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Linda B. Hall*

Alvaro Obregón and Mexican Migrant Labor to the United States, 1920 - 1924

A major problem facing the administration of incoming president Alvaro Obregón in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 was the widespread unemployment which accompanied the economic disorganization and social breakdown of the revolutionary period. Many Mexican workers tried to deal with this problem by migrating, temporarily or permanently, to the United States. This migration had reached enormous proportions during the decade of the Revolution, and these high levels of movement across the border would continue throughout the 1920s. The Obregón administration's attempts to deal with the problems thus engendered are extremely interesting in illuminating two major policy issues: Mexican relations with the United States, and the connection of the Mexican state with the Mexican worker.

The population movement to the United States had been exceptionally high during the decade of the Revolution. Although many secondary sources have indicated that the surge northward occurred during the 1920s, recent scholarship makes it clear that the real acceleration occurred during the previous decade, with up to a million and a half Mexicans taking refuge in the United States from the violence and social and economic problems of that period. Official U.S. government reports list the total number of Mexicans coming across the border during the decade, with or without the intention of establishing permanent residence, at 890,371; illegal migration, particularly after changes in the U.S. immigration laws, probably came close to equalling that figure.¹

Moreover, U.S. employers had been in particular need of Mexican workers in the latter years of the revolutionary decade, since World War I had absorbed enormous amounts of manpower and at the same time immigration from Europe had declined precipitously. The protests of southwestern agricultural employers and of railroad company officials had persuaded the Labor Department to waive the requirements of the 1917 Immigration Act for entering Mexicans, although the Department attempted to institute rather high standards in regard to these temporary admissions. These restrictions, directed generally toward keeping track of the Mexican workers and making sure that they did not become permanent immigrants, were quickly relaxed as the need for Mexican labor grew. Food Administrator Herbert Hoover was perhaps the most vociferous and effective champion of the relaxation of these laws and restrictions, and was not reluctant to go directly to President Woodrow Wilson to make his case. The period of admission for Mexican workers was soon extended until "the end of the war" and the approved occupation list continually expanded. However, when the war ended demand continued, and in February and April of 1920 Labor Department orders extended the period of time during which Mexican farm workers could enter on a temporary basis, despite the growing opposition of Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor. By the time the program of temporary admissions

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¹See Linda B. Hall and Don M. Coerver, *Revolution on the Border: the United States and Mexico, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque, 1988), p. 126; and Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897-1931* (Tucson, 1980), pp. 38, 51-54. According to Cardoso, probably 1,000,000 Mexican migrants were actually in the United States in the summer of 1920 alone.

ended early in 1921, it was reported that of approximately 70,000 workers admitted, 21,400 had left their place of employment and had disappeared. Thus, even with fairly careful enforcement regulations in place, the U.S. government had demonstrated early its inability to keep track of Mexican workers and to assess their entrance into, and impact on, the U.S. economy.²

Despite the cries of southwestern and other employers that they needed Mexican workers, the United States between 1920 and 1922 suffered a serious recession and widespread unemployment, leaving many without jobs and resources.³ In dealing with the problems faced by these workers, the Obregón administration adopted several strategies. First, the Mexican consuls were involved in the distribution of immediate aid to the desperate workers. Second, funds were provided for the provision of basic necessities to unemployed Mexicans in the U.S., and for the cost of their repatriation. Third, an attempt was made to provide employment in Mexico for potential or returning migrants. Fourth, administration officials tried to persuade Mexicans not to go north by publicizing the conditions that actually existed in the U.S. Fifth, when workers did migrate, Mexican officials tried to influence the nature of the contracts made in order to provide them certain minimal guarantees. Last, the Mexican administration considered and instituted measures of retaliation limiting immigration into Mexico from the United States itself.

By the early 1920s, Mexican workers were spread throughout the United States and were by no means confined to agricultural, mining, and railway employment. The Mexican consul in New York reported in December of 1920 that the economic crisis in the United States was causing grave difficulties for Mexican workers, and that as of January 1921 projections indicated that even more factories and commercial establishments would be closed, making the situation worse. The clear implication is that Mexicans were employed in these lines of work. Further, the consul complained that more and more Mexicans were arriving daily in spite of the bad conditions. He went on to say that many Mexicans had neither food nor warm clothing, and thus large numbers of them, unused to the inclement weather, could be found hospitalized and dying of pneumonia during the winter months. He added that the prisons of the United States were full of Mexicans who, pushed to the limit by "hunger and desperation, rob or kill", only to be condemned to life imprisonment or the death penalty. "This", he indicated, would be the "unfortunate end reserved for those who, in search of better luck, come without resources and completely ignorant, to this inhospitable country". He finished his report by urging the government to impose a ban on Mexicans leaving their native land to come to the United States, and by recommending that the true conditions of unemployment, hunger, and misery in the United States be publicized throughout Mexico.⁴

Another area affected in a major way was Kansas City. In April of 1921 the Mexican consul there described the widespread unemployment caused among Mexicans by reductions in the labor force in the meat packing houses of Kansas City, Kansas, and additionally reported the industry-wide attempts of employers to reduce wages by 12-1/2 to 15 percent. He indicated that seventy Mexican families were indigent and that three hundred more single Mexican men were out of work. Although union leaders were to hold a meeting in Omaha, Nebraska, to decide on policy, the consul expressed the opinion of many that, given the scarcity of work, no particular good would come of any union activity. At the same time, many different urban areas in the United States were being heavily affected by problems in this

²The outstanding source for these events is Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport and London, 1976); see especially pp. 24-39.

