Migration and Dependency: Mexican Countryside Proletarianization and the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program

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Abstract
This article addresses the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) between Mexico and Canada by examining the forms of disposability and job insecurity of Mexicans employed in Canadian agribusiness. We argue that the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program has exacerbated the precarity and disposability of Mexican workers by restructuring family dynamics and care chains. This article represents a critique of the SAWP as a model of regulated labor migration, serving as a basis for analyzing the consequences of the proletarianization of the Mexican peasantry and its use as disposable labor for export.

Keywords Proletarianization/proletarian · Peasantry · Temporary workers · Temporary programs

Introduction

In early 2020, there was a crisis in Canadian agriculture: the COVID-19 pandemic forced a temporary suspension of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). As a result, Canadian farmers announced catastrophic scenarios for the agricultural supply chain and raised concerns regarding the nation’s food security.1 Preventing workers from reaching Canadian fields would mean a severe labor shortage feared amid COVID-19 travel bans: https://www.cicnews.com/2020/03/agriculture-labour-shortage-feared-amid-covid-19-travel-bans-0313913.html#gs.135ej3 [Retrieved May 14, 2021].

1 Agriculture labor shortage feared amid COVID-19 travel bans: https://www.cicnews.com/2020/03/agriculture-labour-shortage-feared-amid-covid-19-travel-bans-0313913.html#gs.135ej3 [Retrieved May 14, 2021].

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shortage during the harvest and planting season. Since its creation in 1964, and the gradual incorporation of the Caribbean and Mexican workforce, the SAWP has functioned uninterruptedly, making it the international model of regulated migration programs.

After attempts to use available national labor, Canada imposed new guidelines for employers and workers, and the program resumed in April 2020. The Caribbean and Mexican workers were admitted to the country if they complied with several international health protocols: 14-day isolation upon arrival, early detection of possible outbreaks, social distancing at the workplace, and remaining in provided housing. However, workers documented negligence on the part of employers, poorly suited housing for isolation, and generalized mistreatment that made national and international news. These situations reinvigorated the debate between the need for a profound program restructuring and its elimination.

Under the campaign status for all civil society organizations, working groups from Canadian universities and outside North America called for labor and human rights recognition for workers in the program, demanding open work permits and improved housing and workplace conditions. While these petitions have been raised for several years by organizations such as the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW-Canada), Migrant Worker Alliance, and Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW), international coverage of COVID-19 outbreaks and the deaths of three Mexican farmworkers on Canadian farms brought renewed and increased attention to the SAWP and how similar programs had shaped decades of international migrant management schemes. In addition, this situation led to some reports that addressed the conditions under which migrant workers entered Canada during the pandemic’s early stages. One example is the report published by the UFCW and the Agriculture Workers Alliance (AWA) (UFCW, 2020) in August 2020, which highlights the complicated situation experienced by Mexican and Caribbean farmworkers at the Canadian borders and in workplaces. The report delves into the need for immigration status changes and more straightforward pathways to Canadian citizenship as one way to address the deplorable working and housing conditions of those who enter the program. Canadian government labeled foreign farmworkers as “essential,”

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2 Temporary Foreign Worker Program-COVID-19: https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/notice-covid-19.html [Retrieved April 13, 2021].

3 Coronavirus sheds light on Canada’s poor treatment of migrant workers: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/20/canada-migrant-farm-workers-coronavirus [Retrieved January 12, 2021].

4 Migrant Rights Network has advocated, along with other non-profit organizations in Canada, for workers and undocumented people in Canada to be regularized and given full immigration status without exception https://migrantrights.ca/status-for-all/

5 The three Mexican farmworkers who died in Canada in 2020 and 2021 were: Bonifacio Eugenio-Romero, who worked on a pepper farm near Kingsville; Rogelio Munoz Santos, who worked at a farm in Windsor-Essex, Juan Lopez Chaparro, who worked on a vegetable farm near Simcoe. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/covid-19-farm-workers-deaths-ontario-coroner-1.6003893 [Retrieved December 12, 2021].

6 The status of migrant farmworkers in Canada, 2020. Special Report: Marking three decades of advocacy on behalf of Canada’s most exploited workforce: http://www.ufcw.ca/templates/ufcwcanada/images/awa/publications/UFCW-Canada-Status-of-Migrant-Workers-Report-2020.pdf [Retrieved June 16, 2021].
meaning that their labors were essential to the survival of the Canadian system during contingent times like the pandemic. This labeling allowed workers to move internationally despite health restrictions and enter Canada and continue working in agricultural fields. This represented how Canadian consumers perceive this work and worker in somewhat symbolic terms. Nevertheless, naming temporary workers “essential” to Canada’s agricultural business emphasized their generalized disposability and precarity.

In this article, we argue that the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program has exacerbated the precarity and disposability of Mexican workers by restructuring family dynamics and care chains. The SAWP has increased the dependency of families upon migrant wages while also deepening the historic proletarianization of Mexican peasants. The importance of the SAWP to the Mexican peasantry and their involvement in global migratory routes is analyzed from a historical perspective contrasting it with the experiences of Mexican workers who participate in the program and from family members who stay in Mexico. We describe the origin of this form of regulated migration to explain how these programs, although not new, have been part of the recruitment of migrant workers throughout well-defined cycles and periods in the development of global capitalism. Also, we delve into the debate between abolition and reform of the SAWP by presenting the diverse labor experiences of Mexican migrant peasants in Canada and their families who stay in Mexico. Finally, we argue that the difference between the two proposals represents an unfinished solution to the labor problem of the disposable workforce in the context of regulated migration.

