



From Perote to Tar Heel

Posted on: 09/02/2012 by [David Bacon](#)

This post is also available in: [Spanish](#)

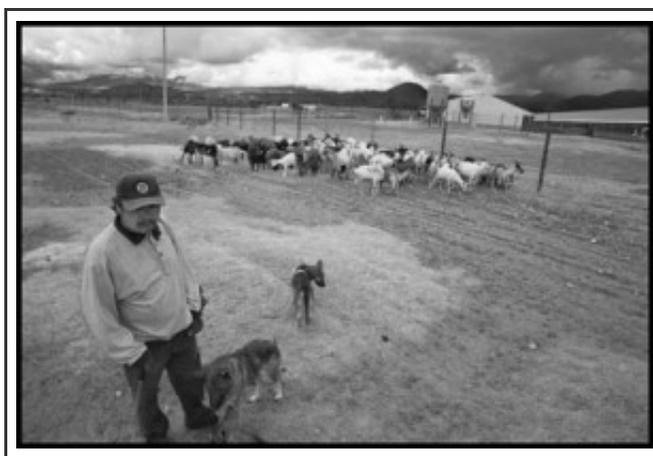


34 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

How Smithfield Foods Fought the People of Veracruz, in Mexico and North Carolina

By **David Bacon**

On some warm nights, Fausto Limon's children wake up and vomit from the smell. He puts his wife, two sons and daughter into his beat-up pickup, and they drive away from his farm until they can breathe the air without getting sick. Then he parks, and they sleep in the truck for the rest of the night.



Jose Neri, A Farmer in Perote Valley

Until a few months ago, his mother went with them. Then her kidneys failed and she went to the hospital, where she died. Limon and his family have all had kidney ailments for three years. He says they kept taking medicine until finally a doctor told them to stop drinking water from the farm's well. Three months ago they began hauling in bottled water. Once they stopped drinking from the well, the infections stopped too.

Less than half a mile from his house is one of the many pig farms built by Granjas Carroll de Mexico (GCM) in the Perote Valley, a high, arid, volcano-rimmed basin straddling the Mexican states of Veracruz and Puebla. "Before the pig farms came, they said they would bring jobs," Limon remembers. "But then we found out the reality. Yes, there were jobs, but they also brought a lot of contamination."

David Torres, a Perote native who spent eight years in the operation's maternity section, estimates that GCM has 80 complexes, each with as many as 20,000 hogs. The sheds look clean and modern. "When I went to work there, I could see the company was completely mechanized," Torres says.

But in back of each complex is a large oxidation pond for the hogs' urine and excrement. On a recent drive through the valley, only one of several dozen was covered. "Granjas Carroll doesn't use concrete or membranes under their ponds," Torres charges, "so the water table is getting contaminated. People here get their water from wells, which are surrounded by pig farms and oxidation ponds."

In a response to an article published in August in “Imagen de Veracruz,” GCM public relations director Tito Tablada declared: “Granjas Carroll does not pollute.” And Amy Richards, Director of Reputation Management for Charleston/Orwig, responding to an inquiry on behalf of Smithfield Foods, says, “Our environmental treatment systems in Mexico strictly comply with local and federal regulations that are different than most other countries that encourage use of treated animal waste, at agronomic rates, as a key element of a nutrient management plan. Mexico encourages, and requires, anaerobic digesters and evaporation ponds.

However Ruben Lopez, a land commissioner in Chichicuautila, a valley town surrounded by hog farms, also says there is no membrane beneath the pools.

Granjas Carroll de Mexico is owned in large part by Carroll’s Farms, a division of Virginia-based Smithfield Foods, one of the world’s largest meatpackers. Company spokespeople point to the 1,200 jobs it created in a valley where employment is scarce. But Limon counters that a third of the young people leave: “They don’t see a future, and every year it’s harder to live here.” Carolina Ramirez, who heads the women’s’ department of the Veracruz Human Rights Commission, says no official agency counts them, “but I’m sure many people have left.”

Migrants leaving the valley are joining a huge wave of migration from Veracruz that dates from the beginning of the 1990s — the start of the NAFTA era. The North American Free Trade Agreement took effect on January 1, 1994, the year the pig farms arrived, and two years after Smithfield built the world’s largest hog slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, North Carolina. Both operations have had an enormous impact on the lives of the people of Veracruz.