³*Ibid.*, p. 49; Thomas C. Cochran, *American Business in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 105.

⁴Mexican Consul, New York, to Secretary of Gobernación, December 22, 1920, Departamento de Trabajo, Archivo General de la Nación, Vol. 334, Expediente 23 (hereafter cited as AGN-DT, followed by volume and expediente number).



industry. According to the consul, the employers were ready for any strike, believing that they could easily break it using workers recently laid off and other unemployed. Meanwhile, the Mexican population themselves as well as various church groups were trying to ameliorate the conditions of those in need. He also reported widespread proposed wage cuts among railroad workers, particularly for 8,000 employees of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, 97 percent of whom were Mexican. Moreover, the Frisco, Missouri Pacific, and the Santa Fe, all employers of large numbers of Mexicans, were contemplating similar cuts.⁵

Although most Mexicans were recruited for work in U.S. Cities close to the border and received labor contracts, the absence of these contracts of firm guarantees for the basic necessities was another major problem. For example, in 1923 a consul in Salt Lake City, Utah complained that many contracts did not provide for adequate housing or health care, both problems in the cold winter climate of that state. The most serious problem that he had encountered, however, was the lack of an assured period of employment. Many Mexicans, he indicated, were transported to Utah with the promise that they would be returned to the point at which they were contracted after six months of continuous employment. However, the employer would habitually fire these workers a few days before the end of the six-month period and then re-employ them a few days later. Thus the employee would not be able to work six consecutive months and would be unable to return to the border. The consul indicated that this procedur  was particularly prevalent among the railroad companies. His suggested solution was to require that the companies make a deposit to the Mexican treasury of a sufficient sum to return the workers to the point at which they were contracted, and that the term of employment be calculated from the time they left the U.S. -Mexican border until their return to that point. Thus the Mexican government itself could repatriate stranded workers at no extra cost. Moreover, the Mexican consuls in these border areas could keep track of the workers under contract who passed through their zones, as the consul in El Paso, Texas, was already doing.⁶

A further problem for Mexican workers was the increasing opposition to foreign immigration in the United States. The Mexican consul in Philadelphia in 1923 noted that this opposition was taking on increasingly unpleasant overtones. He indicated that apart from the usual objections to the entrance of foreign workers--their large numbers, their lack of capital, and their radical ideas--others were beginning to surface. According to his report, "specialists in these matters" believed that such immigration could introduce "un-American sentiments" and could cause the native laboring classes to refuse certain kinds of work, expecting immigrants to do the lowest kind of physical labor. This perception induced them to disdain this kind of work themselves, to develop a "somewhat artificial" life style, and to limit the size of their families, according to these experts. He further described the recent arrival in Pennsylvania of one thousand Mexicans who had been taking the jobs for lower salaries than the natives, "to the great disgust of the latter and the not insignificant danger of the former, as it is not unlikely that the syndicates and unions, in conjunction or alone, will take action, thereby putting our compatriots and even our government in a difficult situation".⁷

There is no question that unions in the United States, faced with a reserve labor pool across the border in Mexico, were concerned about their own bargaining position. During the railway strike of September, 1922, for example, U.S. unions asked urgently that organized railway workers in Mexico not enter the United States,

⁵Mexican Consul, Kansas City, Missouri, in Report to Jefe del Depto. de Trabajo, April 5, 1921, AGN-DT 333/25.

⁶Report, Mexican Consul, Salt Lake City, Utah, in Subsecretary of Depto. de Trabajo to Governor of Durango, November 14, 1923, AGN-DT 703/2.

⁷Report, Mexican Consul, Philadelphia, in Subsecretary of Gobernaci n to Secretary of Industria, Comercio, y Trabajo, August 6, 1923, AGN-DT 703/1.



“given the danger...for the movement”.⁸ As early as 1919 John L. Lewis had pointed out that the problem of Mexican immigration was crucial to both miners and railway workers, and indicated that mining companies in the U.S. had a tendency to use Mexican workers to replace American labor. The AFL at that time adopted a policy of favoring restriction of Mexican, along with European and Asian, immigration. By 1923 Samuel Gompers himself was concerned about the entrance of Mexicans into the steel industry, a concern that was not misplaced as Bethlehem Steel had imported a large number of Mexican laborers and United States Steel was employing at least one southwestern agency to help them in doing the same.⁹ On the other hand, workers and government officials within Mexico were concerned that their compatriots, laid off or unable to find work in the United States, would on returning to Mexico damage their own ability to bargain with employers.¹⁰ Thus Mexican laborers formed a reserve labor force on both sides of the border and could potentially damage the union movement in both countries. Moreover, an economic contraction in the United States could cause an exaggerated reaction in Mexico as the unemployed poured back across the border.