This article presents the disposability, precarity, and proletarianization of Mexican workers employed in the program and their families in Mexico from a theoretical and ethnographic standpoint. Conceptually, we use precarity, not as a synonym for vulnerability but, as Millar (2017) explains, as a condition necessary in creating capital. For Millar, “precarity is the norm of capitalism, not its exception, and all workers share it, whether employed or unemployed” (Millar 2017: 6). This reasoning allows us to understand a myriad of labor experiences within state management migration and opens the possibility of analyzing particular household conditions under programs like the SAWP. Furthermore, we analyze labor under the SAWP from the perspective of Carbonella and Kashmir’s concept of disposability (2014: 7), “which expressly refers to the varied acts of disorganization, defeat, and enclosure that are at once economic, martial, social, and cultural and that create the conditions for a new set of social relations.”

This particular use of disposability resonates with Sider’s understanding of the historical production of difference and inequality depending on intertwined continuous social processes (Sider, 2014: 165). In this article, Mexican SAWP workers and their families find themselves in continuous migrant-wage dependency, cycles of debt, and various

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7 It is essential to understand the concept of vulnerability framed within the multiple forms that disposability and dispossession take. In the case of migration, Green (2009) presents an excellent analysis of the United States’ neoliberal policies and the regulation of international migration along with the production and reproduction of inequalities. Green (2009: 328) uses Sider’s definition of vulnerability (Sider 2006 in Green 2009: 337) as people’s incapability to secure their collective social reproduction completely.
inequalities due to disposability. As Sider notes, “being disposable [is] being put in a situation where what you can earn or produce through your labors, combined with what you are given by the state, community, your kin, and others, is less than what you need to make it to tomorrow” (Sider 2014: 168). In addition, we understand the proletarianization of the Mexican peasantry as a historical process of land dispossession and unequal development that intersects with a gradual introduction of peasants to a reduced local labor market in their places of origin (Hernández 2019, Roseberry 1983, Stavenhagen, 1966). In this sense, international migration has become one of the most used strategies by Mexican workers to alleviate their generalized poverty. However, migration entails an exacerbated exploitation that tends to separate the costs of production and reproduction, making a cycle of dependency on migrant wages (Burawoy 1976).

This article draws on semi-structured interviews conducted between August and September 2019 with Mexican workers employed in the SWAP and their families in Tlaxcala, México. Interviews were conducted once the agricultural season in Canada was over, and they were already in their hometown. By reflecting on the experiences of workers in Canada, and their spouses and children who remain in Mexico, we explain how the SAWP has used the exacerbated conditions of disposability, precariousness, and the historical exploitation of the Mexican proletariat to consolidate Canadian agribusiness capitalism. We use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the workers and families who shared their labor experiences under the program with us.

In the pages below, we first identify three waves of temporary programs in modern global history that allowed the SAWP to operate in current conditions and model the present scenarios of workers, the forms of employer management, and state responsibilities. Secondly, we frame the SAWP in a conceptual discussion regarding the proletarianization of the Mexican peasantry and its use of a disposable migrant workforce, considering the work experiences of Mexicans in Canada. Then, we focus on the current critiques of the SAWP to delve into how disposability, dependency, and exploitation of Mexican workers are functional for Canadian agribusiness. Finally, we argue that within the “reform versus abolition” debate, more attention should be paid to the historical origin of the program and the broad structural consequences it has had in countries like Mexico. Our ethnographic data shows how workers in the program are immersed in cycles of debt and unemployment periods that affect their families in Mexico in diverse ways.

**Temporary foreign worker programs in the history of disposable labor**

As Hahamovitch (2011) argues, Guest Worker Programs (PTI) and Temporary Foreign Worker Programs (PTET) have existed throughout history as a legal alternative to unauthorized migration. This type of program represents a form of work explicitly

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8 The theoretical reflections and the ethnographic compilation from which this article are based on the ongoing project: “Local Food, Foreign Labor: A multi-sited ethnography of the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program in Nova Scotia, Mexico, and Jamaica” (SSHRC Insight Grant #4,352,090,661) led by Dr. Elizabeth Fitting (Dalhousie University). The authors would like to thank Dr. Fitting for her guidance in the realization of this article.
designed to alleviate production problems in host countries while also serving as a proven anti-immigration strategy whose objective is to dissuade certain foreigners from establishing in those countries. Although these strategies are typical in the current highly globalized world, the reality is that these programs have existed for over a century and a half to manage surplus populations for the ends of potential exploitation. As Griffith (2006) explains, the history of temporary worker programs parallels modern capitalist development.

In this sense, Hahamovitch (2011) describes three waves that have together comprised the contemporary characteristics of highly regulated Temporary Worker Programs. The first one represents a continuity of slavery, indentured servitude, and colonialism through the mechanism of racialized labor within host countries. European colonial extraction of natural resources, labor through slave institutions, and land exploitation were elemental examples of this process. Consequently, once sovereign nations were born, intricate systems of exploitation emerged from colonialism, catalyzing workers to work outside their home countries as a flexible workforce.

In this period, countries such as the USA, France, and England restricted the immigration of Chinese citizens and “poor white Europeans.” Similarly, during the 1880s and early 1900s, Australia, the USA, the Netherlands, Sweden, Argentina, and Chile prohibited hiring Chinese workers while exploiting Irish and Scottish laborers through indentured servitude. This racial bias in selecting workers worldwide prompted the first guest worker programs in Prussia, Australia, and South Africa while offering a clear distinction between citizens and non-citizens, “internal and external” individuals (Hahamovitch 2011, 13), thus essentializing labor skills in terms of racial and ethnic characteristics. These patterns remain in today’s regulated migration.

