

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When Status Broke the 'Color Line'. Capitalism, Labour and Conflicts on Mexican Migration in Arizona (1960s–1970s)

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This paper investigates the conflicts between the conservative élite, workers' organizations, and Mexican migrants in Arizona in the 1960s and 1970s when major confrontations occurred around the so-called 'undocumented problem'. Through a labour history approach and the use of primary sources, this study returns the voice of seasonal workers, governors and Arizona's Republican electoral body, union organizers and citizens, workers and anti-union associations. This article investigates, a) the role played by conservative political groups and southwestern capitalists in spreading anti-union and anti-migrant sentiments; b) the relation between status and contract in agricultural work; c) the recruitment and working conditions imposed on migrant workers; d) the political confrontation and conflicts that emerged between unions and migrant workers' organizations in Arizona's agricultural labour regime. In conclusion, although transnational organizing efforts led to success in labour confrontations, the exclusionary political practices against undocumented workers—like the wet line—resulted in the fragmentation of the 'color line' that ultimately exacerbated the frictions between farmworker unions and migrant workers.

**Keywords:** Mexico; Arizona; migration; labour; unión; conservative

Este artículo investiga los conflictos entre la élite conservadora, las organizaciones de trabajadores y los migrantes mexicanos en Arizona en las décadas de 1960 y 1970, cuando se produjeron importantes enfrentamientos en torno al llamado 'problema de indocumentados'. Mediante un enfoque de historia laboral y el uso de fuentes primarias, el artículo da voz a los trabajadores temporales, gobernadores y al cuerpo electoral republicano de Arizona, organizadores sindicales y ciudadanos, trabajadores y asociaciones antisindicales. El estudio investiga el papel desempeñado por los grupos políticos conservadores y los capitalistas del sudoeste en la difusión de los sentimientos anti-sindicales y migratorios; la relación entre estatus y contrato en el trabajo agrícola; las condiciones de reclutamiento y trabajo impuestas a los trabajadores migrantes; la confrontación política y los conflictos surgieron entre los sindicatos y las organizaciones de trabajadores migrantes en el régimen laboral agrícola de Arizona. En conclusión, si bien los esfuerzos de organización transnacionales condujeron al éxito en las confrontaciones laborales, las prácticas políticas excluyentes contra los trabajadores indocumentados—como la *wet line*—resultaron en la fragmentación de la 'línea de color' que finalmente exacerbó las fricciones entre los sindicatos de trabajadores agrícolas y los trabajadores migrantes.

**Palabras clave:** México; Arizona; migración; trabajo; sindicato; conservador

## Introduction

The relation between status and contract for migrant workers in southwestern USA has always been ambiguous and tumultuous. Major confrontations occurred between the state, growers, Mexican migrant workers, Mexican-

American farmworkers, and unions, because of the so-called undocumented problem.<sup>1</sup> The friction between all these actors reshaped working conditions, migrant workers' organizations, and the broader relations between Mexican-Americans, Chicana/o, and Mexican migrants.<sup>2</sup> These changes occurred also through a specific representation of Mexicans, above all the undocumented ones, which were promoted and conveyed by media and state officials.

Within this framework, Arizona is a peculiar region for many reasons. It is a desert area that witnessed a dramatic urbanization and economic boom. The latter was fostered by low taxes and low wages that appealed to business companies. Arizona's strong conservative movement and its right-to-work policies bolstered the aggressive change of economic politics, gaining a national audience and role, being Barry M. Goldwater the prominent protagonist of this movement.<sup>3</sup> Arizona is a pivotal historical case because of its tumultuous economic transformation fostered by low-wage and low-tax policies, its prosperous Republican group that drew national attention, and the anti-union and anti-immigrant policies and sentiments that were coupled with a labour-shortage argument reiterated by growers since the 1940s.

The hostility of conservatives and Republicans towards unions, coupled with the demand for cheap workers, resulted in conflicts between Mexican-Americans workers and Mexican migrants. During the 1960s and 1970s, the hatred towards undocumented migrants became paramount, and it is still widespread and consolidated nowadays. The attitude towards migrants is controversial: life and working conditions for Mexican migrants and their descendants in Arizona have been troublesome for many centuries. In fact, the so-called Sunset State has a long history of discrimination and of conflicts between various private and public actors regarding the migrants' presence, culture, and labour, and it always played a major role in shaping policies and managing migration flows through the US-Mexican border. On the one side, Conservatives and Republicans have promoted the criminalization of undocumented migrants and of unions; on the other side, these very parties and political groups had historically promoted and demanded workers, at least since the First World War when employers requested Mexican workers to sustain a labour-shortage argument. In that regard, a paradoxical context emerged: the aggressive recruitment of workers and the encouragement of mobility to the USA coexisted with anti-Mexican sentiments and hostile policies towards migrant workers (Plascencia 2018).

This paper is structured in the following way. First, the article outlines the historical background in which Mexican migration to Arizona provided the labour supply necessary to growers, renewing the transnational connections between border states and the attempts at unionization of Mexican migrants promoted by Mexican-Americans. It analyses the strong change in labour relations in 1960s and 1970s caused by three main issues: the approval of a restrictive immigration legislation, the poor working conditions of farm labour in a context of economic expansion, and the anti-migrant sentiments that fomented the criminalization of undocumented Mexicans. The aggressive anti-labour Republican policies were coupled with privatization and low taxes anticipating some features of the neoliberal decades that took the global stage in the late 1980s. Second, it focuses on the anti-union and anti-migrant sentiments and policies that were conveyed by conservative groups and supported by Republican voters. These considered unions as a means of the socialist system against the capitalistic one. The

inquiry into workers' conditions by unions and the analyses of Mexican labour composition and obstacles help to better understand migrant labour conflicts. Third, it describes conflicts between unions and labour organizers due to different political positions related to undocumented migrant workers' status and legitimacy.

