

LONG LIVE THE BRACEROS: ESSENTIAL GUEST WORKERS NOT FELONS

By Nick Gier

In 1958 I got my first job picking pears in my hometown of Medford, Oregon. With 10,000 acres of orchards, Medford is called the Pear Capital of the World. When I was growing up there was an annual Pear Blossom Festival, and I would march with my accordion band alongside a float decorated with pear blossoms. Later I thought that this probably looked as amazing as the cello-playing Woody Allen "marching" with his school band in his film "Take the Money and Run."

Except for a few migrant families from the South, I was the only white kid in the orchards. Most of my peers thought I was crazy taking on such "demeaning" work. My crew boss thought that I was saving money for a "jalopy," and he was mystified when I told him that I was saving for college instead.

Most of the pickers were Mexicans hired on the Bracero Program. I was paid 12 cents a box and one day I picked 150 boxes, not bad earnings for a 14-year-old 48 years ago. I was not sure how much the Mexicans were being paid, but at least they were legal. I was not because I lied about my age to get the job.

The Bracero Program was started in 1942 because of the severe labor shortages during the war. More than 4 million Mexicans crossed the border legally, and they helped transform America's orchards and fields into the most productive farms in the world. The program ended in 1964, but the demand for this labor was higher than ever, and millions more began to cross the border illegally.

There is an argument by analogy against immigrants that is making its rounds on the internet. I will offer an edited version and then give my critique.

Let's say I break into your house. Let's say that when you discover me in your house, you insist that I leave. But I say, "I've made all the beds and washed the dishes and did the laundry

and swept the floors; I've done all the things you don't like to do. I'm hard-working and honest. Not only must you let me stay, you must add me to your family's insurance plan and provide other benefits to me and to my family. If you try to call the police or force me out, I will call my friends who will picket your house carrying signs that proclaim my right to be here."

The main problem with this analogy is that, although they cross the border illegally, these people are warmly invited into American homes and employers gladly hire them without checking their papers. The last thing they are doing is calling the police. These Americans are breaking the law just as much as their workers are. Some growers have admitted that they could mechanize much of their harvest, but they say it's cheaper to hire immigrant labor.

Testifying at a recent Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg stated that his city's economy would collapse if the estimated 500,000 illegal immigrants were deported. He also predicted that this would happen to the national economy as well.

The Republicans who wish to criminalize these workers' existence are the largest recipients of campaign money from employers who rather would pay illegal workers less and provide no benefits. The original Braceros worked and lived under miserable conditions and suffered brutal discrimination, and, sadly, those conditions have not improved much since the 1940s.

Larry Kudlow, writing for the conservative journal *National Review* (4/4/06), praises the Bracero Program and urges Congress to expand the ridiculously low unskilled H-2B quota from 140,000 to the millions of visas that are needed for our service and agricultural economy. Kudlow also reminds Americans that "illegals have [paid] \$7 billion to Social Security and \$1.5 billion to Medicare. They are contributing to our wealth, not reducing it." He also adds that "only 10 percent of illegal Mexicans have sent a child to an American public school and just 5 percent have received food stamps or unemployment benefits."

It's high time to recognize the contributions of these hard working people, face the economic facts, and stop the fear mongering that has demonized a group of people who have enhanced an already great nation of immigrants.