Mexican migrants also suffered from the abuse of “coyotes”. As many of the travellers did not have the required entrance and visa fees--usually \$18.00 U.S. during this period--or were physically defective, or illiterate, or simply did not understand the U.S. immigration laws, they made use of smugglers who would take them across the border for a fee. These coyotes frequently charged almost as much as the entrance fee would have been and preyed upon their customers in other ways as well. In February of 1923, the consul at Laredo reported a number of abuses that resonate with border experiences today: the abandonment of the newly-introduced migrants in isolated areas, where they suffered privations and sometimes died; the robbing of the migrants of whatever resources they had left after they were transferred to the U.S. side; and even the physical abuse of the migrants. The consul reported the specific case of a Mexican family composed of the two parents, a teen-age daughter, and a son. The smugglers first transported the mother and the two males across the river, then returned and raped the daughter, who had been left undefended. Unfortunately, according to the consul, even though the smugglers committed crimes on the U.S. side they simply returned across the border, where the judges in Nuevo Laredo claimed that there was no law under which they could be tried. They therefore were permitted to go free. In this particular case, the U.S. authorities were willing to work with the Mexican consul to improve the situation, but officials on the Mexican side were not.¹¹

As a result of the huge migration into the United States during the Revolution, and of the economic recession beginning there in 1920, the incoming administration of Alvaro Obregón was faced immediately with the problems of Mexican workers in the country to the north. It would perhaps be instructive in understanding the new president’s approach to these issues to look at one case which surfaced almost immediately, and which also illustrates the kinds of difficulties which migrant workers faced.

Obregón, himself a native of Sonora, the northwestern Mexican state bordering on Arizona, was personally very concerned with this problem. He had noticed the out-migration of his countrymen from that area and had observed first-hand some of the abuses they had suffered. In January of 1921, during his first month in office, he instructed Eduardo Ruiz, the Mexican consul in Los Angeles, to investigate the

⁸Patricio Flores and David Hernández, Union Miners Mexicana-CROM, to Ricardo Treviño, Jefe del Depto. de Trabajo, September 22, 1922.

⁹Reisler, *By the Sweat*, pp. 67-68; Eduardo Aldrete, San Antonio Employment Agency, to Depto. de Trabajo, November 8, 1923, AGN-DT 704/27

¹⁰Subsecretary, Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo to Secretario de Gobernación, April 3, 1923, AGN-DT 703/3.

¹¹Report, Mexican Consul, Laredo, Texas, in Oficial Mayor, Secretaría de Gobernación, to Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, June 5, 1923, AGN-DT 704/26.



critical situation of workers in the Arizona cotton fields. The president had received reports that the failure of the growers to fulfill their contracts with the workers had caused widespread suffering. Obregón recommended that Ruiz consult directly with Governor Thomas Campbell, an old acquaintance of the Mexican president, and other Arizona authorities for help in clarifying these problems. Ruiz was to remain in direct contact with Obregón until the situation was resolved.¹²

Ruiz hastened to Arizona where he consulted immediately with Governor Campbell. After the Mexican consul's mission was explained to the governor, who was cooperative, Campbell urged Ruiz to proceed with his investigation, and offered to preside at a meeting in which he would bring together the cotton growers, Ruiz, and Adolfo Pecina, President of the Liga Protectora Mexicana, once the investigation was completed. Ruiz then went to the fields, accompanied by a photographer, to take testimony from those affected. He found that the Mexicans who had been brought in to work--men, women, and children--were neither clothed nor housed properly, and had been left "dumped in the countryside". Further, these workers had been brought in on contracts by the growers but not paid, and at least 2500 to 3000 of them were left stranded 35 or 40 miles from the railroad, with neither means of transportation nor other resources to get to a location where they could get employment or aid. Ruiz described the condition of these people as "positively disastrous". Unfortunately, the photographs which he took have not remained with the file. The consul concluded that had these people not been helped, they would all have perished of starvation and exposure. He immediately distributed funds to the workers (\$2 to single men and \$5 to \$10 to those with families), brought in provisions from the local stores, and contracted cars and trucks to take the Mexicans to points from which they could be repatriated. According to Consul Ruiz, "These Mexicans are so ingenuous and ignorant that if they are not helped like children they will expose themselves...to the most terrible trials and troubles".¹³

Ruiz went on to describe to Obregón the structures which had led to this situation. First of all, the Arizona Cotton Growers Association, formed originally to bring together all cultivators of cotton, had grown enormously in the preceding years and been converted into an investment company. The ACGA had then contracted enganchadores (labor contractors), in this case the Mexican Labor Association, to hire Mexican workers who were then dealt with "with shocking indifference as if they were...cattle or sheep". In good times these Mexicans could make "a small compensation", and many of them had established themselves as small farmers in the United States. This particular year, however, the harvest was bad, the price of cotton low, and the ACGA unconcerned with the plight of the workers, "demonstrating the same hardness and indifference that almost all American corporations show towards their workers....".¹⁴

The consul added that the problems stemmed not only from the ACGA but also from the Mexican Labor Association of Nogales, Arizona, which had made contracts highly unfavorable to the workers. Nevertheless, according to Ruiz, the ACGA should have paid the workers the wages that the growers were unable to give them and should have repatriated them to Mexico. A major problem was that the ACGA used as foremen and overseers two particularly unsavory individuals. One of these was an American named Milliken who was described as unspeakably cruel. He reportedly treated those Mexicans going to the Tempe offices of the Association to receive their pay as if they were thieves out to defraud the company. The other was a "renegade

¹²Secretario del Exterior, CROM, to Oficina de Colocaciones, Depto. de Trabajo, February 7, 1922, AGN-DT 508/2; Alvaro Obregón to Eduardo Ruíz, January 1, 1921, 407-A-2, Ramo Obregón-Calles, Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter cited as AGN-OC, followed by expediente number).

