Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin, held extensive hearings in California to investigate "violations of free speech and rights of labor." But most of its recommendations for reform, introduced in 1942, produced no action in Congress. With the coming of World War II, the Dust Bowl migrants flocked to the shipyards; Mexicans and Mexican Americans again became the majority of the California farm labor force; and the public lost interest in the whole matter.

The Rise and Fall of the Bracero Program

The demands of World War II produced a sudden, genuine, and desperate shortage of farm labor. A partial solution to the problem was provided by the use of German prisoners of war as farm laborers. Research by historian Bonnie Trask has found that more than 15,000 German prisoners were working in California cotton fields in 1945. President Truman halted the program the following year when all prisoners of war were repatriated.

Far more numerous were the wartime workers imported from Mexico. In 1942, under an act of Congress and an agreement with Mexico, the United States Department of Agriculture assumed the responsibility for recruiting, contracting, transporting, housing, and feeding these temporary immigrant farm workers. In a formal sense, this was the beginning of the *bracero program.* The meaning of the word "bracero" (strong-armed one), from the Spanish *brazo* (arm), bears a striking resemblance to the meaning of the Tamil word *kuli* (muscle), the likely source of the word "coolie."

There had been an informal bracero program 25 years earlier during World War I, when private labor contractors supplied California growers with seasonal workers from Mexico. Thousands of peons, or landless laborers, had been eager for the opportunity; the Mexican Revolution had turned many of them into displaced persons, much as the Taiping Rebellion had nudged thousands of destitute Chinese toward California in the 1850s.

The growers were able to persuade Congress not to include Mexico in the postwar quota system of immigration restrictions, and the surge of Mexicans into California had continued through the 1920s. Each year an average of 58,000 Mexicans came northward to work in the cotton fields of the Central Valley, where they accounted for more than 75 percent of the harvest workforce. This immigration was reversed in the depression decade of the 1930s as federal and state authorities deported Mexicans. (See Chapter 25.) The Mexican *campesinos,* or farm workers, who remained during the depression participated in several strikes, most notably in the strawberry fields around El Monte in the San Gabriel Valley and in the cotton fields near Corcoran in the San Joaquin Valley.

The Mexican government in the 1930s found itself forced to pay the costs of repatriating many of its impoverished nationals who could no longer obtain work in California and who were not eligible for relief there. In 1942 the Mexican government feared that this experience would be repeated, and it therefore demanded that the United States government, rather than private labor contractors, must take responsibility for the immigrant workers.

After World War II the bracero program continued in force with the enthusiastic support of California growers, though President Truman, to their irritation, removed the program from the grower-oriented Department of Agriculture and assigned it to the Department of Labor by executive order in 1948.

More numerous than the braceros in the years after the end of World War II were the illegal undocumented workers. Although their exact numbers could not be known, it was estimated that more than half a million of these illegal immigrants crossed and recrossed the international boundary each year, most of them to work in the fields of California and other states in the southwest.

In 1951 Congress adopted the famous Public Law 78 (P.L. 78) and also gave special legislative recognition to a new agreement with Mexico. Together these measures provided the most elaborate plan of importing contract workers in which the United States had ever engaged, and although the plan was approved as a "Korean War emergency" measure, it ultimately provided the basis for continuing the bracero program until 1964, 11 years after the Korean War had ended.

Under this system, Mexican officials assembled the braceros and the United States Department of Labor provided for their transportation to reception centers north of the border. There they were turned over to labor contractors representing the growers' associations. At the insistence of the Mexican government, there were standard contracts covering wages, hours, transportation, housing, and working conditions. The American government guaranteed the provision of emergency medical care, workers' compensation, disability and death benefits, and burial expenses. Though such provisions were minimal, they were far superior to the benefits available to American farm laborers, who enjoyed no legal protection at all. Opponents of the program, meanwhile, complained that the system was rife with abuses. "Although the bracero agreement contained stipulations with regard to health, housing, food, wages, and working hours," one critic charged, "most were disregarded by both the U.S. government and the growers." Housing was often substandard, wages were universally low, and racial discrimination was severe.

In 1957, the peak year, California imported 192,438 braceros. In 1960 about 100,000 of them were at work in the state at the peak season in early September, and they formed about a quarter of the seasonal farm labor force. Most of them worked on the larger farms; about 5 percent of the farms in California employed 60 percent of the total number of seasonal hired workers—including more than 80 percent of the braceros.

As Congress continued to grant extensions of the program, it became increasingly hard to disguise the fact that the bracero system perpetuated the tragic poverty of the American migratory laborers. It depressed wages, destroyed the bargaining power of the domestic worker, and drove away local labor.

To employers of seasonal farm workers, the braceros represented a supply of cheap and dependable labor—guaranteed to arrive and to vanish exactly when the employers wanted it to. California growers continued to rationalize such motives on the basis of race, as they had done for more than a century. Anglo-Americans, the growers constantly assured themselves and the public, simply could not perform stoop labor as well as nonwhites, who were equipped by racial heredity with stronger backs. There was no scientific basis for this assumption, and Californians who knew