The article assumes a historical analytical perspective, in particular a social and labour history approach. It is based on primary sources and testimonies from the Arizona Archives and Truman Collection that return the voice of different protagonists: seasonal workers, governors and Arizona's Republican electoral body, union organizers and citizens, workers and anti-union associations alike. Primary sources consist in correspondence, inquiries, and testimonies. In particular, sources give account of the political strategies of labour union organizer Gustavo Gutiérrez and of Governor Barry M. Goldwater.

As a general outcome, this paper gives a contribution to the understanding of the labour history of migrant workers and unions in relation to the economic and political transformations that occurred at the beginning of the neoliberal era in Arizona. In fact, scholarship on the topic is limited and narrowed to studies focused on either capitalism and the conservative movement in Arizona or on farm work and unions within the framework of the Chicana/o movement. This article merges these two streams of analysis and aims to understand the relations between Republican capitalists, unions, and migrant workers—especially undocumented ones—placing them in the same historical context. The specific objectives of the study are to shed light on, a) the role played by conservative political groups and southwestern capitalists in spreading anti-union and anti-migrant sentiments; b) the relation between status and contract in agricultural work; c) the mobility, recruitment, and working conditions imposed on migrant workers; d) the political confrontation and conflicts that emerged between unions and migrant workers' organizations in Arizona's agricultural labour regime. In conclusion, I argue that Mexican-Americans and Chicana/o's demanded recognition as US citizens and policies against undocumented workers. This resulted in the fragmentation of the 'color line'—of the communities of Mexican culture and legacy—through exclusionary political practices that ultimately exacerbated the frictions between farmworker unions and migrant workers.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Changeable Scenario of the 1960s and 1970s**

Since the First World War, agricultural and non-agricultural employers in southwestern United States have reiterated their request for Mexican workers, sustaining a labour-shortage argument “for which the only evidence provided is the assertion of employers themselves. Federal regulatory agencies, as well as most members of Congress accepted employer attestations as factual and without need of verification” (Plascencia 2018: 124). This argument was then used again at the outset of the Second World War when Arizona Cotton Growers Association's (ACGA) requested for Mexican labour force: the Emergency Farm Labor agreement was signed, and became known as *Programa Bracero* that lasted until 1964.<sup>5</sup> Arizona was central

to this large movement of workers because of its dynamic economy and the need for cheap and disposable workers. A large number of Mexicans were recruited in the centre of Empalme in Sonora, Mexico, that was situated near the border with Arizona. For more than two decades, workers moved from Sonora to Arizona and then to other USA states, while thousands of migrants lived at the border waiting for their turn or making a subsistence out of the informal economy that flourished around the centres of recruitment. Sonora renewed its tradition of emigrant state, and the long history of transnational connections and labour migration between Arizona and Sonora was consolidated further (Santos Ramírez 1990; Lozano Ascencio 1997).

Despite the access to the USA labour regime under *Programa Bracero*, undocumented Mexicans were informally recruited by growers and worked in conditions of peonage. State officials were actively involved in the recruitment of undocumented migrants, as well as in their removal at the end of the season when their work in the fields was not needed anymore.<sup>6</sup> USA farmworkers were replaced by *braceros*, who were in turn replaced by undocumented workers. It was a chain of dependency at the hand of growers, state officials, and apparatus that lowered wages in the agricultural sector, worsened housing and labour conditions, exploited migrant labour, and fragmented Mexican communities (Bernardi 2018). In addition, in 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act introduced a system of selective labour migration giving special preference to skilled workers. This commuter program was actually abused by the USA authorities that always issued more permits than established in order to bend with growers' petitions for increased work force (Acuña 2000; Gutiérrez 1995), hence bolstering the transnational migration. Mexican-American leaders requested the end of the *Programa Bracero* as they considered themselves being "denied the opportunity of working" (Sheridan 2012: 294) and blamed *braceros* for the destruction of social life (Cuellar & Vallez 1950). While Arizona's economy was expanding as never before, Mexican-Americans identified Mexican migrants as one of the causes of the discriminations suffered and of lower wages. *Programa Bracero* was finally closed under the pressure of an expanding and strong civil rights movement and with the compliance of the USA apparatus that feared the alliances between different civic and social movements (Massey 2009).

The labour contracts of *braceros* were largely violated and the Program did not give way to a betterment of working conditions for migrants in the USA southwestern fields, as it did not change substantially the conditions of exploitation and precariousness that Mexican workers had to face in the agricultural sector. Contract by itself could not guarantee welfare, benefits, and rights to workers (Bernardi 2018). The *Bracero* era also marked Arizona's transition to the Sunbelt State. Its expansion was intertwined with its ability to attract new businesses and to compete with other cities. Low taxes and low wages were the government's answer.