¹³Informe, Ruíz to Obregón, February 18, 1921, AGN-OC 407-A-2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

Mexican,” ironically named Cristo, who had established himself as a kind of “cacique”. Cristo controlled the repatriation of Mexicans, sending home only those who had paid him off or given him jewelry or something else of value. The ACGA was reported as having confidence in these individuals, who “exercise[d] the brutal pressure of slavedrivers dealing with slaves”. Thus, many Mexicans were frightened even to go into the offices to try to collect the money due them. Although Ruiz had found the general manager of the ACGA, J. L. Knox, to be a person he could deal with, Knox’s faith in Milliken made negotiations problematic.¹⁵

Consul Ruiz identified the labor contracting company, the Mexican Labor Association of Nogales, Arizona, as a major factor in the difficulties. The contracts the Association offered were highly prejudicial to the workers, providing no guarantee of length of work (which sometimes turned out to be only 10 to 15 days), no obligation on the company’s part to repatriate the workers after their jobs terminated, and no inspectors to see that the contracts were fulfilled. The company charged each person a fee of between \$4.00 and \$7.00 U.S. for placement, and also held deposits from them of \$6.00 or \$7.00 each as a guarantee against their untimely departure. According to Ruiz the total of these funds might amount to as much as \$10,000 at a given time. In addition the company promised the workers many things that it was unable and unauthorized to deliver, and had even sent many workers north in November of the preceding year knowing that there was no work. Ruiz, of course, suggested a complete investigation of the company.¹⁶

At meetings with the consul the ACGA had objected, when confronted with Ruiz’ photographs and testimony, that it had no contractual obligation to do anything about the destitute workers. According to Ruiz, “we used all kinds of persuasion” to get the company to accept responsibility, including repeatedly mentioning President Obregón’s friendship with the Governor and even threatening to prevent Mexicans from coming to Arizona during future harvests. Finally the consul was able to get new contracts from the ACGA, which agreed to repatriate the stranded Mexicans and to pay them what the ranchers owed them, since many of the latter were broke. The ranchers then arranged to repay the ACGA.

Ruiz concluded with recommendations for the future. He suggested that:

1. labor contractors be kept out of Mexico;
2. contracts with Mexican workers be made directly with the employers, and that they be approved by the consuls in the regions;
3. no intermediate companies be authorized to contract laborers;
4. an inspection system be authorized in the United States to check each consular district and to inform the Federal Executive directly about labor conditions;
5. the expatriation of Mexicans be prevented whenever possible, because whether or not they were treated badly they represented a loss of useful sons to the Mexican nation;
6. all indigent Mexicans currently in the United States be repatriated.¹⁷

The problems with the ACGA were thus resolved cordially, although the company did not live up to its agreement to repatriate all the workers. Still, the ACGA continued not only to supply Mexican workers to the Arizona cotton fields, but also to the Imperial Valley in California, where cotton acreage jumped significantly in 1920.¹⁸ Governor Campbell wrote personally to Obregón that:

I know it will be a source of as keen satisfaction to you as to myself...that this situation has been taken

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 17-18; Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 101.



care of so satisfactorily and without engendering any friction between the representatives of your Republic and the Arizona Cotton Growers Association”.

Campbell signed with “warm personal regards”.¹⁹

Obregón could not rely only on personal relationships and presidential involvement in individual cases, however. His concern extended well beyond the plight of specific workers in Arizona’s Salt River Valley, since the destitution of Mexican workers in the United States was countryside. His first step, therefore, was to issue an order on February 16, 1921 to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores instructing it to inform its consuls in the United States to provide the economic resources necessary for the repatriation of all indigent and unemployed Mexicans in the United States. At this time 250,000 pesos were transferred to Relaciones Exteriores for this purpose.²⁰

The entire question of migrant labor was tied very closely in Obregón’s thinking to the availability of jobs in Mexico. In addition, he seemed to feel a need for retaliation against the United States for its adoption of increasingly exclusionary policies toward foreign workers, and for the mistreatment of those Mexican workers who were allowed to enter. Ten days before Obregón sent his order to Relaciones Exteriores ordering the repatriation of indigent Mexicans from the United States, he sent another to the same secretariat suggesting the establishment of a ban on the entrance of foreign workers into Mexico. The procedure for enacting such a ban would be the following: The Secretaría de Gobernación would issue guidelines for restricting foreign immigration into Mexico, “using the legal means that it has available to assure that in the Republic, Mexicans would be preferred over all other workers”. This action would give the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores the authority to order its consuls, “especially in the United States”, to refuse visas to all foreign workers. This restriction would remain in force “as long as the present conditions of unemployment continue to exist [in Mexico]”. The only exceptions would be those workers who came to Mexico with the intention of emigrating permanently, and who brought with them financial resources and tools with which to devote themselves to colonization or to agriculture. On the same day, he signed a memorandum of understanding to this effect with his Secretary of Gobernación, Plutarco Elías Calles.²¹ These restrictions would obviously prevent the entrance of foreign workers into Mexico’s oil fields, a goal which became more explicit in later discussions of the problem.

