workers' rights and the program (2000), and Domingo Rodríguez's account of two seasons in Canada, presented as his BA thesis in social work at the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala (1993). Among Mexican scholars, Vanegas, Verduzco, Caloca-Rivas, Barrón, and Sofia Quintero (an uncompleted BA thesis from the Universidad de las Americas in Cholula, Puebla) have carried out fieldwork both in Canada and in Mexico, usually with the financial support of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City. Other BA, MA, and doctoral theses are in process in both Canada and Mexico.

2. The Ontario fieldwork was carried out following initial submission of this article. I include only information from that fieldwork useful in clarifying particular points of analysis.
3. In 2003 the United Food and Commercial Workers established migrant resource centres in Leamington (greenhouse industry), Bradford (open field vegetables) and Simcoe (tobacco, ginseng). Personnel in the centres offer migrants English classes, assistance with Canadian tax returns, health cards and other documents, and serve as intermediaries between workers, employers, and the Mexican consulate in Toronto. Among the bilingual staff are persons of Colombian, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan descent, but not one Mexican or Mexican-Canadian. Frontier College provides home-based English classes through participating students. A limited amount of dating occurs between Mexican workers and non-Latino Canadian citizens, occasionally leading to marriage.
4. However, Basok oversimplifies the role of the consuls, whose support activities are constrained both financially and politically. Currently, the Mexican government provides funding in its Toronto consulate for five liaison officers to service more than 8,000 temporary workers (a ratio of one liaison officer to 1,600 contract workers); by comparison, the Jamaican consulate contains six liaison for 5,000 workers (a ratio of 1:833). Jamaican liaison officers meet new arrivals at the airport, expedite issuance of Social Insurance and Ontario Ministry of Health cards, file Canadian income tax returns for them, and, according to both workers and consular officials, informally visit every farm employing Jamaican workers at least one time during the contract labour season. The Mexican consulate no longer meets workers at the airport, has contracted a private agency in Leamington to fill out workers' tax returns—which requires workers to provide documentation—and sends out liaison officers to only those farms in which employer-worker problems cannot be resolved by telephone. Both the Jamaican and Mexican governments seem to have charged their liaison staffs with ensuring Canadian satisfaction and continued demand for their respective countrymen, but the small contribution that this program makes to offshore Mexican employment—most of which migrates illegally to the United States—lends it a particularly low funding priority, compared, say, to Jamaica, Trinidad, and the Eastern Caribbean states.
5. Concern about workforce stability is evidenced by Canadian farmers' complaints to the Ontario Department of Human Resources when workers solicited by name do not arrive (Verduzco 2000, 340, 342).
6. I would suppose that several factors are at work here, including a steeper dropout rate among people who initially receive shorter contracts, and a higher rate of return migration among those who initially receive longer ones. Mexican contract workers sometimes request assignment to specific farms where living and working conditions are known to be attractive, but

such requests are never, as far as I have been able to tell, taken into consideration. Transfer to a particular farm is possible only on the condition that the farmer request the worker by name.

7. Information from random surveys carried out in four communities of Puebla and Veracruz in 2002–2003 indicate current median wages of undocumented US migrants of US\$7.00 per hour, out of which migrant workers must pay smugglers' fees (between US\$2,000–3,000), rent, and transportation between the work site and living site. Putting aside the temptations of US commodity fetishism—all of these workers reside and work in urban areas—it should be obvious that on average they will not be able to remit as much money as a contract worker in Canada earning the equivalent of US\$5.25 per hour, who pays at most a few hundred dollars as his share of the airfare and lives rent-free on or near the farm.
8. Five of eight informants about whom we have clear information entered the H2A program after one or more years of working in Canada; the other three pursued the opposite course of action. One informant who claimed to have worked in H2A applied to but was denied entry to the Canada Program. A tenth person failed to provide specific information about his H2A experience; he last participated in the Canada Program in 1990.
9. I recognize that such statements were filtered both linguistically and ideologically. Many Tlaxcalan interviewees expressed nationalist pride—often couched in essentialist language—over their ability to work longer hours and more intensively than people of other national origins. In a perverse way, essentialist beliefs enable the superexploitation of workers on the part of Canadian employers, and contribute to the latter's hegemonic control over the former.
10. Verduzco (2000, 340) indicated a tendency toward ethnic/national specialization, with Mexicans maintaining an overwhelming numerical majority in greenhouses and nurseries, as well as in open field vegetables, and migrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean nations predominating in tobacco and apples. The author cites a Canadian official to the effect that the sectorial preference for Mexicans is the result of a supposed "Latin empathy" between Italian (or descendants of Italians) greenhouse owners and their Mexican employees. But such a hypothesis cannot account for the preference for Mexicans in open field vegetables, nor for the predominance of migrants from the Caribbean area in tobacco or apples.
11. Everyone is aware of the ever present possibility that a Canadian employer will issue negative reports on slow workers and "name" the fast ones to return the following year. No better case study exists than Domingo Rodríguez's bachelor's thesis, which recounts two seasons in Canada. Rodríguez explains how the workers refused to take advantage of one employer's largess—he allowed them to work without supervision—because

they feared that to do so might have future disciplinary consequences (Rodríguez 1993). These workers had internalized a set of expectations regarding work that relieved the employer of the need to expend time and resources managing them.

12. Based on Satzewich's figures (1991), contract workers cost 38% more than domestic workers. If the former were, indeed, 9% more efficient, then the remaining 29% (equal to 77% of the cost difference) would be accounted for by other factors.

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