For over two decades, Smithfield has used NAFTA and the forces it unleashed to become one of the world’s largest growers, packers and exporters of hogs and pork. But the conditions created in Veracruz to help it make high profits, as one of Mexico’s largest pig producers, also plunged thousands of Veracruz residents into poverty.

“In my town, Las Choapas, after I killed a pig, I would cut it up to sell the meat,” recalls Roberto Ortega. “Whatever I could do to make money I did. But I could never make enough for us to survive.” Eventually, he left for the United States, where he again slaughtered pigs for a living. This time, though, he did it as a worker in Smithfield’s Tar Heel plant.

North Carolina became the number-one U.S. destination for Veracruz’ displaced farmers. Many got jobs in the Tar Heel slaughterhouse, helping Smithfield’s bottom line by working for low wages on its U.S. meatpacking lines. Some, like Ortega, helped lead the 16-year fight that finally brought in the union there. They paid a high price. Asserting their rights also made them the targets of harsh immigration enforcement and a growing wave of hostility towards Mexicans in the U.S. south.

The experience of Veracruz migrants, and farmers impacted by Perote pig farms, show the close connection between U.S. investment and trade deals in Mexico, and the displacement and migration of its people. Protecting Mexico’s environment, and the rights of migrants displaced by environmental and economic causes, requires making the connection between trade reform, environmental protection and immigrant and labor rights.

Smithfield Goes to Mexico



In 1994, Carroll’s Farms, a giant hog-raising corporation, created a partnership (Granjas Carroll de Mexico) with a Mexican agribusiness company, Agroindustrias Unidas de México S.A. de C.V. Together they set up the huge pig farm in Perote. Carroll’s Farms had a joint partnership for many years with Smithfield Foods, the world’s largest pork producer, including a seat on the Smithfield board of directors. In 1999 Smithfield, which now controls 27% of all U.S. pork production, finally bought out Carroll’s Farms entirely.

In 2004 the expansion of the swine sheds through the previous decade provoked a social movement that swept the Perote Valley. Pueblos Unidos (United Towns — a coalition of local farmers) began in Xaltepec, where local residents started collecting signatures on a petition in protest. Veronica Hernandez was a teacher at the secondary school in La Gloria, the Perote Valley town where she was born. She was already concerned about her students, who told her coming to school on the bus was like riding in a toilet. “Some of them fainted or got headaches,” she charges. “In the morning, when it was time to eat, many couldn’t because they still felt sick.”

Hernandez not only signed the petition, she began to write leaflets urging Valley residents to get involved. “We said they weren’t treating the pig excrement in a sanitary way,” she recalls, “that they would leave dead pigs in the open air, which would attract flies. The flies were a potentially dangerous source of illnesses.”

The lack of response from government officials increased the anger among the farmers. On April 26, 2005, hundreds of them blocked the main highway from Xalapa, Veracruz’ capital, to Puebla. People from sixteen towns confronted the police, and only lifted the blockade when officials said they’d talk with Granjas Carroll management.

That had no effect. In November a construction crew in Chichicautla, about to build another shed and oxidation pond, was met by a thousand angry ranchers. Police rescued the construction crew, but when they returned to the site, the people had disappeared with all the construction materials. Finally, at a meeting in 2007 between the presidents of many valley towns and company officials, GCM’s Tito Tablada signed an agreement blocking any new expansion.

The protests clearly worried the company, however. That year Granjas Carroll filed criminal charges against Hernandez and 13 other leaders in the state courts of both Veracruz and Puebla. All were charged with “defaming” the company by accusing it of pollution.

In Veracruz, the charges were dismissed quickly, when a judge agreed the activists were exercising freedom of speech. But the 14 had to spend the next two years registering with the court in Cholula, Puebla, every two weeks, to avoid being locked up.

While those charges eventually were also dropped, they scared the farmers and the protest movement diminished. Then, in early 2009, the first confirmed case of swine flu, the AH1N1 virus, was found in an eight-year-old boy, Edgar Hernandez from La Gloria. Two infants, the grandson of Ernesto Apolinar and the son of Maria Hernandez, died of what was diagnosed as pneumonia.

Pickup trucks from the local health department began spraying pesticide in the streets to kill the omnipresent flies. Health workers with backpack sprayers went house to house. Nevertheless the virus spread to Mexico City, and then to California. By May, 2254 non-fatal U.S. cases had been reported, while in Mexico 45 people had died. Mexican schools closed and public events were cancelled.