It was immediately obvious that Obregón’s directives were woefully inadequate in dealing with the disastrous plight of Mexican workers north of the border, and the consuls were able to return “only the sick and the most indigent”. On May 3, 1921, therefore, Obregón made a public declaration of the government’s intention to repatriate all Mexicans living in the United States, regardless of cost. Interestingly, he added that this action was to be taken to prevent them from seeking to support themselves by criminal means--“actos reprobables”-- which would require U.S. authorities to move against them. In addition, on May 4 Obregón asked the Mexican Congress to pass a law restricting the immigration of foreign workers into Mexico, as their presence made the situation of Mexican workers even worse.²² Although the Mexican Congress does not appear to have taken effective action to limit the entrance of foreign workers at this time, the repatriation program was put into effect immediately and the President received widespread support on the issue. As *Excelsior* pointed out editorially on May 9:

¹⁹Thomas Campbell to Alvaro Obregón, February 9, 1921, AGN-OC 407-C-2.

²⁰Alvaro Obregón to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, February 16, 1921, AGN-OC 605-T-2.

²¹Alvaro Obregón to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, February 6, 1921, *ibid*; Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 99.

²²“Crisis obrera en los Estados Unidos,” Legajo 3, 1921, 205-206, in Fernando Torreblanca C. Archive, section Alvaro Obregón IV.2, (hereafter cited as FTC/AO); Report, Mexican Consul, Los Angeles, in Subsecretary to Secretary of Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, May 19, 1921, AGN-DT 333/23/1.

The majority of our emigrants to the neighboring country between 1914 and 1920 left Mexico for two reasons, the first being the chaotic state of our country in the wake of the civil war, during which our resources became paralyzed and a number of our workers were left without work. In searching for bread and fleeing from the misery, and, in many cases, the disorders which have consumed our nation, thousands of Mexicans have taken refuge in the United States, which, since the end of 1914, has been intensifying its agricultural and industrial production, in order to trade with the belligerents in the European War. In the second place, North American employers have favored the migratory current, because they need more workers to staff their businesses; and when North America entered the European conflict,...the need for workers increased...

The *Excelsior* editorial went on to point out that the Mexican Revolution had a principal role in this flight, because had Mexico not been involved in a civil war it could have taken advantage of the European war to sell needed supplies and in this way to improve its own economy. As the editorial concluded:

...since the Revolution forced them to emigrate, it is only just that the government born out of this Revolution provide them with the resources to return to their homeland.²³

The repatriation program itself proceeded rapidly, and by September of 1921 at least 23,354 workers had been brought back to Mexico. Although the exact cost of the program was hard to determine, it had amounted to at least \$3,000,00 pesos.²⁴ In October of 1921 the government suspended the program, believing that the crisis in the United States was over. Still, all Mexicans were urged to stay home.²⁵ Unfortunately, those Mexicans repatriated were frequently confronted with unemployment and conditions in Mexico that were no better than those they left in the United States. The exodus began to accelerate again in 1922 as the economic situation in the U.S. improved, and one authority has suggested that most of the people repatriated at such cost by Obregón's administration made their way back across the border within a year.²⁶

Repatriation itself continued to be an issue, with the consuls in various areas responding to acute individual problems on a case by case basis. The consul in San Francisco, J. Garza Zertuche, exemplified the difficulties faced by many of his colleagues when, in March, 1922, he asked for permission to send home sixty to seventy Mexicans in the ship "Bolívar". Protesting that he had adopted a very conservative stance since the adoption of the new policy in October of 1921, aiding only about 5% of applicants in the most urgent need, Garza Zertuche pointed out that as each passage cost about \$16, the total would amount to some \$1,000, a reasonable price to help relieve the miseries of those "who go about...without finding work". The reply of the Chief of the Consular Department was that Garza Zertuche should continue to consider each case individually and then proceed according to his best judgement. These measures reflected the extreme financial straits of the Mexican government.

The consul in El Paso complained that the Los Angeles Department of Charity was sending its indigent Mexicans to that border city, but since funds were lacking these people were living in great want, waiting for the issuance of railroad passes to the interior of the country. The reply of the Consular Department in this instance was that perhaps procedures could be changed to avoid some of the red tape and that they would try to help. In May of 1922 consular officials held a meeting in San Antonio, Texas, at which it was decided to suspend the repatriation process completely, excepting only the most desperate cases. By the following October, Garza Zertuche was again asking permission to repatriate his fellow Mexicans, this time those who had been imprisoned

²³*Excelsior*, May 9, 1921.