In 1952, Republican businessman Barry M. Goldwater was elected senator, becoming "the silver-haired knight

of Sunbelt Republicanism" (Sheridan 2012: 285) and, together with his circle at the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, "unshackled the state's urban economy from the harnesses of the New Deal" (Ross 2011: 62). This business elite curtailed the reach of government regulation and turned Arizona into a free enterprise champion that attracted top companies in the key industries. Its capital city, Phoenix, may be considered "the birthplace of the doctrine of deregulation and privatization that much later came to be called neoliberalism" (Ross 2011: 66; Shermer 2013). Cheap land, water, and power required cheap and disposable labour. The agricultural sector was the lowest-paid sector of Arizona's economy while the highest one was the unionized mining industry (Sheridan 2012). In brief, Mexican migrants working in the Arizonan fields were the most vulnerable workers in a context of general hostility to labour rights and profits as a major economic objective. These ideals were fostered by the Republican ruling élite:

The business elite also detested unions, an antilabor sentiment reflected in their successful efforts to limit organizing efforts, and their preference to employ ethnic Mexican workers as a means to lower costs and prevent organization [...] the control and submission of organized labour and ethnic Mexican laborers remained an essential feature of Arizona's political economy (Larkin 2013: 68–9).

During the 1960s, Arizona was rapidly urbanized and industrialized. This process changed the geographical economy of Arizona, in particular of its south-central region where the agricultural sector increasingly diminished its relevance. Thousands of acres of farmland were transformed into suburban subdivisions and the agricultural sector employed a declining percentage of the region's total labour force (Sheridan 2012; Lorey 1990). Three elements have to be considered in this changing scenario. First, in place of the *Programa Bracero*, a restrictive legislation was introduced to manage and select the migrant flow; second, poor working conditions degraded farm labour in a context of economic expansion and higher individual expectations; third, anti-migrant sentiments fomented the criminalization of undocumented Mexicans. I begin to detect these three elements that set the stage for the troublesome relations between growers, farmworkers' organizations, and migrants in the following decades.

In the first place, differences in legal status made workers' organization ever more difficult: "*Legal* and *illegal*, *documented* and *undocumented* were terms imposed by employers to divide workers" (Valdés 1995: 123). The immigration policy enacted after 1965 was designated to regulate both the flow of workers and the wages paid. The Immigration and Nationality Act placed Latin America for the first time on a quota system: a cap of 40.000 was applied to any one nation, whereas Mexico had been the main country of immigration to the United States, already exceeding these numbers in the previous years (Lorey 1990). This quota was received by Mexicans as "one of

the most serious aggression by United States to our country" (Sobre los trabajadores migratorio indocumentados, 1977–79: 3). Besides establishing the magnitude of flow, the Act was aimed at defining the quality of migrants as it provided for preferences to be made according to categories, such as relatives of USA citizens and those with skills deemed useful. This legislation, coupled with the McCarran-Walter Act, was further implemented after the end of the *Programa Bracero* and abused by growers, fuelling large streams of temporary migrant workers who had almost no rights and guarantees. In 1972, the so-called Rodino Bill sought to make employment of undocumented workers a crime and provided penalties for employers to make them responsible, but it was not approved by the Senate as happened to Senate Bill 3827 that, two years later, aimed at regularizing the status of undocumented workers and at sanctioning employers (Quiñones 1981). In sum, law "played an instrumental role in the production of a legally vulnerable undocumented workforce of 'illegal aliens'" (De Genova 2004: 161).

The second element is related to working conditions. Agriculture was the lowest-paid sector of Arizona's economy while the largely unionized mining industry remained the highest-paid sector (Sheridan 2012). Degraded farm labour became ever more unsustainable and unbearable in a context of economic expansion. In 1967, seasonal workers and other testimonies were interviewed to inquire into workers' conditions. The Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor found many difficulties in understanding what was happening in agricultural fields as many Mexicans refused to testify, scared by the repercussions. This silence highlighted the fear of authorities, conditions of abandonment, and lack of protection (Steiner 1967: 256).

The Border Patrol, county sheriff, and local officials always acted jointly to lower wages and intimidated migrants to avoid that they would speak out against abuses. Poor working conditions for migrants could only be maintained through the criminalization of Mexican labour, which ultimately "devalued and degraded the work performed by Mexicans and Chicanos" (Acuña 2000: 324). In other words, the results achieved by labour movements in unionizing farm workers were shortly endangered by the abusive use of commuter programs and by imposing poor working conditions and control over seasonal migrant workers, both documented under commuter programs and undocumented through illegal recruitments by growers.

The third element points to the criminalization of migrants. The early 1970s were characterized by a growing recession, high inflation, and unemployment. The anti-migrants and, above all, anti-Mexican sentiments revived as politicians, the INS, and some lobbyists fomented the threat of an insurmountable wave of illegal migration from Mexico and instigated a hysterical propaganda (Quiñones 1981). As already happened during the 1930s after the Great Depression and—with some major differences—in the early 1950s with Operation Wetback, the Mexicans were blamed for the economic crisis, unemployment

and, more generally, for United States' economic ills. The Mexican, once again, became the scapegoat of the economic crisis, in particular the undocumented worker who was guilty twice: once for being Mexican and alien, and once for working on USA territory without documents. He/she was guilty both for his/her nationality and race and for the juridical status. They started to be considered a threat to national security. Mexicans were in general considered responsible for worsening economic conditions, and in particular undocumented migrants were labelled as 'illegal' aliens and accused of being a national threat (Bernardi 2018). Arizona newspapers began to publish frequent articles with titles such as 'Flood of "Wetbacks" Entering U.S.' and 'Jails Stuffed as "Wetbacks" Stream Over Mexico Line' (Meeks 2001: 307).