Smithfield denied the virus came from its Veracruz hogs. Mexican officials were quick to agree. A government statement claimed, “Neither in the farm, nor in the homes, did we see sick pigs or people. Neither did we see signs of respiratory disease.” Tablada’s note to “Imagen de Veracruz” asserted that “Our company has been totally cleared of any links with the AH1N1 virus,” and that “the official position of the Secretary of Health and the World Health Organization leaves no room for doubt.”

Meatpacking companies breathed a sigh of relief at Smithfield’s exoneration. The [U.S.] National Hog Farmer website reported that fear of the virus led to losses of \$8.4 million per day for the first two weeks of the global scare.

In the valley, though, “no one believed it,” Limon recalls. “We all knew that such a brutal concentration of animals could result in illnesses. But we had to go on living here.” Laura Carlsen, journalist and director of the Mexico City-based Americas Program, warned “the centrality of foreign investment in the Mexican economy creates a climate

where transnational corporations with large investments can exercise coercive power over government agencies on all levels.”

In August, GCM representatives convinced the municipal president of Guadalupe Victoria, the county next to Perote, to grant a permit for building new hog farms. According to Abigail Marin, lawyer for Pueblos Unidos, the director general for the state of Puebla, Laura Escobar, warned farmers not to get in the way. Nevertheless, representatives of eighteen town councils signed a declaration denouncing the new expansion plans. Referring to the 2007 agreement, they declared that “state and municipal authorities are trying to ignore and supplant the majority will of our communities ... including even the threat to use public force (the granaderos) so that the company can continue to expand, against our will,”

“It doesn’t do any good to threaten to kill us,” said one farmer. “We’re already dying anyway. We’re not going to let them build any more sheds. What we really want is for GCM to leave the valley.”

NAFTA Boosts the Export of Pork and Pollution



By 2008 the Perote operation was sending close to a million pigs to slaughter every year – 85% to Mexico City and the rest to surrounding Mexican states. By locating in the mountains above the port of Veracruz, Mexico’s largest port, trains could bring in imported corn for feed – two-thirds of the cost of raising hogs. U.S. pork producers benefit from below-cost soybeans and corn, the key components of feed, which are subsidized in Congress’ farm bills. “After NAFTA,” says, Timothy Wise, of the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University “corn was priced 19% below the cost of production.” Lower feed costs, unavailable to Mexican producers, gave GCM’s hogs a competitive advantage.

But Smithfield didn’t just import feed — it imported meat as well.

According to Alejandro Ramírez, general director of the Confederation of Mexican Pork Producers, Mexico imported 30,000 tons of pork in 1995, the year NAFTA took effect. By 2010 pork imports, almost all from the U.S., had grown over 25 times, to 811, 000 tons. As a result, pork prices received by Mexican producers dropped 56%. U.S. pork exports are dominated by the largest companies. Wise estimates that Smithfield’s share is significantly greater than its 27% share of U.S. production.

Imports had a dramatic effect on Mexican jobs. “We lost 4,000 pig farms,” Alejandro Ramírez estimates. “On Mexican farms, each 100 animals produce 5 jobs, so we lost 20,000 farm jobs directly from imports. Counting the 5 indirect jobs dependent on each direct job, we lost over 120,000 jobs in total. This produces migration to the U.S. or to Mexican cities — a big problem for our country.”

Corn imports also rose, from 2,014,000 to 10,330,000 tons from 1992 to 2008. Once Mexican meat and corn producers were driven from the market by imports, the Mexican economy was left vulnerable to price changes dictated by U.S. agribusiness or U.S. policy. “When the U.S. modified its corn policy to encourage ethanol production,” he charges, “corn prices jumped 100% in one year.”

“Small Mexican farmers got hit with a double whammy,” Wise explains. “On the one hand, competitors were importing pork. On the other, they were producing cheaper hogs.” Smithfield was both producer and importer. Wise estimates this one company supplies 25% of all the pork sold in Mexico.

GCM enjoyed another advantage. The Mexican News online business journal explains that “production cost is very low because of the high ratio of pigs to workers ... The preparation of food and feeding of the pigs is completely automated, along with temperature control and the elimination of excrement.”

Workers aren't employed directly by Granjas Carroll, however, according to David Torres, "Since we work for a contractor, we're not entitled to profit-sharing or company benefits," he says. "Granjas Carroll made millions of dollars in profits, but never distributed a part of them to the workers [required under Mexico's Federal Labor Law.]" Torres was paid 1250 pesos (\$110US) every 15 days, and says the company picked him up at 6 every morning, and returned him home at 5:30 each night, often six days a week.