²⁴"Informe Presidencial," September 1, 1921, in "Material para un libro," Legajo 7, 337, FTC/AO IV.2.

²⁵*El Universal*, October 24, 1921.

²⁶Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 103.



for “delitos leves” (minor crimes) but could not be paroled unless they were sent home: otherwise they would be confined to prison indefinitely. Relaciones Exteriores replied that it would be all right to send them back, but only if their conduct in prison had been exemplary, and if they had committed crimes neither of “blood” nor “property”. As late as April of 1924 the consul in Laredo, Texas complained that U.S. authorities were deporting large numbers of Mexican workers, and that the only course available to him was to send them to the Office of Migration in Nuevo Laredo, which likewise needed more help to deal with the problem.

In fact, a number of offices of migration had been set up by the Obregón government both in border cities and in the interior of Mexico with the hope of controlling the northward flow of emigrants, but in many cases the staffs of these agencies had actually made the situation worse by cooperating with labor contractors and taking their own cut of the profits of the trade in workers.²⁷ Further, the Obregón administration had mixed feelings about the migration northward, since some Mexicans had been able to carve out viable situations for themselves in the neighboring republic. In May of 1921 Obregón himself enjoined his consul in Los Angeles to urge those Mexicans with jobs in the area not to give them up, and suggested that the consul see if work for some of the unemployed might be obtained in the Imperial Valley of California.²⁸ Regardless of his desire to establish Mexicans in reasonable economic situations within their own country, Obregón was too practical not to seek out economic opportunities for his countrymen on both sides of the border.

The proposed ban on the entry of foreign nationals into Mexico aroused mixed feelings within the Obregón administration, although not within the President himself. In the original accord with Secretary of Gobernación Calles of February 6, 1921, Obregón had justified his action in two ways. First, all governments were obligated to take whatever actions were necessary for the well-being of their own citizens; and second, the United States and other countries had just taken strict measures prohibiting foreign workers from entering their countries. (In fact, the legal requirements for the entrance of Mexicans into the United States had not been changed since the 1917 Immigration Law; however, the waivers to which Mexicans had been accustomed during World War I were revoked). He went on to say that it was “absolutely urgent that the Secretary of Gobernación take strict measures to restrict the entrance of all foreign workers into Mexico...so that in our Republic Mexicans will be preferred above all others”. Once Gobernación had taken this action, the Secretary of Relaciones Exteriores could instruct Mexican consuls to cease giving visas to “any foreign worker whatsoever”, a measure which would “protect properly the interest of Mexican workers”.²⁹

A few weeks later, in an internal memorandum requested by the President, Enrique Colunga, head of the legal department of the Secretaría de Gobernación, explored both the justification for the decree and the way in which it could be put into operation. First of all, he indicated that restrictive immigration laws were the legitimate right of all nations (“colectividades”), and therefore that the adoption of such a law should not distress other nations (particularly the United States) since they had set the example. Such a decree was also found to be constitutional, in accord with Articles 11 and 32 of the 1917 Constitution. Further, Colunga stated, it was clear from consular and newspaper reports that:

²⁷J. Garza Zertuche to Depto. Consular, March 4, 1922, 36-16-94; Garza Zertuche to Sec. Relaciones Exteriores, February 17, 1922, 36-16-98; L. Montes de Oca to Secretario del Estado y del Despacho de Relaciones Exteriores, April 21, 1922, and Oficial Mayor, Depto. Consular, Relaciones Exteriores, May 15, 1922, 36-16-363; Garza Zertuche to Sec. de Relaciones Exteriores, June 19, 1922, and June 24, 1922, 36-16-106; Garza Zertuche to Depto. Consular, October 25, 1922, and Subsecretary, Relaciones Exteriores, November 14, 1922, 36-16-122, all in Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (hereafter cited as ASRE); Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 112.

²⁸Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 101.

²⁹Alvaro Obregón to the Secretary of Gobernación, February 6, 1921, AGN-DT 334/23.

1. in the United States citizens were given preference over all foreign nationals in all lines of work, forcing Mexicans into poverty and crime;
2. many foreign workers had entered Mexico without complying with the immigration laws;
3. the petroleum companies were favoring this immigration, preferring North American workers to Mexicans and thus infringing on their contracts with the Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo;
4. the companies also paid better salaries to foreign workers;
5. they employed a private army, a “Guardia Blanca”, to keep workers in line.

Since there was ample reason, therefore, for establishing a ban on foreign immigration to Mexico, immediate measures were recommended to ameliorate the problem. First, foreign workers should be prevented from entering Mexico and Mexicans prevented from leaving. Second, all immigration councils, inspectors, and agents should be instructed to enforce this ban. Third, the governors of the border states and of those bordering on the Gulf and the Pacific should aid in these efforts. Finally, the governors should make sure that Mexicans were given employment preference over all others in their regions. The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores would instruct consuls to cease giving visas to foreign workers, and the Consul General in New York would arrange for railroad transportation of all Mexicans in the U.S. back to the border; the Secretaría de Hacienda would provide funds for repatriation; the Secretaría de Industria, Comercio and Trabajo would force oil companies to comply strictly with the stipulations in their contracts to employ a specific number of Mexicans, and should take legal steps to prevent companies from paying foreign workers more than Mexicans; and the Secretaría de Guerra y Marina would disarm the “Guardia Blanca”, prevent it from reorganizing, and provide enough forces for the oil regions to protect all interests.³⁰