Mexican migration became largely the so-called wetback problem, not only in the eyes of public opinion and state officials, but it was a concern also for Mexican-Americans. In fact, already in 1953, GI Forum civil rights activists published a pamphlet entitled 'What Price Wetbacks?', arguing that undocumented migrants pushed their 'blood brothers, American citizens of Mexican descent' out of the region and into the migrant stream earlier every year (Idar & McClellan 1953: 5–23). The undocumented represented a problem also for some Mexican-Americans that looked at wetbacks as the cause of discrimination against themselves. Indeed, "criminalization intensified the division of labour and resulted in Chicanos pecking down on the undocumented worker to avoid discriminations" (Acuña 2000: 324). Undocumented migrants were seen as job stealers and used as strike-breakers.<sup>7</sup> The 'color line' was already compromised by status as different legal status led to the segmentation of Mexican communities in the southwest.

### The Hostile Context to Workers' Organization

This changing scenario is the political and economic background within which to place the relations between unions, government, and entrepreneurs. In the 1970s, Arizona witnessed an aggressive change of economic policy in which high productivity had to be met at any cost, especially at cost to labour. The Arizonian senator Barry Goldwater obstructed the David-Bacon Act that guaranteed an equal wage to workers in the area of construction that involved federal funding. Since these workers benefited from high wages and these projects were just 1/5 of the total construction work, Senator Goldwater aimed at removing the benefits that were introduced under the New Deal (Goldwater to Swanson 1970). This opposition was also a clear denial of Mexicans' rights, as they constituted a large percentage of construction workers during the aggressive urbanization of Arizona.

The cuts to labour costs and the dismissal of labour protective laws were envisaged as the only solution to keep a high market competition. Goldwater identified unions as the main obstacle to competition and profits: "The labour unions of our great nation must be made to understand that strikes to increase workers pay and give shorter workers hours will soon bring about a condition whereby

we cannot meet world competition with our American-produced good" (Goldwater to Trinkaus 1971: n.p.). The rise of production, the decrease of labour costs and of inflation were three goals that Republicans aimed to fulfil through the removal of unions that were the cause of inflation.

Republican regional élites were ostensibly anti-unionist and aimed at the liberalization of labour relations as their main political strategy: "While I continue to introduce bills which unions condemn as anti-union, I seldom obtain hearings upon them. The only device we conservatives can use is to attempt to attach such bills to other bills on the floor of the Senate" (Fannin to Pristo 1973: n.p.) affirmed Paul Fannin, the plurigovernor of Arizona who defined his political position as financial conservative. In the Republicans' view, the liberalization of labour relations would not only leave negotiation to the single parties—employers and employees—but would abolish the compulsory adhesion to unions that is considered the main cause of low union membership. In Goldwater's words: "The United States has the lowest percentage because it is forced on people" (Goldwater to Clough 1973: n.p.).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the political context was not favourable to unions in Arizona, a historically conservative state. Republican voters considered unions as a means of the socialist system against the capitalistic one: "As for our country, it seems to me the political power struggle is one between capitalism and socialism, with socialism gaining the lead" (Clough to Goldwater 1973: n.p.). As a socialist means, unions are a threat and a matter of national security, an internal enemy that has to be identified and erased from the nation: "This *terrorism* must be stopped before it spreads farther" (Clough to Goldwater 1973: n.p., emphasis mine). The very nature of unions is rapacious: "My belief is labor unions are greedy in every sense of the word, and their insatiable appetite will never be satisfied until they are in the White House" (Pristo to Fannin 1973: n.p.).

All these statements by Republican voters are not isolated voices. In this period, political groups and associations were established to limit and drive back union's power. For example, in 1974, the group Americans against Union Control of Government requested funding from the Arizona government to settle its debt of money used for boycotting the legalization of strikes: "Debt accrued in past 90 days by successful fight to stop legalization of postal strikes" (Marsh to Goldwater 1974: n.p.). A letter sent to Senator Goldwater clarifies a common political view about unions:

Do we want the big union dictatorship in control of America? Do we want this freedom hating, cold-hearted, corrupt organization representing every freedom loving American who is against dictators of every kind and would like to see a return to what made this country great – faith in God, constitutional rule, free enterprise and a return to leaders who have MORALS and are Americans FIRST, LAST

AND ALWAYS. (Ball to Goldwater 1975: n.p., capital letters emphasized as original)

Besides the anti-union sentiments, the call to Americans and the emphasis on 'first, last and always' shows a strong nationalism and hostility to migrants.

### Status Fragmented the Colour Line

In the early 1960s, Mexican-American workers were the most organized and tried to improve their condition by "joining *mutualistas* as a means to protect their tightly knit communities, or forming labour unions to challenge the racially ordered class system imposed by the regional elite" (Meeks 2001: 311). Unions promoted actions to defend wages and to improve working conditions and services. They also encouraged a policy of visibility to stand in the political scene of Arizona and opened a path of self-determination and recognition of their forms of organization. "Without any apology to anyone including the union or company officials we have decided this silence will come to a halt" (American Train Dispatchers Association to Fannin 1971: n.p.), affirmed the Mexican-American workers of Southern Pacific, Southern Railway, and Union Pacific that were striking for higher wages.