The second wave of the Guest Worker Programs began during and after World War II. At that time, national labor shortages due to war mobilization accelerated the hiring of foreign workers, especially in the agricultural sector. Building on previous experiences with established programs, Germany, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Japan, and the USA used a diverse workforce from Eastern Europe, Korea, Mexico, and Jamaica, respectively (Hennebry 2008, 23). Notably, the South African gold mine programs that had used a temporary migrant workforce since the nineteenth century set the basis for those European and North American countries in regulating migrant labor (Burawoy 1976, Hahamovitch, 2011). Similarly, in the USA, the Bracero program9 that employed thousands of Mexican seasonal farmworkers from 1942 to 1964, and the H2-A visa for Jamaican sugarcane laborers in the early 1950s became key models for subsequent programs that employed special restrictions and limited labor rights (Griffith, 2006). Other examples include the programs bringing

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9 The Bracero program is commonly referred to as the first massive, regulated labor program in Mexico. Thousands of Mexican workers were directed to US agricultural fields in early 1943 to help fill the job positions of native workers leaving for World War II. Although the program ended in 1964, its consequences have been widely studied. Our primary interest is the opening to regulated labor migration in the form of visas and temporary worker programs stemming from the bracero bureaucratic structure. For a history, detailed analysis, and the various consequences of the Bracero program, see Durand (2017).
Haitian braceros to the Dominican Republic to cut sugarcane at the beginning of the twentieth century (Lozano 1992) and the import of Haitians and Jamaicans to Cuba (Howard 2015). In these two programs, and as in the South African mines, the production of the Other as racially distinct was used to reduce production costs and, at the same time, increase workers’ dependence on the temporary labor structure (Burawoy 1976). The Canadian SAWP was also born in this second wave in 1966. Although Canada had already received a significant number of immigrants before and after the Second World War (Satzewich, 2007) — mainly Polish, Danish, and Irish citizens — it was the SAWP that allowed the bureaucratization of the labor immigration system in Canada, expanding and formalizing diverse forms of temporary work programs with non-European citizens.

In the third wave, the consolidation of cycles of dependence on remittances from sending countries was accompanied by several other changes: in contrast to the primarily male force of the previous waves in countries such as the USA, Canada, and France, the workforce expanded to include of women (Hennebry 2011, 28). Through other regulated programs, workers who entered these countries required specific skills in specialized industries, such as oil or technology. In addition, during this time, the countries mentioned above, and others such as Germany and Portugal, created bilateral agreements with other states to allow non-citizens to enter as contract workers. For example, from the mid-1970s and well into the 1990s, the Philippine State concentrated its efforts on organizing an army of workers, recruited mainly for their “export” to countries that required cheap and agile labor for care or domestic labor (Rodríguez 2010, Gardiner Barber 2008). Similarly, during this period, Mexico secured the binational agreement for seasonal agricultural workers with the USA and a new one with Canada, which led to the gradual replacement of Caribbean workers by Mexicans in North American agribusiness (Binford 2013). This wave is characterized by a high degree of bureaucratic administration whereby states manage and send their surplus populations. This characteristic dynamic is combined with the symbolic and political discourse of globalization in state-state agreements for the hiring of migrants.

An example of this is the financial and labor policies and the differentiated consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the USA, and Canada. As Mize et al., 2010: XXVII) explained, “NAFTA has increasingly bound each nation’s production and consumption practices to one another. In all three NAFTA nations, it is the most marginalized of Mexican laborers who do the hard work of production for the consumer-driven economy.”

In the three waves described by Hahamovitch (2011), each period contains a history of racialized work, tensions between the differentiation between free and unfree work, and migratory movements managed by the state or private companies, as in the case of the Canadian farms. In addition, it is evident how the limitation of citizenship became the best way to administer surplus populations moving through various industries and demanding better labor conditions. For example, the current Canadian SAWP and the US H2-A visa program remain the two most extensive programs for Caribbean and Mexican temporary migrants and the most stable binational agreements for both receiving and sending states. Although the number of Mexican and Caribbean workers employed in the US H2-A is more significant than
in Canada’s SAWP, the latter has become the “model program” for other similar programs worldwide that manage labor migrations, shaping their internal regulations, agreements between nations, and, most importantly, the treatment of workers.

The Canadian case: Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)

The SAWP is a temporary foreign worker program designed to alleviate shortages in the Canadian agricultural sector by hiring cheap temporary foreign labor while increasing production intensity. Born in 1966 as a bilateral agreement between Jamaica and Canada, the SAWP was implemented to prevent the “vices of illegal migration” while ensuring a stable workforce for the Canadian agribusiness in times of “crisis.” In 1967, other Caribbean islands became interested in the program and sought to sign labor migration agreements with Canada. Andre (1990) argues that the SAWP began as a regulatory scheme, legitimizing the exploitative nature of the program, utilizing the Caribbean’s colonial history and its ties to the Commonwealth to direct a needed workforce.

In Canada, the transition from the family farm to a new form of intensive agriculture required a new labor force to allow production to keep pace with the rapid growth in demand. Historically, this transition is a narrative of land dispossession by agribusiness and other industries that brought several changes in Canadian agricultural laws and protection to agricultural production in the country, i.e., agricultural exceptionalism (Martin 2021). Migrants from the Netherlands and Poland, for whom no special immigration status was required and whose transition to citizenship was expected and desired, initially entered the workforce on family farms. However, as these migrants abandoned farm labor, the SAWP channeled precarious and racialized populations outside Canada to alleviate the resulting labor shortages and ensure fast and profitable food production without clear paths to citizenship or permanent resident status as with the migrants of the turn of the century.

With this background, in 1966, Jamaica sent its first 264 workers to the tobacco farming industry in southern Ontario. Then, in 1967, the first workers from Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados were admitted to the program under conditions like the Jamaican workers. Finally, Dominica, St. Keith, and Nevis joined in 1971 (Satzewich, 2007; Smith 2015). By 1973, the Canadian agricultural sector began to rely heavily on foreign labor, and more and more producers began applying for the program and hiring non-Canadian workers (Binford 2019). Thus, in 1974, the SAWP was expanded to include Mexican citizens, taking advantage of the infrastructure left behind by the Bracero program. Currently, the SAWP operates in almost the entire Canadian territory: in 10 of its 12 provinces with more than 40,000 agricultural workers, primarily Mexican men, married and with children, from rural areas of Mexico who spend between 4 and 8 months in Canadian fields and greenhouses (Binford 2019).