A few days later the head of the Departamento de Trabajo within the Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo responded to this report with a memorandum to Secretary Rafael Zubarán Capmany. Although it differed in many respects from the thinking in other parts of the government, and particularly from the ideas of the President, it is worth considering in detail as another point of view within the administration. To begin with, he disagreed that the situation of Mexicans in the United States had reached a crisis at all. He pointed out that the United States had not prohibited the immigration of Mexican workers, but had only begun to enforce the normal statutory requirements--an \$8.00 entrance fee (the visa fee was still frequently waived), literacy, and a lack of subversive ideas. Further, he indicated that the unemployment problem in the United States had passed now that the winter was over. According to him, Mexican workers in the U.S. were usually out of work during those months anyway as agricultural activity came to a standstill, and now that this work had resumed most Mexicans were again employed. He also objected to the assertion that all U.S. employers preferred U.S. citizen workers; after all, according to him, a large proportion of the North American population was foreign, and Mexicans were preferred for agricultural work in the South and West “because of their resistance to high temperature”.³¹ The memorandum went on to discuss the enormous number of Mexicans who were trying to get home, and pointed out that this was a natural result of the considerable movement across the border during the revolutionary years. He noted, for example, that the official entry figure from Washington for the year 1920 was 52,000, a figure far too low because “of the large number of individuals entering clandestinely”. And it was not only potentially hard-working individuals, but also the less energetic and the unemployed, who were trying to get a free trip home. In other

³⁰Enrique Colunga to Subsecretary of Gobernación, March 18, 1921, *ibid.*

³¹Jefe, Depto. de Trabajo, to Secretary, Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, March 28, 1921, *ibid.*



words, some of those petitioning at the consulates were simply idlers and delinquents.³²

In spite of all these qualifications, the chief of the Departamento de Trabajo denied that the entrance of foreigners into Mexico or the exit of Mexicans from the country was a good thing. Mexicans should be prohibited from leaving their native land, and insofar as possible labor contractors entering Mexico in search of workers should be controlled because they were the source of many of the worst abuses. In his opinion, the best way to control these contractors would be to require them to deposit with the government the money for the return trips of any workers whom they persuaded to go with them to the United States. He was opposed to prohibiting the entrance of foreigners into Mexico, since “we urgently need the colonization of other races...” He was further opposed to equal pay scales for foreigners and native Mexican workers, since “except for the Chinese or the Turks, they will not be attracted by our usual remuneration...”³³ It should be noted at this point that the department head, whose surname appears to be French, did not last long in his job, as might be expected given his less-than-nationalistic attitudes. He had been replaced at least by April of 1923.

In a different and somewhat more sensible vein, he suggested that Mexico consider setting up an Office of Migration in the United States which would work directly with the Department of Labor in Washington, making it possible to settle questions relating to labor supply and migration in the two countries without having to rely on the Consuls and various government offices. At this time the Obregón government was not recognized by the United States, and therefore there was no ambassador in Washington to coordinate the handling of such matters. Further, the official suggested that on the Mexican side questions of migration become a responsibility of the Departamento de Trabajo, which could thereby help distribute workers entering Mexico on the basis of need. One of the major problems of dealing with the whole migration question was that no one agency in the Mexican government had responsibility for it, and that as a result procedures were ad hoc and confused. In fact, at that time Obregón himself was in charge of directing the repatriation process, working with the personnel involved and even authorizing personally all funds from the Secretaría de Hacienda.³⁴

Finally, the head of Trabajo recommended strongly against a decree prohibiting foreign immigration to Mexico because of the “disagreeable resonance which it would produce outside of Mexico... and its repercussions on the national future”. In closing he indicated the need for a continued division of arable land to attract “the revitalizing current that may so providently direct itself toward our territory”, “the revitalizing current”, of course, being composed of U.S. and European immigrants.³⁵

In a separate memorandum on the same day in response to Gobernación’s extensive document, the soon-to-be-replaced head of Trabajo reported on a study that he had conducted of the employment of foreign workers in the oil fields. Again, he downplayed the importance of the foreigners’ presence, indicating that only a few companies had more foreign than Mexican employees in their professional and white-collar staffs, almost none had more skilled foreign workers, and no employers had a significant number of unskilled foreign workers. Again, this information could be biased given its source, but the Secretary of Industria, Comercio, y Trabajo apparently took him at his word, as he did not in other areas. The memorandum was accurate in pointing out that there was no law on the books requiring equality in compensation or preference for Mexican over foreign workers. The Secretaría,

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*; Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration*, p. 99.

