

La Lucha Sigue

The Hidalgo Processing Center stands on the banks of the Rio Grande of southern Texas, two miles from the Mexican border. Clad in a blanket of dirt, the place interrupts the rolling flat of the land. The area's few trees root to the red country, dwarfed and sparsely leafed under the sun. The center's buildings nestle together in rectangles. Inside, the center is bare of furnishings. The emptiness of the room accentuates the concrete of the ground. Hanging from the structure's steel ceilings, sabers of fluorescent light brighten the room's four corners. As the doors lift to the ceiling's rafters, a tide of heat wades over the braceros' heads. They filter into the center. It's processing time.

Don Felipe Muñoz Pavón speaks in an art gallery. Like the evening night outside, the gallery's ceiling is black and studded with small lights. Felipe stands in the center of the gallery, an audience before him. His cracked hands open warmly as he speaks. Orphaned at eleven, he was born of humble parents. A former bracero, or Mexican guest-worker, in the heartland of the American west, Felipe's voice is as weathered as his image. The eighty-nine year old bracero removes his cap and stands before the chairs of students and Latinos.

The braceros crowd like cattle outside the Hidalgo Processing Center. A convoy of milk-colored trucks border the inner building of the center. The trucks are painted with black letters on each side— CHEST X-RAY HERE. Inside, a mess of medical machines attach to the ground and walls. A bracero unbuttons his white tailored shirt. His skin is a scorched tint that can be

found on any worker south of the Rio Grande. An examiner holds the bracero's arms to his hips. They speak only in gestures and signals. The fan-shaped muscles of his chest contorting out, the bracero pushes his body against the machine. It whirs. A line of shirtless others wait behind him.

Don Felipe recounts the start of the bracero program. "The war came when Germany invaded Poland in 1939." As U.S. fathers and sons took off for the Rhineland and shores of Europe, the American workforce dwindled. "The presidents of the United States and Mexico began talks of mutual aid between the two countries. In 1942, the governments signed an accord for workers from Mexico to work in the fields of the United States." Once the accord was signed, the Mexican government took to advertising. The government sent out notices in all the states of Mexico for men to enlist as workers in America. "These men were coming from towns and villages all over Mexico. They had to pay their own way as they came to the United States— the travel, the food, the housing. Once they got to the border, ranchers from the states came to the processing centers and told how many workers they needed to contract," Don Felipe recounts. At the centers, the men were given physical exams from head to toe. Because of the wartime, they were also required to donate two or three bottles of blood.

The quick sound of pecking echoes inside the Hidalgo Center. Fingertips grazing the keys, a row of women sit working before typewriters. The ends of their striped dresses fall to the concrete. For every woman, a bracero stands before the desk. They offer paper documents, and wait for the women to finish striking the keys. The line flows to the next room. A bracero's back

is straight against a white background hanging from the ceiling. A spotlight shines on his sickled mustache. A bulb flashes, and a camera strikes. The bracero leaves, and another steps before the lens. The line flows again. A man holds the bracero's palm with one hand and thumb with the other. The black ink soaks the faults of the thumb and then stains the paper. The bracero is dealt his identification card, and exits the line. Another takes his place.

Don Felipe's translator is a balding man. While Felipe talks, he stares intently at him, as if seeing the words cascade from the bracero's mouth. The translator is unsure of Felipe's words. He looks to the Latino crowd for reassurance. They shout translations back. A girl from the crowd speaks, "A clause of the accord stipulated that ten percent of the wages would be set aside in a savings account for each worker for when they returned to Mexico. The ten percent was taken away from their salaries, but never given to them back in Mexico. Instead, it was covered up." This ten percent is the origin of the bracero's current struggle and bad faith with the government. The Mexican government won't return the ten percent taken from each paycheck of the braceros. Don Felipe is fighting for this ten percent, not only for himself, but for all bracero families. He has tagged his campaign, *La Lucha Sigue*, or *The Struggle Continues*.

The dining hall clatters as the braceros queue for their meal. A half a day of processing has passed. Braceros huddle over a cauldron. A man stands ladling mounds of beans onto tin plates. Braceros sit on wooden tables arm to arm, their hands gripping the clay cups of coffee. The window panes of the hall open for the meager breeze to flow over the crowd. The Hidalgo main

yard is seen through the windows. The braceros' belongings litter the ground. Nearby, braceros use a garden hose as a makeshift water fountain. As the men spill the water onto their faces, it muddies the ground.

The silence over the ten percent was broken in 2001, when a California newspaper published an article describing the missing payments. Within a week, a bracero group began to form. Don Felipe, the leader of the group, petitioned local governments with no success, but soon found a lawyer who could help. The lawyer thought of putting speakers on a car, and announcing a meeting of braceros throughout the town. Quickly, the movement began to grow. A group of 50 braceros meeting at restaurants in the smallest state of Mexico soon grew to 5,000 meeting in an auditorium. Finally, the Mexican government began addressing the issue. Don Felipe explains: "The House of Representatives named eighteen representatives to investigate the ten percent stolen from the braceros. The government came up with a law aimed to settle the matter. They promised each worker 38,000 pesos." Although 38,000 pesos was promised to each worker, few baceros got this money from the government. Because the government only set aside 288 million pesos, it was not enough to pay the braceros in all of Mexico. In Don Felipe's group of five thousand, twenty-five received payment. This was the same all over Mexico. The struggle was not settled.

The line of braceros continues to another building at the Hidalgo Process Center. The nurses stand in white dresses that stop just above their ankles. The thick heels of their whites shoes allow

some to tower over the shirtless men. As thumbs press upon plungers, needles bite through the braceros' arms, vaccinating the men. Afterward, the line moves outside. Low roofs shelter the yards. The shade offers a moment of refuge from the sun. An examiner lines the braceros arm to arm. He examines the braceros' hands for calluses, and feels their limbs for muscle mass. After the inspection, the braceros line up once more, documentation in hand. Ranchers file through the lines of braceros, plucking them for their farms. A woman moves to a chalkboard posted upon a pillar. She reaches for an eraser, and updates the day's tally to 4,500 processed.

When news came out that the government was returning money to the former braceros, many applied for their share. But in order to do so, the workers had to give the government their documents proving they had worked as braceros. Don Felipe describes the handing over of documents: "There were a lot of workers who got their documents taken away, but didn't get paid. The government took away documents, so they wouldn't have any way to make claims on the money they never got." Don Felipe has moved the bracero struggle to international court. He is petitioning for the bank that collected the ten percent from the braceros' salaries, Wells-Fargo, to release records. "The Mexican government made an arrangement with the United States government to seal the records in Wells-Fargo under lock and key. Wells-Fargo has the complete list of everyone who was a bracero, and information about the ten percent." Ending his speech, Don Felipe Muñoz Pavón removes a pair of thick-lensed glasses from his shirt pocket. He unfolds a sheet of paper, and begins to read from a poem marking the

continued struggle of the braceros. "The forgotten former braceros wish to be heard. We worked with our arms in the fields of the United States. Many years have passed, and our savings are still hidden away. We are fighting to be equal, to be respected, and to be heard."

A caravan of trucks marks the end of processing. Herds of braceros queue to be seated in the open-air beds of the ranchers' trucks. The braceros huddle together as more are packed in the beds. They have passed testing, been documented, and are now ready to work in the fields of the United States. The wheels mill the ground, causing the crust of the dirt to break. Lifting the dust to the air, the trucks move north, leaving the Hidalgo Processing Center on the horizon, and just beyond it, the Rio Grande, and Mexico.

Sources:

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