The southwest has been animated by different attempts at unionization that became more strenuous in the agricultural sector in which right-to-work policies were more effective. Chicana/os massively organized workers of the fields. Labour leaders, such as César Chávez, Reier López Tijerina, and Dolores Huerta, founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1959 (NFWA) that won disputes through strikes, marches, hunger strikes, and boycotts. In 1966, NFWA and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC)—led by the Philippine labour organizer Larry Itliong—merged into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) that made great efforts to unionize farm workers and also achieved some success in raising US farm workers' wages and imposing safer working conditions. The UFWOC adopted a non-violent strategy through pickets, boycotts, rallies, and hunger strikes while workers were involved through grass-root tactics of organization largely based on door-to-door talking and small group house meetings.

In 1968, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Carolina Rosales, and Mel Hewey established the Arizona Farm Workers Organizing Committee (AFWOC) that became a local of UFWOC. Based in the farming county of Tolleson, AFWOC defined itself as "a militant and democratic labor union" (Rosales 2000: 302). Their political approach was to conduct surveys of farm workers and to go door-to-door discussing with farm workers about their conditions; they also monitored pesticide use in Arizonian fields. As they stated in the article 'What are we doing?' in their newspaper *El Paisano*, the AFWOC goals were:

(1) to organize and work with farm workers in the fields so we can begin to value union with our fellow workers; (2) to give services to farm workers, such as help with welfare, social security, or when

a contractor refuses to pay you; (3) to work for contracts with the growers with wage guarantees for union members; (4) to print a monthly newspaper with news of interest to farm workers; (5) to start a credit union for farm workers; (6) to someday become a local of the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee AFL-CIO, in Delano, California. (Rosales 2000: 302).

In 1972, the UFWOC became part of AFL-CIO and adopted the name United Farm Workers union (UFW). This change reinforced the aversion to Mexican migration. Indeed, UFW opposed migration from Mexico for two reasons: on the one side, it lowered wages as green carders worked for cheaper wages making farm work even less desirable for US citizens; on the other side, because migrants were not easy to be organized, it made Mexican-Americans a preferable pool. Also Chávez' idea of a union could not fit with a mobile and flexible workforce: "A union, then, is not simply getting enough workers to stage a strike. A union is building a group with a spirit and an existence all its own" (Rosales 2000: 303–4). Such idea of a union would imply a strong and continuous transnational organization of migrant workers to effectively create a spirited single group. UFW organized USA farmworkers but not Mexican ones—despite that they were working in the same field—and did not organize with Mexican communities that would have been necessary to create a group with a spirit.

The charter to AFL-CIO, together with the melon strike in 1972–75 and the citrus strike in 1974–75 in Yuma County at the border with Sonora, deeply modified the political strategies of unions involved in farmworkers' organization and the relations between them. The strike promoted by UFW cost 1.6 million dollars and did not lead to the expected result, as workers did not obtain the demanded contract. The major issue that arose during the strike was the division between USA citizens and green card holders (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 1). This division ran across all those places in which these social groups worked. In San Luis Río Colorado-Sonora, UFW strikers assaulted many Mexican green carders who did not support the strike: five bombs were thrown against their houses and cars. Despite the aggressive and violent threats, Mexicans kept working during the strike. The situation of irremediable break-ups led to the institution of a tactic that embodied the border in the negotiation for excluding non-striking Mexican workers. It was the birth of the wet-line: "a line of tents set up along the USA/Mexico border on the outskirts of San Luis to forcibly put a stop to the crossing of undocumented workers whom they regarded as potential strike breakers" (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 1). The motto of UFW became 'no wetbacks are welcome in Arizona'. The wet-line brought a season of violence, fragmentation, and conflicts between workers, to say the very least. Many Mexicans were caught, beaten, and robbed: "It resulted in fear, division, and hatred among the workers, but no contract" (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 2). The difference in status fragmented the 'color line' and brought about the strike's failure.

Many Mexican-Americans aimed at differentiating themselves from Mexican nationals and kept opposing their rights' recognition. In particular, they wanted to take a large distance from undocumented migrants to the extent that the division between unions crystallized and the agricultural labour force became ever more fragmented. The violence led to a split of the union when a group of UFW members opposed the coercive actions to the detriment of Mexicans and created the Maricopa County Organizing Project (MCOP) in 1977. A non-profit civil and human rights organization that aimed at changing the "exploitative nature of farm labor in Arizona and to improve the treatment of workers [...] MCOP helped to organize and represent undocumented as well as documented farm workers" (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 2). Its first directors were Guadalupe Sánchez and Jesús Romo; among its founding members, there was Gustavo Gutiérrez, who affirmed: "From its inception, the Project's philosophy was that no distinction could be made among the workers, and that the only valid organizing method was through education" (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 2). In the late 1970s, MCOP started to support migrant workers by broadening the geography of labour organization and intensifying actions (Anastas & Gregory 2015). They never made distinction over legal status but supported and recognized all farmworkers. In other words, the activity in the fields, the betterment of working conditions, and the antagonism to growers were the joint elements against legal status, citizenship, and race.