³⁵*Ibid.*

however, had such a clause written into all contracts and concessions, and the head of Trabajo urged that the states try to enforce this policy, while recommending against a law to this effect.³⁶

Six weeks later Secretary of Industria, Comercio y Trabajo Zubarán Capmany replied to Calles, the Secretary of Gobernación, in regard to the report from his Departamento Consultivo. Although he repeated the assertion of the head of the Departamento de Trabajo that in most cases more Mexican personnel were employed in the oil business than foreigners, Zubarán added that indeed there was a significant differential in compensation in favor of foreign workers. His ministry had proceeded to investigate these irregularities in order to demand that the stipulations of the concessions be followed or that sanctions be applied. However, he added, many of the old contracts had no such requirements for equal pay or for the employment of Mexican workers, making any action in those cases difficult. In regard to other industries, since no law was on the books these precepts could only be included in future concessions approved by his ministry. Unlike the head of the Departamento de Trabajo, however, the Secretary thought that the time was ripe to retaliate against the United States for its restrictive immigration policies, which he incorrectly believed to include a quota restriction on further immigration from the Americas. By this time, of course, the Mexican president had already recommended that his own congress tightly restrict foreign immigration to Mexico. The secretary agreed, finally, with the head of the Departamento de Trabajo on the advisability of setting up an Office of Migration in Washington.³⁷

During the next three years of the Obregón administration migrant labor to the United States continued to be a problem despite the return of prosperity to that nation. Some administrative reorganization was instituted in Mexico to help deal with the difficulties. Offices of migration were set up in some border and interior cities, and a department to deal with repatriation was instituted within the Secretaría of Relaciones Exteriores. Mexican consuls in the United States continued to be very active in aiding Mexican nationals, but large government subsidies to pay for repatriation ceased, particularly after January, 1923, as funds were difficult to come by and the whole process seemed to be fruitless. Moreover, at the time of the De la Huerta rebellion in 1923 the financial resources and energy needed to deal with Mexican workers in the United States were drained off in the effort to defeat the insurgents and to re-establish peace in the country. Given the differentials in wages and employment potential on the two sides of the border, Mexicans continued to flock to the United States. Moreover, it was very difficult for the Obregón administration to exert any pressure whatsoever on the oil companies for a more equitable employment policy. Oil revenues were necessary to the Mexican treasury; and the companies, regardless of the favor they showed non-Mexican employees, still provided work for at least an estimated 20,000 Mexicans. For these reasons any radical action in regard to the oil companies was likely to be self-defeating, particularly given the oil companies' new interest in the fields of Venezuela.³⁸

Mexican lawmakers were no more effective than the chief executive in stopping the flow of immigration into Mexico. Though the matter was scarcely noticed in the United States, nevertheless the seeds of the idea had been planted. Not until February, 1934, faced with the reality of the world-wide economic depression, did Mexico finally move to restrict immigration drastically. The entrance of worker-immigrants was prohibited indefinitely, and only a few exceptions were to be permitted. For example, technicians who could perform jobs Mexicans could not and who would teach Mexicans how to do

³⁶Jefe, Depto. de Trabajo, to Secretary, Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, March 28, 1921, *ibid.*

³⁷Secretary of Industria, Comercio y Trabajo to Secretary of Gobernación, May 13, 1921, *ibid.*

³⁸Lorenzo Meyer, *Mexico and the United States in the Oil Controversy, 1917-1942* (Austin, 1977), pp. 66, 86. The best recent scholarship on the oil companies shift from Mexico to Venezuela is Jonathan C. Brown, "Why Foreign Oil Companies Shifted their Production from Mexico to Venezuela during the 1920's," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), pp. 362-385.



them, artists and professional sportsmen, and traveling salesmen were permitted to enter for periods of six months to a year. Others who intended to remain as immigrants could enter with \$20,000 pesos minimum capital for investment in industrial or agricultural pursuits. Directors, managers, or representatives of a given company or of someone else in a post of responsibility might enter, but only at the discretion of the Secretaría de Gobernación; permission was conditional and repatriation had to be guaranteed.³⁹

Thus, thirteen years after the first crisis, the Mexican government took measures to restrict foreign immigration into the country during the worldwide Depression, while at the same time Mexican nationals were being forced out of the United States in enormous numbers. The initial difficulties, however, remained the same. Mexico was still unable to provide employment for its own people, as it is today, and the existence of a more prosperous economy to the north still led Mexicans to cross the border in search of work. Mistreatment remained an issue as well. Although Obregón had tried to use his consular system in the United States to prevent the worst abuses, this effort had proven largely ineffective except in a few cases. Moreover, his efforts to repatriate Mexican workers in the United States as the economy there fluctuated were fruitless as well. On the one hand, the Mexican treasury lacked the resources to bring home all destitute Mexican citizens abroad, and on the other, there were insufficient jobs to take care of the workers when they returned. By the end of his term, Obregón had terminated his efforts in this direction and was urging the consuls to persuade citizens desiring repatriation to try to stick it out and to take care of themselves. The lack of productivity in the Mexican economy had made the problem intractable.

In fact, to this day the problem of Mexican migration to the United States has not been solved. In the almost seven decades since the inauguration of Alvaro Obregón in 1920, the problem of migration across the U.S.-Mexican border has only grown in magnitude and complexity, and policy-makers in both countries have proven themselves unable to solve it.

³⁹Eduardo Vasconcelos, Secretaría de Gobernación, "Resolution prohibiting the migration of workers," typescript translation, *Diario Oficial*, February 17, 1934.