In Perote, the company was investing in an area where it wouldn't face the environmental cleanup costs it was forced to pay in the U.S. In 1997 Federal Judge Rebecca Smith imposed the largest federal pollution fine to that date — \$12.6 million — on Smithfield for dumping pig excrement into the Pagan River, running into Chesapeake Bay. Smithfield then had to upgrade the local water treatment facilities to handle the effluent from two plants.

That year the state of North Carolina went further, passing a moratorium on the creation of any new open-air hog waste lagoons, unless they were built with new, expensive waste-disposal technology. Smithfield had to agree to a production cap at its Tar Heel plant. Environmental groups advocated even stricter limits.

In 1998 the Environmental Protection Agency also proposed rules for animal-waste runoff. And in 2000, then-state Attorney General Mike Easley forced Smithfield to fund research by N.C. State University to develop treatment methods for hog waste more effective than open lagoons. These requirements were criticized by Earl Bell, president of the North Carolina Pork Council, who claimed that "more regulations drive up the cost of production ... [and] will hurt America's ability to export pork."

North Carolina is hardly a regulation-friendly state, but the outcry from communities enduring the stench and flies from the lagoons was so great that business lobbies retreated. In 2007, when Mike Easley (by then governor) signed SB 1465, a permanent ban on new lagoons, the Council supported it.

In Perote, Smithfield didn't have to worry about U.S. regulations. NAFTA had a side agreement, supposedly to raise Mexican environmental standards and increase their enforcement. No complaint was ever filed or action taken about hog farms, however. "The company can do here what it can't do at home," Carolina Ramirez concluded bitterly.

Veracruz Migrants Come to the U.S.

By the time of the swine flu epidemic, migration from Veracruz to the U.S. already had a two-decade history. In 2010, 53 million Mexicans were living in poverty, according to the Monterrey Institute of Technology—half the country's population. About 20% live in extreme poverty, almost all in rural areas.

Pork and corn imports were just part of a series of economic changes brought about by NAFTA, and neoliberal reforms to the Mexican economy, such as ending land reform, that were made in the same period that the treaty took effect. Companies like Smithfield benefited, but poverty increased also, especially in the countryside.



The World Bank, in a 2005 study made for the Mexican government, found that the extreme rural poverty rate of 35% in 1992-4, prior to NAFTA, jumped to 55% in 1996-8, after NAFTA took effect — the period when Ortega left Mexico. This could be explained, the report said, "mainly by the 1995 economic crisis, the sluggish performance of agriculture, stagnant rural wages, and falling real agricultural prices."

The growth of poverty, in turn, fueled migration. In 1990 4.5 million Mexican-born people lived in the U.S. A decade later, that population more than doubled to 9.75 million, and in 2008 it peaked at 12.67 million. About 11% of all Mexicans now live in the U.S. About 5.7 million were able to get some kind of visa, but another 7 million couldn't, and came nevertheless.

As an agricultural state, Veracruz suffered from Mexico's abandonment of two important policies. First, neoliberal reforms did away with Tabamex, a national marketing program for small tobacco farmers. A similar program for coffee growers ended just as world coffee prices plunged to record lows. Second, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the country's most corrupt president, pushed through changes in Article 27 of the Constitution in the late 1980s, dismantling land reform and allowing the sale of ejidos, or common lands, as private property.

Waves of tobacco and coffee farmers sold their land because they could no longer make a living on it. Many became migrants. Granjas Carroll, however, could not only buy land for its swine sheds, but also found a ready supply of displaced rural labor to staff them.

Simultaneous changes in the U.S. also accelerated migration. In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which set up the H2-A visa program. U.S. agricultural employers could then bring in workers from Mexico and other countries, giving them temporary visas tied to employment contracts. Growers in North Carolina became large users of the program, especially through the North Carolina Growers Association. Displaced tobacco farmers from Veracruz became tobacco workers in the Carolinas.

"Many Veracruzanos came because we were offered work in the tobacco fields, where we had experience," remembers Miguel Huerta. "Then people who'd been contracted just stayed, because they didn't have anything in Mexico to go back to. After the tobacco harvest, workers spread out to other industries."

