

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 304 pp. \$28.95 paper (978-1-4426-0157-4), \$60.00 hardcover (978-1-4426-0158-1)

Consuming Mexican Labor critically examines how North American consumption patterns shape Mexican immigrant labour in the provision of goods and services. Its central thesis is that relations between the US, Canada, and Mexico have always been inextricably intertwined. Mize and Swords argue that in the current era of global capital accumulation, the consumption of US and Canadian citizens is based squarely, though not exclusively, on the marginalization and exploitation of immigrant labour. They emphasize that the social problems in which immigrant workers find themselves are not due to their personal pathologies but are systematically rooted in the triad of exploitation of Mexican workers, capital accumulation, and overconsumption. Another major theme is resistance of migrants to exploitation and their creation of alternatives.

The authors' perspectives are enriched by both their academic research in Chicano Studies and Sociology and their personal closeness to the topic. They are not only scholars but also activists with experience in immigrant solidarity movements. Both identify with Mexican migrants and include details of their families' migrant histories in the preface. Mize's observations and analysis made while working in the US operations of a Mexican maquiladora and as a crop harvester in the Central Valley of California are included in the section on the US-Mexico border.

Theoretically, the book begins from Marx's discussion of the industrial reserve army of surplus labour in the migration of Irish proletarians to England's industrializing cities. It emphasizes that migration is important in the ability of capitalists to reproduce their workforce over time. The book also draws on wide ranging research on consumption, including Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption as well as the literature on the global movement of nurses and domestic workers.

The first section of the book establishes the US state after World War II as an international labour broker, analyzing the central contradictions of its simultaneous attraction and repulsion of Mexican labour. On the one hand, the government's creation of the Bracero Program brought

Mexican workers to every region of the US, shaping contemporary patterns of labour migration. Simultaneously, repatriation programs such as Operation Wetback, begun in 1954, sent them back to Mexico. In 1965, the Bracero Program ended and the Immigrant Nationality Act was passed, unintentionally opening migration from Latin America and Asia. Since this new migration was skills based, the undocumented status of unskilled Mexicans who continued to fill the US demand for cheap labour was now highlighted and they were eventually criminalized.

Section two focuses on Mexican migrants' resistance, showing how Mexicans who were assumed by union leaders to be unorganizable due to their illegal status were organized in the United Farm Workers. This led to the farmworker civil rights movement, and the authors bring the reader up to date by showing how they have successfully taken on Taco Bell, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Burger King, and others to raise the wages of tomato harvesters. These movements successfully employed consumer boycotts, especially by university students. When unions did finally recognize Mexican migrants' capacity to organize, they joined the struggle using mutual aid societies and community unionism to work with janitors, service, and hotel workers. In addition, nonunion based labour organizing has occurred in workers' centres such as those for day labourers. The section ends with the conservative White majority's anti-Mexican public discourse which resulted in the passage of laws at the state level (e.g., California's Proposition 187) that ended public services such as bilingual education. The authors speak hopefully of the huge public rallies of Mexicans beginning in 2006 across the US to oppose legislation to further criminalize the undocumented. The book was probably in press when such protests were discouraged by unprecedented raids of workplaces and Latino communities by Immigration and Customs Enforcement to apprehend, imprison and deport the undocumented.

The third section is devoted to how Mexican labour is exploited in different regions such as the southwestern US, the US Midwest, the hinterlands (US northwest, northeast, and south), the US-Mexico border, Mexico, and Canada. Case studies in each area illuminate the key characteristics. There is some contradiction in the Canadian section when the authors say that NAFTA never mentioned the flow of labour (pp. 215, xxii) and then subsequently that NAFTA nations share a temporary visa program (p. 217) for professionals. While the book in general reflects a very good knowledge of the literature, this inconsistency would have been avoided by consulting Christina Gabriel and Laura MacDonald's work on the many streams of Mexican migrants to Canada and the US as part of an asymmetrical mobility regime ("The hypermobile, the mobile,

and the rest: Patterns of inclusion and exclusion in an emerging North American migration regime,” 2004).

The very well elaborated conclusion recaps the content and then focuses on current injustices and strategies for improving the life chances of Mexican labourers. The authors start with liberal adjustments such as making agriculture meet the legal requirements that all other US employers must meet, such as the standards of the National Labor Relations Act. Another reform would be restoring the funding for the Agricultural Labor Relations Board so that it can fulfill its mandate. Strategies that the authors call social democratic include having the remittances which Home Town Associations of Mexican workers provide to their places of origin matched by US employers who refuse to increase their wages. Finally, the authors suggest transformative politics in which truth commissions composed of migrants or former migrants give accounts of violations of their human rights due to their immigration status. They and their audiences commit themselves to preventing such violations from occurring again, and organize with others to implement such commitments.

The authors argue quite convincingly that there have been attempts at discursive closure of debates on immigration by limiting the strategies to “comprehensive reform,” i.e., one broad piece of legislation passed by the US Congress and Senate that would supposedly address all aspects of immigration. This is problematic because it limits the discussion of immigration as a freedom or a right. The authors point to the proposed DREAM Act as a way of defusing the one sided proposals of restriction and criminalization, since it would allow many undocumented youth who have been in the US most of their lives a path to citizenship. This book is also an important contribution to preventing such discursive closure.

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