The nature of the employment contract under the program is straightforward: the workers are temporary, not eligible to apply for permanent residence or citizenship, and thus not subject to the rights and obligations of those statuses. In addition, the SAWP establishes a fragmentation of legal responsibilities and labor rights applied
differently across Canadian provincial governments. Labor laws, wage rates, and employer responsibilities differ depending on the province where migrant workers are employed. In addition, the combination of federal laws, provincial labor laws, and regulations of the workers’ countries of origin make it challenging to homogenize work experiences, situations of exploitation, and demands on labor rights. (Martin 2021). The program’s general agreement establishes closed employment contracts restricting labor mobility by linking the worker with a single employer throughout the entire season (Valenzuela 2011). Worker transfers to other farms are highly complicated, even in cases where the worker has reported inconsistencies in their contract or mistreatment. When a worker decides to report labor exploitation, harassment, or abuse, there is always the constant threat of immediate deportation (Binford 2013). The employer’s obligations require them to provide adequate housing near the farm or within the premises, with appropriate accommodations for workers to work a minimum of 240 h within the contract period (Perry 2018).

In recent years, the SAWP has also made use of a gradual process of ethnic replacement (Bourgois 1989) and labor “surfing” (Binford 2013). An example of this is the creation of different branches of agricultural work parallel to the SAWP that have included Guatemalan and Salvadoran temporary workers and industries such as domestic work and care that have benefited from cheap Filipino labor (Gardiner Barber 2008). In this regard, Roberto, a 43-year-old Mexican worker with 15 years of experience in the SAWP, explains:

Where I was, the farm stopped asking for Mexicans. Before, there were like a thousand or maybe eight hundred. What happened is that Guatemalan labor is cheaper because they [Guatemalans] have to pay for everything. They have to pay for their transportation, paperwork, and everything, and we don’t. The boss pays the transportation for us [Mexicans], and when we arrive at the farm, the employer takes it from our paychecks. They also pay rent, but the wage is the same as ours. So, the boss is happy because they are cheaper and everything is done with less money. He even built a house for them, and now he has about sixty guatemalas at forty dollars a week each, and they also pay him to rent.

Migrant advocacy groups and workers have also documented the poor housing conditions. For example, in our interviews with Mexican workers, we found overcrowded houses resulting in conflicts due to not having the time and space for bathing, changing, cooking properly, and eating before leaving for the workplace. For example, Roberto says:

So, there are fifty-two of us in the house. The kitchens are separate; there are eight workers in each kitchen; we share the bathrooms. Upstairs, on the third floor, there are two bathrooms, there are three toilets, and many urinals, but just about twelve showers for fifty-two [people].

Employers prefer male workers who are married with children and wives who reside in their country of origin. The employers hope that family separation will minimize the chances for the worker to change their immigration status. However, as Binford (2013) explains, the SAWP uses those desired characteristics to tighten
exploitation and racially segment farm labor, usually contrasting Caribbean “cultural” values with the “moral” values of Mexicans. Additionally, in contrast to their Caribbean counterparts, Mexican laborers’ lack of English language skills often keeps them from reporting abuse. As a result, participating in this program also involves a complicated international family dynamic involving an increasing dependence on remittances and Canadian wages in the countries of origin, a related tendency for wives of Mexican SAWP workers to take on more unpaid domestic labor, and consequently, a complexification of the chains of care that support the raising of children and grandchildren. The experience of Margarita, her husband, and their daughter Antonia show these contradictions. Margarita is 43 years old and the wife of a SAWP worker who has been on the SAWP for eleven seasons. Her eldest daughter, Antonia, 26, has recently joined the program and has done half a season in Canada. Antonia is a single mother, and her mother, Margarita, takes care of her daughter while she is not in the country. Margarita speaks about family life under this type of work:

It was harder when the kids were growing up. Then, when they turned into teenagers, that was the hardest part. You know? All the shitty stuff was for me, working here, the little kids, and he wasn’t here. It is hard when your family is used to being together. The bad thing is that you get used to this new life. You always get used to new stuff, to see your people going back and forth, back and forth. You know, it’s annoying changing every time they come and go. For me, it’s the same; the only difference is that I take care of my granddaughter. She is the sole responsibility I have when my daughter is gone. That’s why I keep going with my stuff, and I try to keep everything to myself because she leaves us, and I stay here all by myself and with the kid. I knew it would be hard, and the money won’t be enough.

In contrast to Margarita’s comments about the difficulty of staying at home, Antonia talks about her SAWP experience as a kind of “vacation” from housework and childcare in Mexico:

The women working with me said: ‘we’re here on vacation.’ I had to work the night shift; I started at 6 pm and finished at 5 am. Because we lived one hour away from the farm, we would get home at 6 am, and we sometimes slept all day. Sometimes you get something to eat at work; you have a break, and you adapt to the overnight work. When you get home, the only thing you want is to sleep. We used to get up at 1 pm or 2 pm, we would get something to eat, cook, shower, and then after that, we would leave at 4 pm. So, it’s like you only get home, eat, sleep, get up, shower, and get to work again. It’s like, I get it; I’ve told my dad: “you men get here, and don’t worry about anything, not like what happens to us, women. You go to bed, eat, work and repeat.”