As the pool of Veracruzanos grew in North Carolina, it attracted migrants like David Ceja. He was eighteen, living on a ranch outside Martinez de la Torre, two hours from the Perote Valley.

As a small child, Ceja remembers his family had ten cows, some pigs and chickens. Even then, he still had to work and they sometimes went hungry. "But we could give milk to people who came asking for it. There were people even worse off than us," he recalls. "Sometimes the price of a pig was enough to buy what we needed, but then it wasn't. Farm prices were always going down. After the crisis, we couldn't pay for electricity, so we'd just use candles. Everyone was hurting almost all the time."

His family had no money to plant trees or crops, and sometimes went hungry. "I didn't really want to leave, but I felt I had to," he recalls. "I was afraid, but our need was so great."

In 1999 his parents sold four cows and two hectares of land, and came up with enough to get him to the border. There he found a coyote who took him across for \$1,200. He arrived still owing money for the passage. "I couldn't find work for three months. I was desperate," he says. He feared the consequences if he couldn't pay, and took whatever job he could find on the street until he finally reached North Carolina. There he found friends, got the identification he needed for a real job, and went to work at Smithfield's Tar Heel packinghouse. "The boys I played with as a kid are all in the U.S.," he says. "I'd see many of them working in the plant."

Guadalupe Gonzalez from Las Choapas knew where she was going – to Lumberton, the city closest to Tar Heel. She took a bus to Naco, Sonora, on the border. There she slept on the floor of a shack, eating once a day until the coyote was ready to take her group across. He led them into a ravine where sewage water ran from a sewer pipe. "We crawled in on our hands and knees, one behind the other," she recalls. "We inched forward in total darkness, in terrible, dirty-smelling water. I prayed to my saint that I would come out alive. But I had such a need to come that I wouldn't stop."

A van met her on the other side and took her to Phoenix, where she got a flight to North Carolina. “I arrived on Saturday, went to mass on Sunday, and to work on Monday,” she says. “With the first money I earned, I bought a saint and put him in the church.” Her relatives helped her get a Social Security card, and with that, a job at Smithfield.

Roberto Ortega remembers that there were hundreds of people from Veracruz in the Tar Heel plant when he worked there in the late 90s and early 2000s. They’d have community get-togethers, eat seafood and play their state’s famous jarocho music on wooden harps and guitars. “Almost the whole town [Las Choapas] is here,” he says. “Some are supervisors and mayordomos, and they bring people from the town.”

As an academic in the 1990s, Carolina Ramirez studied migration to North Carolina before taking her position at the human rights commission. Labor recruitment was a big factor, she found. “There were recruiters in many Veracruz towns,” she remembers. “There were even vans stationed in different places, and a whole system in which people were promised jobs in the packing plants. It was an open secret.”

Smithfield spokesperson Amy Richards responds, “with one exception [a management trainee program], Smithfield Foods does not travel to, nor advertise in, other countries or outside of our local communities to actively recruit employees for our various facilities around the country.”

“These companies are very powerful and can do anything. They hire legally and illegally,” Miguel Huerta charges. “They can go to Mexico and bring as many employees as they want and replace them when they want.” Poverty, though, was the real recruiter. It created, as Ceja says, the need. “We all had to leave Veracruz because of it,” he emphasizes. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t do something so hard.”

The Union Campaign in Tar Heel

The Tar Heel slaughterhouse kills and dismembers 32,000 hogs every day. Meatpacking is demanding and dangerous work. People stand very close together as animal carcasses speed by, cutting them into pieces. In their white aprons, hairnets and masks, workers wield extremely sharp knives, slicing through meat, sinews and bone in the same motion, hundreds of times each hour.



The plant’s first workers were mostly African Americans. From the moment it opened in 1992, many objected to the high line speed, and the injuries that proliferated as a result. Even in North Carolina, where union membership and wages are low, Smithfield’s wage level gave both workers and even the company problems. It was hard to attract local workers, especially with a growing reputation for job-related injuries. Once people were hired, many quickly wanted more money for such exhausting and dangerous labor.

The United Food and Commercial Workers began helping workers organize a union almost as soon as the lines started running. What followed was one of the longest and bitterest fights in modern U.S. labor history.

In 1994 and 1997 the UFCW lost two union representation elections, both later thrown because of company intimidation tactics. In 1997, the head of plant security, Danny Priest (later a Smithfield general manager), told local sheriffs he expected violence on election day. Police in riot gear then lined the walkway into the slaughterhouse, and workers had to file past them to cast their ballots. At the end of the vote count, union organizer Ray Shawn was beaten up inside the plant.