### The Attempts to Support Mexican Migrant Workers

MCOP formed various Commissions that inquired into workers' conditions and place of origin. These inquiries discovered many relevant elements worthy of listing (Sánchez & Romo 1981). Migrants were almost entirely males, men and teenager boys, whose wives and families usually remained behind in Mexico, and most of them came from the states of Queretaro, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, Nayarit, Michoacán, and Guerrero. In order to migrate, they had to incur heavy debts to pay for the *coyotes* that smuggled them across the border: the average fee for the trip to Maricopa County was \$250. Most agricultural undocumented workers in Arizona worked in the citrus industry because vast orchards and thick foliage permitted the workers to hide from immigration authorities. The minimum wage laws were not observed, they were paid from \$6 to \$9 dollars a day for an eight to twelve hours workday, and a special fee for the 'old people' was deducted from their pay checks. Health conditions and guarantees were extremely lousy: they had no sanitary facilities; workers lived under the trees and hence were subject to pesticide, insecticide spraying, and irrigation of their bedding; the only washing and drinking water available was that of the irrigation ditches which was frequently contaminated with chemicals. Compensation laws were totally ignored, and any worker injured on the job was either given liquor as a remedy or deported to Mexico. They were paid only once a week, and INS

agents often hit on Fridays, right before payday, so that workers did not know what happened to their pay checks when they were deported. If the INS in Tucson would have caught them, the agents took their money, claiming it was owed as income tax. Furthermore, they were subject to constant raids by bandits who came to rob them of their savings. At the end of this dramatic description of Mexican workers' conditions, the inquiry affirmed that: "Random Border Patrol arrests, while certainly enough to harass the workers and to create a sense of isolated agency activity, never were designated to threaten the overall work force and stability of the entire citrus industry" (Sánchez & Romo 1981: 4–5).

Since the very beginning, MCOP encountered several obstacles. The most solid one was the INS, which used to deport migrants as soon as the protests got started. As in the previous decades, deportation was a widespread tactic to remove 'troublesome workers' who were demanding better wages and working conditions. Through this tactic, the long and strenuous process of workers' organization was dismantled quickly and lastingly. Growers' direct control on Mexicans' labour and life in the field was another major obstruction: "The workers lived under the very trees that they worked. They depended on the growers for mail, medicines, and transportation in and out of the field. Surveillance was strict, and any outsider caught inside the fields faced a severe beating" (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 3). Besides INS' raids and employers' harsh control on the fields, workers were subject to intermediary forces. Undocumented Mexicans became a relevant business as they were sold to growers, giving way to a real trade:

they had organized a network of 'coyotes' who paid the foreman \$20 per worker. The coyote, in turn, later sold the workers to growers in other states for \$200 to \$450 each, depending on the distance travelled. The grower later charged the worker for the money he had paid the coyote for his delivery to the ranch (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 4).

The presence and role of extra intermediaries, besides unions, influenced the migration networks across the USA and Mexico and the organization of labour in USA fields. Whereas under *Programa Bracero* the state became the recruiter of the labour force through centres displaced along the border and within Mexico, after 1964 the *coyote* overwhelmingly came back on stage and structurally organized the transportation of migrants towards the working places within a regime of land lobbies that exchanged migrants as a usual good. Many illegal trades multiplied and spread out. Growers bought migrants through a market system that echoed the slave one. From being a guide responsible for migrants' transportation, the *coyote*-foreman turned to be more similar to a trafficker and a jailer of a low-cost labour force. MCOP firstly identified *coyote* as an exploiter and denounced them to the authorities for their illegal activity. The union aimed at obtaining Mexican workers' trust as they were prosecuting their exploiters who trafficked them as goods on the

market and also Mexican-Americans' trust as it was condemning the illegal system of Mexican workers' recruitment and not migrant themselves.

Mexican migrants, after two decades of negotiations under international agreements and contract labour, found themselves in a landscape of hostile elements: *coyote*-foremen, growers, INS, Border Patrol, Mexican-American unions, and the conservative public opinion of Arizona. In this context, there was also a growing fear of the expanding political power of Cesar Chávez in organizing farm workers by Arizonian growers (Fridlay to Goldwater 1975). Consequently, control over unions escalated. The Agricultural Employment Relations Act (1972) was the state's answer to entrepreneurs' concerns and it went on record as an Act established to "promote labour peace and keep to a minimum the effects of uncontrolled labour-management strife" (Arizona Agricultural Employment Relations Board 1979: 6). Actually, it "made it 'unlawful for unions to recruit members in the fields, prohibited secondary boycotts, allowed the courts to issue ten-day restraining orders against work stoppages during the harvest, and required workers vote to strike under the observance of a governor-appointed board" (Tompkins 2016: 83). This Act complicated workers' organization and affected unions' main strategies, such as strikes, consequently protecting growers' interests who praised right-to-work laws: "The power struggle with Cesar Chávez and the farm workers of California and Arizona is another example. Fortunately, Arizona has the "right to work" law permitting open shops" (Fridlay to Goldwater 1975: n.p.). By 1975, UFW had largely given up the organization of Arizonian farmworkers (Tompkins 2016).