Although employers favor men for farm labor positions, the hiring of Mexican and Caribbean women has increased. Preibisch and Hermoso Santamaría (2006), and Barndt (2002) have documented these changes, and cases like Antonia’s reflect employers’ changing hiring practices. The desired profile is a single mother with
children under ten or childless women who have a partner in Mexico. The Canadian migration system interprets such a profile as limiting the likelihood of permanent residence, family migration, or applying for citizenship. Among our interviews, we find women’s experiences that coincide with the hiring of single mothers and couples who have stayed in Mexico. For example, Antonia says:

> When I tried to enter the program the first time, they told us that no single mother would be accepted. So, we attended a meeting in a room, and then a man told us: ‘I’ll say it only once, if you are a single mother, forget it…you will not be accepted in this program, leave the program now.’ He just told us that married women would be the only ones hired.

The second experience corresponds to Hernán, 42 years old, the husband of a female worker employed in the SAWP. He tells us:

> She told me that most female workers were single mothers when she got to that place. The application call said that no married woman would be accepted, but that year she tried anyway even though her profile didn’t fit, but they accepted her just like that. She says it was a little weird since most women were single mothers, divorced, or widowed. They discriminated against those who had a partner; they were told they didn’t have the right to be there. Mexican women are told: ‘you have a husband; you shouldn’t be here.’ Just imagine being at home in a safe place, protected, with people you love, and then going to this other place where everyone is aggressive; she was finger-pointed a lot, and they made her feel terrible.

As we see, care chains have become more complex under the program. Also, the share of unpaid domestic labor for women—and to a lesser extent for men who assume this role in contingency situations, like Hernán—who stay in Mexico increases with these changing family dynamics. Hernán, for example, discussed the implications his wife’s labor migration had on his gender role, his family, and the couple’s dynamics:

> Taking all the responsibilities was really hard, honestly. I told my wife that we weren’t closed-minded. I wanted to be responsible and to be able to take the role. Now I know what women do, the way it is [laughs]. It isn’t very easy. It would be like some sort of single mother job. I understood it that way, and I felt it, and I was able to do it. And I think life with another person is complicated. I don’t think we even pictured it. All these years that we have lived together, we’d never been far away from each other. Suddenly, we were separated. We hadn’t even discussed it; we didn’t picture ourselves like that. When we faced reality about being away from each other; we didn’t imagine what it would be like; none of us did it. We were very close to each other, and having this in our lives affected our relationship. I didn’t see it coming; we didn’t see how complicated this situation was. When you look at the problem from the outside, it’s easy; it’s like, ‘Oh, she’s gone.’ But those people have never been in something like this, to say: ‘you know? My wife or my husband is gone.’ That’s when you realize there are six or seven
months in between us. Yeah, WhatsApp and Facebook exist, and we video call all the time. But this is not the same; there are many complications, you have to be honest, and many personal issues; it’s not the same knowing that life fills those spaces, and it is tricky.

The adaptation of returning workers to Mexico complicates the already complex family dynamics established in their absence. The following interview excerpts show some problems concerning family adaptation in and outside of Mexico. Margarita emphasizes how the sets of labor conditions and migration within the SAWP “changed” her husband:

It changes them a lot! that country [Canada] changes them too much. They [the male workers] get used to be just by themselves, so it is more difficult when they come back. And we [the families] also change because there are too many conflicts. I tell my husband that most people [the couples] are only together because it’s a habit. After all, you stop loving people; many things are lost when you are far away. When they come back, the only thing they do is get angry, and anything could be an excuse for that! They say: ‘tell the children to shut up, ‘kids, go to bed!’; ‘turn off the light; when I was in Canada by this time, I was already sleeping.’ There are many problems, now each one has a room and does their stuff alone [her husband and her] this way we don’t fight. He had a schedule over there [at the Canadian farm]; he has to get along with us every hour and every second. He wanted to have breakfast on one occasion, but we were sleepy, too much trouble.

Unfortunately, the remittances and savings of the SAWP farmworkers are not enough for families to make ends meet throughout the year. In interviews, the workers we spoke with were immersed in a never-ending cycle of debt that depended on income diversification and migrant wages. Families diversify income with alternatives that vary between small businesses, such as handicrafts sold in tourist places or traditional weaving garments for tourists. Margarita, for example, says:

They go away and leave their job here. When they come back, they cannot find another job. If they had some savings but couldn’t find a job, they go again [to Canada’s SAWP]. I tell him [her husband], ‘why can’t you just tell the farm that you’ll be gone eight months and will work four?’ Many people here cannot get out of that vicious circle: they’re here but cannot work, so they go and come back without a job. You cannot even save a cent; the money he saves disappears in four months. Why? Because they don’t work. We started a small business, but we won’t have anything again, because when he has to leave again, I’ll be by myself again.

The complex international family dynamics that we showed above are evidence that the conditions Mexican laborers faced on the SAWP affected the workers and their families. The hiring process, the dependency upon migrant wages, the increasingly complex care chains that rearrange every year, and the adaptation process after the season ends (including jobless periods for workers) impact in a multifactorial
way every member of the worker’s family. This situation forces us to focus on the
program’s consequences on workers and their families in Mexico and question its
origins.

Proletarianization of the Mexican countryside: creating disposable labor

In addition to these complex family conditions, employers favor hiring Mexicans
and Caribbeans with experience in agricultural work, which often results in a sim-
plistic reduction of the worker’s status as a “peasant” in his country of origin. Fur-
thermore, employers favor hiring male workers, men who own small family plots
with a low level of productivity or who have been employed in previous seasons on
the same farm and can now show that they want to do “peasant” work. We analyze
the process of peasant proletarianization in Mexico from a historical point of view
to argue that the selection of “peasants” for agricultural work in Canada is directly
related to this process.

To understand Mexican peasantry proletarianization and its inclusion in programs
like the SAWP, we delve into peasantry as a historically grounded concept that
shows broader global processes. Within the history of social formations, peasants
have played a role as direct producers within various modes of production embed-
ded in the social world in diverse ways (Roseberry 1973, Roseberry, 1983; Smith
2011). To understand the historical formation of the Mexican peasantry, we exam-
ine its characteristics through a historical and relational approach that reconstructs a
structural totality. We argue that observing the peasantry from an ahistorical linear
progression leaves no room to construct broader analytical relationships (Roseberry
1983). Firstly, we frame our argument with the analysis of Stavenhagen (1966), Paré
(1985, 1988, 1991), and Warman (1976).

Stavenhagen (1966) and Paré (1985) analyze the Mexican peasantry as a sector
gradually marginalized since the 1940s. This marginalization is due to public poli-
cies that have increased peasant material crises through their growing reliance on
state subsidies, thus exacerbating the inequality of agricultural production and land
ownership (Paré 1985: 88; Stavenhagen 1966). Warman (1976) analyzes the politi-
cal and material connections of the Mexican peasantry in the mid-twentieth century
with the state via unions, peasant organizations, credits, and support programs and
the structural consequences of this relationship. We found both historical character-
istics in the SAWP workers and their families interviewed.

Agricultural activity in Mexico has been significantly impacted by several factors
shaping its current forms, such as land ownership and peasant struggles of the mid-
twentieth century (Paré 1991) and the institutionalization of the welfare social sys-
tem (Warman 1976); and internal colonialism dynamics (Stavenhagen 1966). From
the 1940s to the 1980s, Mexico saw major rural dispossession and a low familial
agricultural production that directed the agricultural semi-proletariat towards wage
labor (Stavenhagen 1966; Paré 1985, Hernández 2019). This proletarianization,
marked by inequality and poverty, had formed rural regions that were engulfed in
ecological and economic crises. Peasants were, thus, led to diversify income both in urban centers and in waged activities in their places of origin (Stavenhagen 1966; Paré 1985). Migration, in this sense, responded to several situations ranging from dispossession to low agricultural productivity and pushed day laborers to seek employment requiring skills like their agrarian work (Macip 2005: 177). The intensification of this migration is a direct consequence of decades of post-revolutionary social recomposition and labor leveling, where industrial jobs proliferated (Hernández 2018).

During the 1970s and until the 1990s, indigenous groups in Mexico supplied temporary labor reserves for the national labor market while also turning to the USA in large numbers as part of a needed but unwanted illegal migration. Furthermore, as Macip (2005: 195) explains, current Mexican migrations fetishize workers’ ethnic identification and utilize it for production. This process describes how an international migrant proletariat sustained by networks of production and based on previous systems of exploitation (Hernández 2019; Fitting 2004) becomes part of agribusiness in the USA and Canada. In the case of the SAWP, uneven capitalist development produces a disposable and interchangeable labor force, both with new generations of workers and with other types of precarious populations in organized projects to capture surplus populations (Smith 2011). With the state as the regulatory entity, this selectivity generates specific differentiation criteria according to the need for capital; in this case, temporary Mexican agricultural workers are proletarianized and precarious in their places of origin.

This process of proletarianization and increased precarity has impacted many of the regions that the SAWP targets to extract a flexible workforce, such as Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Zacatecas, and the State of Mexico (Vanegas 2018). In those places, various local crises in rural areas point to diverse factors such as the land and water dispossession connected with macrostructural processes, such as the implementation of NAFTA. In addition, the demand for the labor associated with the development of horticultural agro-industrial zones, a system of widespread sharecropping, dispossession, and chiefdom (Fitting 2004; Macip 2005), has led to planned, forced, indefinite, temporary, internal, and international family migrations that often become generational. In summary, a variety of different structural factors and historical processes of the proletarianization of the Mexican countryside explain why Mexican peasants travel to Canada year after year to join the SAWP. The precarity of this peasantry and its disposability are the product of incorporating Mexican rurality into internal and international migration as an option for survival.

Miriam's experience, 50 years old, with her husband as a SAWP worker for more than 18 years, condenses the historical characteristics of the Mexican proletariat and its incorporation into global labor markets:

My husband tells me that if it were not like that [that he migrated], they would never have given education to their daughters. Before my husband went away, he spent time in the fields, growing corn and beans on our land. He also worked as a day laborer for people with more land than us. He wanted to go to
Canada before, but he wasn’t accepted because he studied in high school. They said, “no, those studying cannot be accepted.” What they wanted was *Campesinos*, plain and simple. And I guess *Campesinos* don’t go to school. So, it has been 18 years going back and forth every year. Right now, he’ll be coming in November and leaves in April. I’d like to go over there, but my husband doesn’t like the idea; he tells me: ‘No, you won’t, you’ll suffer a lot here.’ It’s also hard to be without him. My daughters feel better when he’s around, and they say that I shouldn’t let him go; they say: ‘don’t let him go, just imagine what will happen if he continues like this.’ One of my daughters has just been accepted into university, and it’s four years, and we need money for that. Every time he leaves, he says: ‘Now that I think about it, it’s too far away; I wish I didn’t have to go.’ The money he sends is money I spend. I save some for the food, for other things like school, our animals’ food, or any other bills to pay. Right now, I’m using some of that savings; I’ve just bought this [she points out a bag with coats inside] to sell, so we get enough money because sometimes it’s not enough with what he sends.

By introducing the concept of proletarianization into the discussions on the SAWP, we recognize the structural origins of the labor force incorporated into the North American agricultural sector. We approach the workers and their families as a proletariat with a history of dispossession and precariousness (Millar 2017, Carbonella and Kasmir 2014) to open the analysis of hegemonic processes of labor selection under capitalism (Smith 2011). Moreover, paying attention to the consequences of the SAWP in the worker’s family life enables a complex understanding of the freedom of workers to sell their labor power and the obligation to depend on wages extracted in deplorable conditions. Finally, this line of analysis also helps explain how historical stereotypes of different national and ethnic groups shape workforce selection, which has led to a division of workers on Canadian farms. A vision of “good workers” or ideal migrants (Gardiner Barber 2008; Binford 2013) is predominant when training the workforce in specific sectors.

**Abolition and reform**

Many scholars have explored the historical conditions of the SAWP, such as the use of the exploitable Caribbean and Mexican populations, as a platform for discussing the impacts of temporary immigration status, better labor rights, and whether the continuity of the SAWP and other temporary worker programs is still desirable in economic or ethical terms. However, as Binford (2019) points out, most SAWP literature focuses on specific situations instead of analyzing the economic and historical structure on which the program relies, missing the opportunity to delve into the conditions that organized these programs. For example, most temporary worker programs, such as the SAWP, find temporary migration attractive because it allows greater flexibility in the labor market and reduces immigrants’ apparent threat to native workers (Basok, 2004). Similarly, temporary and regulated migration enables
the intense production of commodities without bearing the social consequences of labor exploitation by externalizing maintenance costs (Burawoy 1976).

While Ruhs and Martin (2008) examine whether placing the responsibility on the host countries in regulating low and high skilled immigration will improve their working conditions, Silverman and Hari (2016), Weiler et al. (2017), and Bridi (2013) argue that granting labor rights to foreign workers once they are on Canadian land prevents abuses and reduces exploitation and protects workers once they leave agricultural work. One of the most critical points of potential reform is the formation of unions to allow for collective bargaining on labor rights beyond the program’s provincial restrictions. However, as Vosko (2019) has described, union organization within the SAWP is hugely complicated and is permanently under attack through different strategies ranging from workers’ blacklisting, deportation threats, and constant attrition. Also, canceling closed contracts can increase labor mobility within the program, forcing employers to restrict control over workers. By allowing workers the right to cancel contracts, workers would attain more mobility, thus loosening employers’ power over them. However, without resolving the most difficult situations of the program, the workers will face the same problems that constrain them to farm work exploitation.

Although these are essential goals, it is essential to emphasize that states and agribusiness companies have explicitly designed the SAWP to eradicate workers’ negotiation power. As a result, states and private agencies have monopolized agreements to achieve a kind of labor force extraction without the worker’s voice present. In other words, the worker exists insofar as his workforce is present, reducing the worker to its expected labor power. At the same time, the program’s long history in places like Mexico has resulted in a deep dependency on migrant wages, as the workers interviewed have shown. In this regard, Binford (2019), Vogel (2007), Bacon (2013), and Vonk and Holmes (2019) emphasize that the problem to understand is not the dependency on remittances but the long history of rural disarticulation and internal migration that pushed peasants to “choose” being part of programs like the SAWP, the Bracero, or the H2-A.

We approach this debate by drawing on Rosa Luxemburg’s “Social Reform or Revolution” (2014 [1899]) to frame the contradictions between these positions. In this essay, Luxemburg constructs a critical question that can be used to examine the SAWP: does gradually reducing the exploitation inherent in capitalism lead to a workers’ conquest of political and legal power, or does it lead to tacit acceptance of the impossibility of obtaining it? In other words, attenuating the internal contradictions of capital — in this case, expressed by the “defective” functioning of the program — appeases crises, benefits the middle class by soothing the most utterly exploitative elements of the labor structure, and expands capitalists’ profits by diverting attention from the total elimination of surplus value extraction from workers. We share Luxemburg’s (2014 [1898, 145] disenchantment regarding palliatives, in the form of reforms, as the only method to resolve conflicts in capitalism by regulating the economic system and controlling the labor market. Hence, by emphasizing that those palliatives
stem from an idealistic and utopic desire to mend the system’s wounds, seeking immediate results to historical structural problems, and waiting for the necessary conditions to subvert them, Luxemburg points towards its contradictions.

Reformism aims to construct an objectively harmonious and universal narrative binding together capitalist development and the modern model of democracy to enhance a variety of rights while leaving the program’s guiding principle intact. Simultaneously, it seeks the attenuation of class antagonisms as slow historical progress involving a diminution of different kinds of abuse. SAWP’s abolition, on the contrary, compels us to see exploitation as inherent and fundamental to the program and the only escape is to eliminate any form of exploitation. In this sense, the debate falls between two divergent positions. The conciliatory reform position recognizes what can be modified within the program to maintain the program while creating the friendliest possible terms for both the worker and the employer. In contrast, those in favor of abolition call for the program’s total elimination, seeing that as the only possible solution for ending all exploitation of migrant labor in programs such as the SAWP. We argue that both positions will benefit from a historical analysis of the formation of a highly exploitable proletarian class and the regional dependency of Mexico on the USA and Canada.

Conclusion

As of April 2021, Canada has officially recorded the deaths related to COVID-19 complications of three Mexican SAWP workers. Additional information indicates that more than 2,800 temporary workers (Caribbean and Mexican) in Ontario, another 2,000 more in Quebec, and more than 1,000 in British Columbia have contracted the virus while working, complying with mandatory isolation, or traveling to the farms. Between June and July 2020, the Canadian and international media reported how the pandemic exposed the poor treatment that temporary workers received in Canada: workers denied care after contracting COVID-19; restrictions on their health insurance coverage; deportations; unjustified dismissals. In early June 2020, Mexican media reported that agricultural worker travel to

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10 Although these are the official numbers, migrant advocacy groups and several international NGOs have questioned their veracity. For example, justice for Migrant Workers (J4MW) has recorded between 20,000 and 21,000 infections of workers in Ontario alone, emphasizing that the number of migrant deaths from COVID-19 is still unknown (J4MW 2021). In addition, some Mexican media, such as El Universal (https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/al-menos-6-trabajadores-agricolas-han-muerto-por-covid), report that between three and six deaths of SAWP Mexican workers during the 2020 season. However, difficulty accessing COVID-19 tests and the fact that many of the workers were infected while returning from Canada make it difficult to determine how many workers have died from SARS-COV2 in the last year.