Priest and the other security guards were later deputized, and maintained a holding area in a trailer on the property, which workers called the company jail. During the campaign, one couple was “arrested” when security discovered a pair of smoldering gloves in a trashcan. “They took us to a jail the company had,” one recalled, and then taken to the county lockup. “It was to intimidate us since we were both actively organizing in the plant. They wanted to get rid of

us.”

In the mid-1990s the percentage of immigrants in the slaughterhouse began to rise. As new migrants, people from Veracruz were desperate and hungry. Most were undocumented. Keith Ludlum, one of the plant’s few white workers, fired for union activity in 1994, says, “After Smithfield ran through the workforce around here, you started seeing a lot more immigrants working in the plant. The company had to make that happen. They thought, the undocumented will work cheap, they’ll work hard, and they won’t complain.”

Carolina Ramirez describes the Veracruz immigrants as “docile at first, because they didn’t have the experience.” For employers, she explains, “these people were a safe workforce. They didn’t understand their rights or the system here. But they got the message — don’t organize. Don’t think for yourself. If you comply, your job is assured. They would work fast for fear of losing their jobs because there was no alternative.”

Nilsa Morales, a Veracruz native, slipped and fell on the greasy floor in 2004, twisting her arm and shoulder, already injured from using an electric knife all day. The company doctor forced her to return to work, a common complaint. “I kept on working in spite of the pain,” she remembered, “because I needed the money. People depend on me. But there came a moment when I just couldn’t stand the pain anymore.” She left her job, and the company cut off her insurance. “Many workers put up with the pain and keep on working. They don’t say anything because they’re afraid of being fired.”

“They pressured you so you’d work faster and produce more,” Ortega recalled. “You felt like knifing the foreman. Many wanted to throw their knives at his feet and just leave. But if you have to support your family you put up with it. ‘I am not going to leave my work,’ you say to yourself – ‘who will pay me then?’”

Eventually, people didn’t put up with it. In the early 2000s the UFCW sent in a new group of organizers, who began helping workers find tactics to slow down the lines. They set up a workers’ center in Red Springs, offering English classes after work. When Ortega was fired, he began making visits to other workers.

In 2003 the night cleaning crew refused to work, keeping the lines from starting the following morning. David Ceja helped organize another work stoppage a year later.

By 2006, Mexican workers made up about 60% of the plant’s 5,000 workers. As immigrant protests and demonstrations spread across the country in April, hundreds left the plant and marched through the streets of Wilmington. On May Day only a skeleton crew showed up for work.

That spring Smithfield enrolled in the Department of Homeland Security’s IMAGE program, in which the government identifies undocumented workers, and employers agree to fire them. The program enforces a provision of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, employer sanctions, which prohibits employers from hiring undocumented workers. Smithfield spokesperson Amy Richards says, “We do all that the law requires, and more, in assuring that our workforce is authorized to work in the U.S. In addition to complying with the Form I-9 process, all of our plants are members of E-Verify.”

In October, Smithfield announced it intended to fire over 300 workers, alleging they had bad Social Security numbers, presumably because they were undocumented. When terminations started, hundreds walked out, forcing the company to rescind them temporarily.

After a twelve-year legal battle, the company had been forced to rehire Ludlum just months before. “It was really empowering to see all those workers stand up together,” he recalls, “probably one of the best experiences of my life.” It had an effect on African American workers too. They collected 4000 signatures, asking the company for the day off on Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. When managers refused, 400 Black workers on the kill line didn’t come in. With no hogs on the hooks at the beginning of the lines, no one else could work either. The plant shut down again.

Nine days later, agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained 21 Smithfield workers for deportation, questioning hundreds more in the lunchroom. Fear was so intense that most immigrants didn't show up for work the following day. A few months later, another raid took place. Some of the detained workers were later charged with federal felonies for using bad Social Security numbers.

Meanwhile, ICE agents swept through Mexican communities, detaining people at home and in the street. Ludlum and union organizer Eduardo Peña followed the ICE agents with video cameras, but they couldn't stop the terror the raids engendered. Ludlum, Peña and other union activists believe the company cooperated in the IMAGE program and immigration enforcement because the Veracruzanos were no longer useful. "The workforce that was in the shadows was expecting rights, expecting to be part of the community," Ludlum says. "That's not what they wanted. They wanted a workforce that would be quiet and do what they were told."