Besides state and growers' hostility, unions faced internal troubles. Chávez centralized leadership was a main cause of tension within UFW that brought many labour organizers to leave the union, which was consequently weakened. Moreover, Chávez' statements against migrant workers caused disagreements and continuous disputes between MCOP and UFW. MCOP kept avoiding any differentiation among workers based on status but fostered solidarity in the work places. Financially conservative policies kept supporting high productivity at migrant workers' costs while growers strictly controlled migrant workers in the fields: the "greatest obstacle in organizing undocumented workers was fear" (Tompkins 2016: 84). However, labour organizers set up actions to fight back these policies. On October 3, 1977, the workers ranch committee of Goldmar Inc. at Arrowhead Ranch in Glendale—co-owned by Robert Goldwater, brother of Senator Barry M. Goldwater—went on strike. MCOP organized the largest undocumented workers' strike in Arizona history. This was possible because of a key strategy in organizing workers. MCOP members travelled to the various Mexican villages from which workers migrated, coordinating and planning the strike with communities of departure (Sánchez & Romo 1981). This strategy was aimed at creating awareness about political and working conditions in Arizonan fields, and communitarian support and strength for migrating workers. It also highlighted great understanding of

the transnational dimension of production processes in Arizona and the consequent need for a very transnational organization of workers.

Strikers demanded minimum wages, workmen's compensation, working safety, decent living conditions, and the right to organize to attain a collective bargaining agreement (Sánchez & Romo 1981). The media responded with extensive and wide coverage as strikers were hoping to bring the issue of migrant workers to the attention of a national audience. As workers knew that growers would have attempted to recruit other Mexican undocumented workers, strikers took down the license plates of all *coyotes* in action, tracing and threatening them with legal action. In the end, this strategy proved to be successful. Within ten days from the beginning of the strike, 260 of the 300 workers had been deported and two organizers were jailed an average of once a day until the strike ended on October 27. Nonetheless, after twenty-four days of strike, undocumented workers won. This strike opened the path to other struggles, and shortly after, 3,000 farm workers in the county went out on strike, funded by the already organized undocumented workers (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 9–10). This was a major accomplishment. The transnational cooperation with Mexican unions and communities was then identified as a crucial issue for protecting and organizing undocumented Mexican workers in the years to come, and union conferences were set up in Mexico to coordinate the process (Conferencia preparatoria 1978: 4–5). Despite rigid financially conservative policies in Arizona, migrant farm workers were able for some years to organize campaigns. For example, in 1978 against the bishop of Phoenix who supported policies against undocumented migrants, together with boycotts and strikes—also very large ones like the Fletcher Farms' strike in 1980 when two hundred protesters stopped the production against inhumane working conditions (Gutiérrez 1977–79: 9–10). MCOP also developed strategies to supervise grower's pesticide usage practices by initiating programs for identifying violations (Tompkins 2016).

Despite the victories that blossomed in 1970s Arizona, at the end of the decade, the 'undocumented issue' was on everybody's lips. In 1979, even Chávez called on INS to be more active in deporting undocumented workers, so shocking MCOP organizers and fragmenting definitely the farmworkers' movement in Arizona. The hostility against undocumented workers resulted ever more in hysterical anti-migrant propaganda, and the debate around undocumented migration became critical. Different plans were proposed to increase the number of immigration officers, limit employment opportunities, improve methods of deportation, build a barrier on the border, and exclude migrant workers from benefits and rights such as pensions, health benefits, insurance and injury compensation. The same Goldwater proposed a bill in 1979, together with other Congressmen, that aimed at regulating Mexican labour and restricting migration without allowing any right or benefit to workers: it did not pass the Senate. As Goldwater always sought to protect Arizonian entrepreneurs, he tried to guarantee economic production and

profit making to local businesses according to their interests (Quinones 1981):

The burning economy problem today is inflation, the cruel tax of inflation is eating away the paychecks of everyone, construction workers and all other. The answer, in my humble opinion, is to unleash private enterprise to create new jobs, not to look to the Federal Government. If we can reduce taxes, reduce Federal spending and cut government regulations, our economy will be more productive and offer enough good paying jobs to go around (Goldwater to supporters of David-Bacon Act abolishers 1979: n.p.).

Eventually, the feud between the MCOP and the UFW over ideology and support led to division that contributed to the demise of the UFW intervention in the farm workers' movement in Arizona in the mid-1980s (Tompkins 2016). Although the MCOP stayed involved in migration issues such as Border Patrol abuse and racism, but largely limited its role to information for farmworkers, until its end in 1993.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, the historical case of Arizona sheds light on the relation between labour, migration, and workers' organization in a context of capitalist expansion and financially conservative policies. The growers of the Sunbelt State were the first to tactically claim labour shortages but actually demanded a flexible, disposable, and tractable work force from Mexico. After the end of *Programa Bracero*, the aggressive and illegal recruitment of workers coexisted with anti-Mexican sentiments and hostile policies against migrant workers. Employers benefited from low wages, strict control over workers, and illegal recruitments at their hands. The state was persistently reluctant to monitor and punish violations of migration and labour regulations, with rare exceptions, and it seldom enforced actions to protect migrant workers' rights and benefits. Sunbelt Republicanism turned Arizona into a free enterprise champion that attracted top companies in the key industries and imposed right-to-work on its populations. Anti-union policies continuously tried to prevent the organization of workers while anti-Mexican sentiments fostered a hostile climate to migrants. Republicans considered unions as a mean of the socialist system against the capitalistic one and the main obstacle to competition and profits.