11 Third migrant farmworker dies as Canada reaches a deal with Mexico: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-third-migrant-farm-worker-dies-as-canada-reaches-deal-with-mexico/ [Retrieved March 12, 2021].

12 Third migrant farmworker dies as Canada reaches a deal with Mexico: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-third-migrant-farm-worker-dies-as-canada-reaches-deal-with-mexico/ [Retrieved March 12, 2021].
Canada was suspended due to the rise in COVID infections.\textsuperscript{13} This suspension represented a temporary production diminution on Canadian farms and a profound destabilization of the income of Mexicans who depend on the SAWP. Given the health emergency, the Canadian and Mexican governments reformulated the sanitary measures to reactivate the regular migration of farm laborers. By the end of June, migration was reactivated, and new health measures were implemented.\textsuperscript{14} While the contagion numbers increased, there were no more official records of deceased workers in Canada or Mexico.

In conclusion, we want to highlight the conceptual intersection between disposability, precarity, and proletarianization shown in this article through the historical and ethnographic exploration of the Mexican countryside and the Mexican peasantry. As we ethnographically described, SAWP migrant workers are directed and contractually pressured to tolerate their role in the program. At the same time, those conditions are extended as permanent scenarios that influence their family lives even when not working on the SAWP. Consequently, working on the program translates as a complex situation that frequently undermines every aspect of life in Canada or their home countries (Weiler et al. 2017; Binford 2013). Moreover, as we showed, the program has done little to alleviate the structural poverty of Mexican workers and their families, who often remain jobless in Mexico while remaining utterly dependent on their “essential” role in the Canadian food system (Otero 2019; Vonk and Holmes 2019). Most workers regularly hired on the SAWP have cut ties with the labor market of their home country, making them depend solely on the program. Furthermore, the generational replacement aimed to attract a much healthier workforce has left workers with years of experience in the program unprotected, perpetuating the idea of an “unfree worker” (Smith 2015; Vonk 2019), vulnerable (Sider 2006), and highly precarious (Millar 2017) unable to circulate in the labor market inside and outside Canada.

This limitation of labor mobility emerges as constrained freedom obtained through state-regulated exploitation that directs its productive population to profitable labor markets. The practical struggle for reforms, for improving the conditions of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, thus may appear to be a reasonable means to overcome the most visible horrors of the program. In the case of the SAWP, the requests for an open work permit that Mexicans and Caribbeans can use to circulate in the Canadian agribusiness labor market, for permanent residence upon arrival in the country, and less bureaucratized ways to obtain citizenship seem to be palliative in a structure that needs these

\textsuperscript{13} Mexico temporarily suspends sending agricultural workers to Canada after deaths from Covid-19. https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/internacionales/Mexico-suspende-temporalmente-envio-de-trabajadores-agricolas-a-Canada-tras-muertes-por-Covid-19-20200616-0036.html [Retrieved March 2, 2021].

\textsuperscript{14} The deaths of Mexican farmworkers Juan López Chaparro, Bonifacio Eugenio Romero, and Rogelio Muñoz Santos during the 2020 season prompted the publication of a report by the Deputy Chief Coroner of Ontario, outlining 35 recommendations to make conditions safer for farmworkers and temporary laborers. https://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/sites/default/files/content/mcss/docs/Report%20-%20DCC%20Review%20of%20COVID-19%20Related%20Deaths%20of%20TFAWs%20in%202020.pdf [Retrieved June 20, 2021]. This report was due to pressure from advocacy groups in Ontario and academic groups such as the Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group.
exploitable workers for its correct continuity. Although it immediately alleviates the most abusive conditions, the deep wounds that the program has left in the workers and their families in their places of origin persist. Focusing on functional failures and the possibility that they can be solved assumes the continuity of the program under its same structural statutes.

The program has adapted throughout more than 50 years of operation no matter what type of crisis it faces. The most extensive “model program” of temporary and regulated migration in history only seems contradictory when its most entrenched working conditions exceed the tolerable levels of common sense. The visible horrors of the program stand out in a multiplicity of daily and persistent intransigence to which workers are subjected on Canadian soil and in their countries of origin. The economic dependence of the workers and their families on the program has limited livelihood strategies in their countries of origin, creating circles of debt that widen with the inclusion of new generations of workers. Much more attention has to be directed to how Caribbean, Mexican, and Canadian states regulate the hiring and mobilization of workers year after year.

In the same way, it is necessary to dismantle the master narrative of Canada as a benevolent, tolerant, and altruistic country where migrants can stake their hopes on the search for a better future (Smith, 2015). The SAWP demonstrates that Canada has succeeded in securing a regular, non-free, and easily super-exploitable source of labor based on the unequal sociohistorical development of the Caribbean and Mexico under a scheme that adapts and functions through colonial ties (Smith, 2015, 278, Burawoy 1976), dispossession, the systematic precariousness of the global peasantry, and the recruitment and redirection of surplus populations such as temporary agricultural workers. Precariousness is the norm within this type of program, sustaining extensive disposability processes (Carbonella and Kashmir 2014) with various consequences in the countries where it is applied. At the same time, it is important to hold both migrant-sending countries and host countries politically, legally, and economically responsible. Worker demand from Mexico and the Caribbean responds to unequal state and bureaucratic functioning situations in Canada. Likewise, the SAWP tripartite system—states, employer, and worker—has placed most of the bargaining power with the employer and has lowered the level of worker political participation to almost eliminate any possibility of improving the system itself (Hennebry 2008; Silverman and Hari 2016). Under these conditions, the decision between reform and elimination does not seem complicated.

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