Terry Slaughter, an African American union supporter, calls it "a tactic by Smithfield, a dirty low blow. The company knew who they were hiring."

Eventually the immigrant workforce shrank by half as people left. Union organizing stalled. But then, led by Slaughter, African American workers stopped the plant again by sitting all day in the middle of the kill floor. They put union stickers on their hard hats, and began collecting signatures demanding union recognition. Helped by widespread community support and impending lawsuits, the company agreed to an election barring its old bare-knuckle tactics. When the ballots were finally counted on December 11, 2008, the union won. Today Ludlum is president of UFCW Local 2208, and Slaughter is secretary-treasurer.

A Veracruzana, Carmen Izquierdo, is on the union executive board. "In the union it doesn't matter if you're undocumented, if you have papers or not," she says. "We should all be respected because we are human beings, and because of our work. All the workers here, whether or not we have papers, have rights."

Ludlum and Slaughter say line speed is slower now, and workers can rotate from one job to another, reducing injuries. They no longer fear its doctors will send them back to work if they're hurt. David Ceja felt the union gave workers a tool to change conditions. "I'm glad it came in. We worked hard to get it."

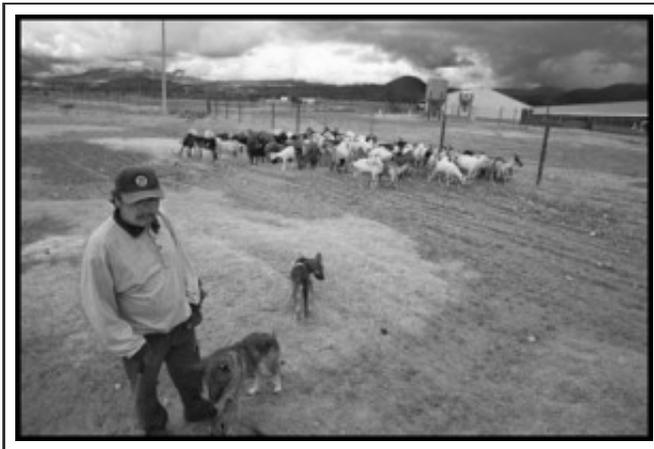
But he's not there to enjoy it, and works as a mechanic now in a local garage. His band plays weddings and quinceñeras, and his brother Marcos wants him to come back to Veracruz, where the family used the money David sent from his job at Smithfield to plant fruit trees on their ranch. Guadalupe Gonzalez left when her ID was questioned too. Two of her children have university degrees now, though, and she still supports the other two who are finishing school. But she could never go home to see them in the eleven years since she left. "We just talk on the phone. On holidays I feel real lonely," she says. Roberto Ortega and his wife Maria left North Carolina when the hostility towards immigrants got worse, and they couldn't find work.

Juvencio Rocha, head of the Network of Veracruzanos in North Carolina, says bitterly that "after we contributed to the economy, they didn't want us here anymore. They even took our drivers' licenses away."

Demands for Change, on Both Sides of the Border

Smithfield didn't invent the system of displacement and migration. It took advantage of U.S. trade and immigration policies. And at crucial moments in each country, it found cooperative governments willing to bend those laws and policies for its benefit.

Farmers in Perote Valley were able to stop expanding swine sheds for a while, and migrant Veracruzanos helped organize a union in Tar Heel. But there was no balance of power in this system. Today those farmers and migrants continue to face that imbalance as they try to defend their land, their jobs and their rights. They are demanding change in those laws and policies that contribute to the imbalance, on both sides of the border.



“From the beginning NAFTA was an instrument of displacement,” says Juan Manuel Sandoval, professor at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, and cofounder of the Mexican Action Network Opposing Free Trade. “The penetration of capital led to the destruction of the traditional economy, especially in agriculture, and produced a huge labor reserve in Mexico. People had no alternative but to migrate. The system helps corporations make profit, which is relocated to the U.S. And it produces displaced people, who are needed by the U.S. economy.”

Sandoval sees that many U.S. industries are now dependent on this army of available labor. “Meatpacking especially depends on a constant flow of workers,” he says, “because of the very intense system of production, and the high rate of injuries. Mexico has become its labor reserve.”