Farmworkers' unions promoted actions to defend wages and improve working conditions and services. Besides, they enacted a policy of visibility to stand in the political scene of Arizona and open a path of self-determination and recognition of their forms of organization. The results achieved by labour movements in unionizing farm workers were shortly endangered by the abusive use of commuter programs and by imposing poor working conditions and control over seasonal migrant workers, both documented under commuter programs and undocumented through illegal recruitments by growers. Inquiries by the

government's Commission and unions highlighted the dramatic recruitment and working conditions imposed on workers. The anti-migrants and, above all, anti-Mexican sentiments revived as politicians, the INS, and some lobbyists fomented the threat of an insurmountable wave of 'illegal' migration from Mexico and instigated a hysterical propaganda.

Mexican-Americans also ended up supporting the closure of *Programa Bracero* and opposing migration from Mexico. While Arizona's economy was expanding as never before, Mexican-Americans identified Mexican migrants as one of the causes of the discriminations suffered, and of lower wages. These attitudes divided domestic and migrant farmworkers, and this division consequently reflected inside the Mexican communities. UFW conveyed a political view of migrant workers that became ever more common within Mexican-American groups in the USA. Even if most of these groups identified with a 'brown' community of Mexican descent and employed race as a source of pride to claim rights and social recognition, some groups like the UFW considered these claims as legitimate because of their juridical status on USA territory as citizens of a nation-state. In other words, they did not seek recognition because of their work in the southwestern fields, but as white American citizens. Legal status differentiated and fragmented communities of USA citizens of Mexican descent, foreign workers under contract like farmworkers, resident aliens, or undocumented aliens.

In the 1970s strikes, the major issue was the division between USA citizens and green card holders who were systematically deported and attacked. The political practice that widened the gap between Mexican-American, Chicana/o, and Mexican migrants was the wet-line, a sort of political and juridical border that the UFW imposed in the very work place, enforcing the opposition between citizens and migrants, between documented and undocumented—the 'illegal' ones. The different status fragmented the 'color line' and brought about the strike's failure. The imposition of the wet-line and the consequent conflicts within the Mexican communities left a durable legacy that is also the historical background of most recent events in the Sunset State.

The MCOP organized differently and had another vision of a union: it never made a distinction over legal status but supported and recognized all farmworkers in the work place. In other words, the activity in the fields, the betterment of working conditions, and the antagonism to growers were the joint elements against legal status, citizenship, and race. Since the very beginning, this project of unionization encountered several obstacles: deportations, control over workers, *coyotes'* slavery trade, anti-union sentiments, hostility by Mexican-American unions. The transnational network organized by the MCOP for the 1977 strike proved to be successful, showing the possibility of obtaining rights and recognition beyond the divisions imposed by status condition and nationality.

The conflicts between the UFW and the MCOP describes both the possibility of successful actions organized by migrant workers—as the long-term demise of migrant workers organizing projects in a context of hostility

against unions—and migrants that escalated in the 1980s. Indeed, the 'color line' was apparently defeated by status, in particular by citizenship and the growers' use of recruiters to fuel low-cost labourers and to segment workers' organizational efforts by imposing control over seasonal migrant workers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In general, migrants are considered here as all those persons that move from their original place of departure to another place under a different jurisdiction (i.e. from one state to another); this movement can be temporary, seasonal or permanent, and can be documented or undocumented. *Braceros* and undocumented migrants are both Mexican migrants, disregarding their legal status and labour relation. Mexican-Americans are all those USA citizens who have Mexican origin, recognize themselves culturally as Mexicans, or are connected to communities through Mexican kinship networks. Undocumented migrants are those foreign nationals who don't have legal documents, permits, or labour contracts to enter the United States.
- <sup>2</sup> Chicanos and Chicanas, and more recently Chicaxs (as queer identifier), are all those USA citizens of Mexican origin who feel part of Aztlán (the portion of Mexican land that United States conquered in 1848) and animated a strong civil and social rights movement that began in the 1960s.
- <sup>3</sup> Barry M. Goldwater (1909–1998) was a Republican five-term senator from Arizona and presidential candidate in the elections of 1964 in the USA. He is considered the promoter of the resurgence of a conservative political movement, the main protagonist of Sunbelt capitalism, and a strong opponent of New Deal politics. See the extensive work of Elizabeth T. Shermer.
- <sup>4</sup> The term 'color line' was first introduced by Frederick Douglass in 1881, and it refers to the racial segregation imposed in the United States after the formal abolition of slavery. Two decades later, W.E.B. Du Bois used the term in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folks* to refer to the relation between races, and it entered the scientific language to identify the process of hierarchisation, segmentation, and bordering established by racial definitions.
- <sup>5</sup> The term 'bracero' means those 'who use/work with the arms', and it clearly represents the role this person is assigned: he/she is reduced to his/her body parts needed for working. Migrants are hence reified and degraded to their functionality. The so-called *Programa Bracero* or Bracero Program refers to a series of binational agreements between the USA and Mexico, signed between 1942 and 1964, that scholarship identifies as a guest worker program. See Bernardi 2018; about the limits of studies about the program, see Plascencia 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Underwood to the President Truman; Cook to the President Truman; Garza to Bailey, p. 1; Cortez to Stowe and to Miller, p. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Strikebreakers or, in Spanish, 'rompehuelgas' are those workers recruited by growers and entrepreneurs dur-

ing a strike in order to neutralize it: very often these workers are migrants, undocumented and subject to blackmail.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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