According to Tim Wise and Betsy Rakocy, “the confluence of agriculture, trade, immigration, and labor policies have pushed cheap commodities south and driven people north,” Ten percent of Mexico’s population is already working outside the country, and six million Mexicans have come to live in the U.S. since NAFTA took effect. Their remittances now make up three percent of Mexico’s gross domestic product, according to Frank Holmes, investment analyst and CEO of U.S. Global Investors. Mexicans sent home \$21.13 billion last year, and before the U.S. recession started, the total was even higher. Remittances are now Mexico’s second largest source of national income, behind oil.

Gaspar Rivera Salgado, a professor at UCLA who heads an organization of indigenous Oaxacans in both Mexico and the U.S. — the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations, believes that in the U.S. “migrants need the right to work, but with labor rights and benefits.” In Mexico “we need development that makes migration a choice rather than a necessity—the right to not migrate. Both rights are part of the same solution.”

Fausto Limon’s right to stay in Mexico, on his ranch in the Perote Valley, depends on ending the problems caused by the operation of Granjas Carroll. He has become a leader of Pueblos Unidos, and hopes to find a counterweight to the company’s influence by joining forces with other Mexicans who’ve also suffered environmental destruction from corporate mines and dams. In July he went to Acapulco for the seventh National Assembly of Environmentally Affected (NAEA). The NAEA declare their mission is to build a national movement “to fight for life in our homes, our lands, our waters and our territories.” It’s part of a broader movement connecting similar groups throughout Latin America.

But Limon also has no money for planting, and his family was driven out of the government’s ProCampo rural credit system when the protests started. And he shares the poverty created by meat and corn dumping, followed by price spikes to consumers, with farmers throughout Mexico. The trade system that allows that to continue will inevitably produce more migrants – if not Limon himself, perhaps his children. The fabric of sustainable rural life at his Rancho

del Riego is being pulled apart.

In the U.S., many migrant rights networks believe a rational immigration reform must change US trade policies that contribute to displacing people. The Trade Act, proposed in the last Congress by Rep. Mike Michaud (D-ME), received support from many of those groups because it would hold hearings to reexamine the impact of NAFTA, including provisions like the environmental side agreement that did nothing to restrict the impact of Granjas Carroll on Perote Valley. The bill would also ban negotiations of new trade agreements that lead to the violation of environmental and labor rights.

Another proposal, called the Dignity Campaign, goes one step further and would ban agreements that lead to displacement, like that caused by pork imports or the cross-border investments that created the Perote pig farms. Instead it proposes an alternative immigration bill based on human and labor rights. In particular, it would also repeal employer sanctions, the immigration law that led to firing and driving so many Veracruz migrants from the Tar Heel plant.

“Employer sanctions have little effect on migration,” says Bill Ong Hing, law professor at the University of San Francisco, “but they have made workers more vulnerable to employer pressure.” Hing investigated the impact of employer sanctions and raids in the Swift meatpacking plants for the UFCW. “The rationale has always been that this kind of enforcement will dry up jobs for the undocumented and discourage them from coming,” he explains. “However, they actually become more desperate and take jobs at lower wages. This can lead to an overall reduction in the average wage level for millions of workers, which is, in effect, a subsidy to employers.”

“When you make someone’s status even more illegal,” Carolina Ramirez adds, “you just make their living and working conditions worse. Jobs become like slavery. And if there are no remittances, kids in Veracruz can’t go to school or to the doctor. All the social problems we already have get worse. And all this just provokes more migration.”

“We would be much better off if we ended employer sanctions, and changed our trade and economic policies so they don’t produce poverty in countries like Mexico,” Hing concludes.

The walkouts in Smithfield and the marches in the streets in 2006 show a deep reservoir of support for basic changes in the conditions of immigrants. In Perote Valley, farmers are equally determined to prevent the expansion of pig farms and the destruction of their environment. In many ways, their efforts are linked together, not just by the fact that they’re carried on by people from the same state, facing the same transnational corporation. They’re fighting the same system.

“We are fighting because we are being destroyed,” said Roberto Ortega. “That is the reason for the daily fight, to try to change this.”

David Bacon is a writer and photojournalist based in Oakland and Berkeley, California. He has been a reporter and documentary photographer for 18 years, shooting for many national publications. He has exhibited his work nationally, and in Mexico, the UK and Germany. Bacon covers issues of labor, immigration and international politics and is an associate editor at Pacific News Service as well as a collaborator with the [Americas Program](#).

Research support provided by The Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute