

“It’s Not What You Earn, It’s What You Send” Resisting Dispossession In Southern Mexico

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For more than a century, the border region that stretches across northern New York and Vermont has been known for its numerous dairy farms. Most of these have long been family owned and operated, often by farmers with French Canadian roots dating back to the large-scale Québécois immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yet despite the picturesque, even timeless, image that this region and its dairies evoke for the outside world, the dairy industry has undergone important changes since the mid-to-late 1990s, changes unknown even to many local residents. Up until then, local dairy farms relied exclusively on local workers; less than a decade later, a majority of hired dairy workers came from southern Mexico and Guatemala.

Agricultural migration from Mexico to the United States has a long history. However, its geographical expansion to the most distant, isolated, and ethnically homogenous frontier of the United States is worthy of reflection. What I have found in my research on the subject is that certain communities in rural southern Mexico and dairy farmers in the Northeast have formed a limited but growing degree of labor interdependency. For dairy farmers, this dependency has to do with downward pressure on prices from agribusiness; for migrant workers, who primarily come from rural southern Mexico, it stems from a much more extreme manifestation of the same problem. Undocumented labor, in this case, has become a precarious solution for both dairy farmers seeking to avoid bankruptcy and for migrant workers resisting the dispossession and displacement of their families.

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Over 100 people from the small village of San Isidro, Las Margaritas, Chiapas, have at times worked simultaneously in the dairy industry of Vermont and New York. Many of the new houses are built with dairy remittances.

This article is based on field research in both the United States and Mexico. In 2014, I conducted a 30-person survey in Franklin and Addison counties, Vermont, with dairy workers from Mexico and Guatemala.¹ Later that year, I did 28 qualitative interviews in three southern Mexican communities with particularly strong ties to the Vermont dairy industry. These three communities are quite diverse in certain respects: San José de Monteverde, Oaxaca, is a Mixteca indigenous community with cooperative labor arrangements; San Isidro, Chiapas, is a former coffee-producing *ejido* (collectively owned land) that has experienced great economic and environmental hardship; and Tres Bocas, Tabasco, is a former *ejido* now in environmental ruin due to oil and gas production. What they have in common is their new dependency on dairy remittances.

THE DAIRY CRISIS

Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, was raised on an Indiana dairy farm. During his tenure, he initiated the push to eliminate supply management programs and maximize agricultural production. Butz famously said U.S. farmers should “get big or get out,” echoing the interests of agribusiness in securing a steady supply of cheap commodities. Tighter profit margins pushed producers to seek economies of scale, and, in the decades since, the country has seen a concentration and consolidation of milk production, in which family farms and small-scale producers have been decimated as reduced profit margins—often even negative profit margins—squeeze them out of business.²

Not only has milk production been concentrated among fewer, larger producers, it has also become highly industrialized. Even as small producers disappear at a precipitous rate (Figure 1), the number of cows has declined much more slowly (Figure 2). More surprisingly, milk production has actually increased (Figure 3) due to more intensive milking practices (three times a day instead of two) and to automation.

Growth and intensified production have allowed some dairy farms to survive, but what often goes unmentioned in the academic literature on the industry’s restructuring is the staggering degree to which this industrialization relies on migrant workers.³ The National Milk Producers Federation estimated that in 2009, 62 percent of the milk produced in the United States came from farms with foreign workers, and that the country hosts 57 000 foreign dairy workers, making up 41 percent of the national industry’s 138 000 workers.⁴ Indeed, these figures probably underestimate the real migrant population, as many farmers prefer not to reveal their workers nationality or immigration status. (The dairy industry is excluded from the H2A agricultural visa program because it is year-round work, and the vast majority of foreign dairy workers are therefore undocumented.) Between 2000 and 2005, the number of migrant workers on Vermont dairy farms grew to about 1 500, the same number as at present.⁵ According to estimates, between 2 600 and 2 900 migrant dairy workers live in New York,⁶ but the real number is likely much higher, due to the greater number of farms in the state as compared to Vermont.

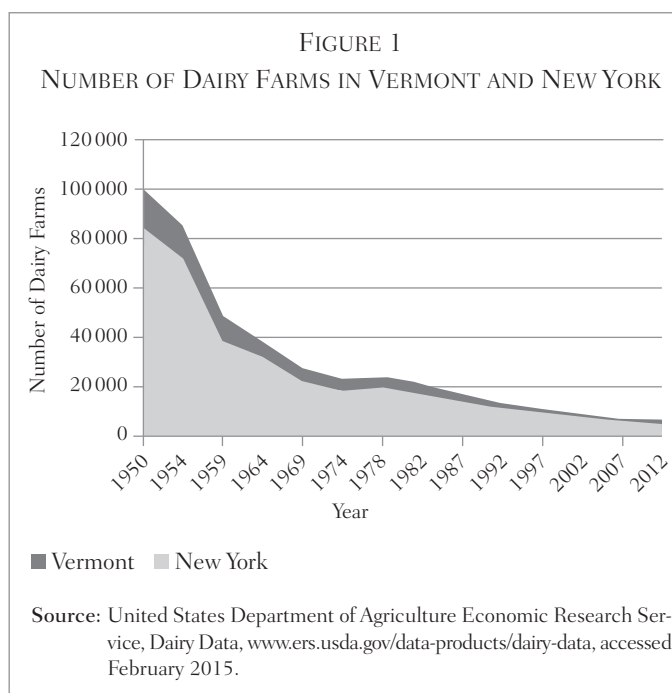
Why have dairy farmers turned to migrant workers as a response to the social crisis they are facing in the industry? It is not necessarily a question of wages, though

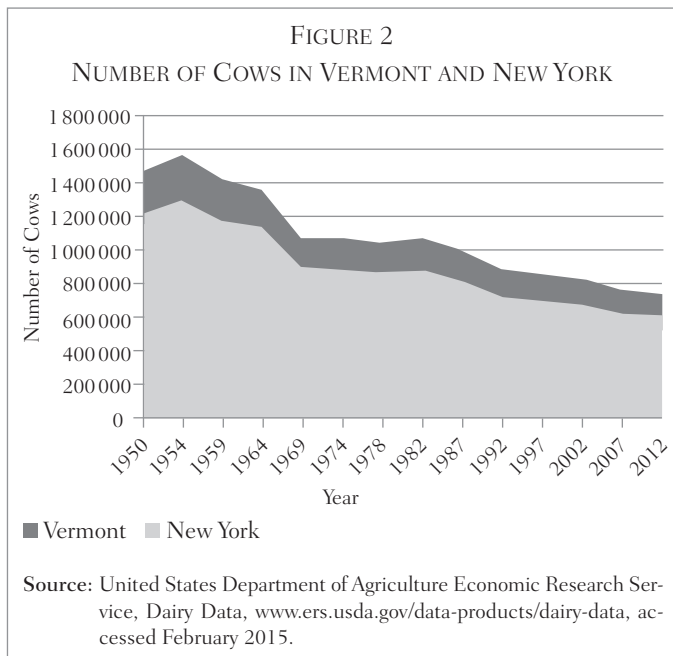
migrant workers do tend to earn less than their U.S. counterparts on the farm. Rather, the issue is flexibility. Dairy work has a demanding schedule, with shifts that often begin at three in the morning and irregular breaks. Add to that the fact that it is a dirty, outdoor job in a region where winter temperatures are prohibitively cold, and most local dairy workers have opted for other low-wage jobs.

One Vermont farmer described his decision to hire migrant workers in this way:

We had two American elderly guys working on the farm and they both, at 65, said “I’m done.” And then I tried to advertise for help and look for help, and you get the guys that would come for a week or ten days, and “No, I don’t like this job,” or they don’t come in the morning, show up in the afternoon. And then somebody introduced me to another farmer who had Hispanic workers.⁷

Not enough local workers want to do the work required, at least not without significantly higher pay. Migrant workers, on the other hand, come to the United States in order to save money and are often more willing to make the necessary sacrifices. According to my 2014 survey, migrant workers in Vermont work an average of 66 hours a week and earn an average of US\$547 per week (many are paid by the hour, but





others by the week). This is many times more than they could hope to earn in rural Mexico, where paid work is scarce—and even then the going rate is equivalent to a few dollars a day.

**AGRICULTURAL MIGRATION
TO AVOID RURAL DISPLACEMENT**

Rural southern Mexico has seen the displacement of millions of people since the implementation of neoliberal economic and agricultural reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called “Washington Consensus.” These reforms included World Bank agricultural loans with political conditions; the liberalization of land markets and the *ejido* reform; the opening of the Mexican market to U.S.–produced corn and other products through NAFTA; and drastic cuts in the availability of agricultural credit. According to Mexico’s National Peasant Confederation (CNC), the liberalization of the Mexican agricultural sector has caused the displacement of 5 million people, 57 percent of whom are small-scale farmers with fewer than 2 hectares of land.⁸

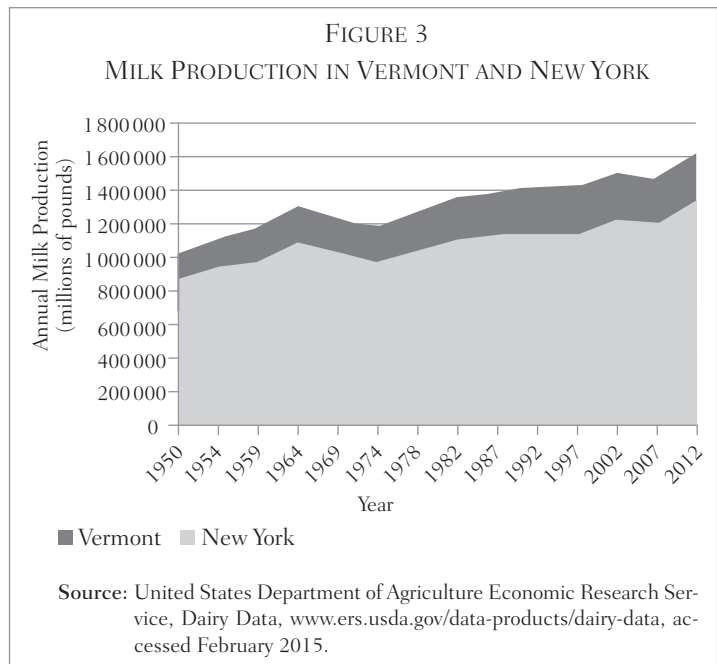
In my survey, 93.3 percent of respondents indicated that they came from rural farming communities. Approximately 4.4 percent of migrant workers on Vermont dairy farms are from Guatemala and the remain-

ing 95.6 percent are from Mexico, the overwhelming majority from southern states (Figure 4).⁹

All respondents mentioned that their families produce food for their own consumption, mainly corn and beans. While many came from families that sold small amounts of these and other agricultural products, 46.7 percent reported that their families did not have any source of cash income other than the remittances they received from the United States or other parts of Mexico. This is the principal reason that so many people from their communities have gone to work in the United States. In San Isidro, Las Margaritas, a community in the state of Chiapas with a population of 711, residents who had worked in Vermont explained that consistently more than 100 people were working on dairy farms from around 2006 to 2009 (the number has dropped recently due to increased Border Patrol surveillance in Arizona). One interviewee in Chiapas explained how

this came about, beginning in the 1990s, when the first residents began migrating to the United States, due to a series of economic and environmental difficulties:

Some go to the fields of California. And then little by little they figured it out; they all found out where you had the best chance of getting money, where you could save money, because in the city, they say you spend more, and at the dairies they say you

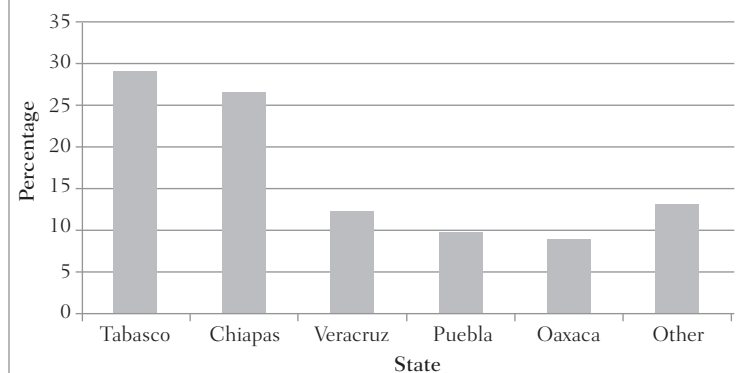


don't. That's why everybody went up there to get money, to save for their families.

This explanation, repeated by nearly all interviewees in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Vermont, gets at the heart of dairy's newfound importance in agricultural migration. It would be inaccurate—or at least incomplete—to conclude, as neoclassical macroeconomic theories of migration might indicate,¹⁰ that the labor crisis in the dairy industry simply absorbed the effects of a social crisis in rural southern Mexico, which had provoked massive displacement. There is nothing mechanical about these linkages, although the difficulties faced by smaller-scale producers in both countries have roots in the corporate-driven industrialization and commercialization of agricultural production over the last several decades. Rather, migrant workers have specific reasons for migrating to dairy farms as opposed to other agricultural jobs. By making these family decisions, they assert their agency, not just in their own lives, but also in shaping agricultural labor markets.

Almost all interviewees for this project emphasized that the economic advantages offered by dairy work motivated their choice to come to Vermont. Unlike most other agricultural jobs, dairy work is year-round; the boss generally provides rent-free housing, which cuts down on costs; and the isolation of farms means that there are painfully few opportunities to leave the farm and spend any money. While this makes for serious quality-of-life problems, it does allow workers to save money much faster than they would in other industries. On average, surveyed workers sent US\$341 of their weekly pay (62 percent of total earnings) to their families in Mexico, a far greater sum than would be possible in most other low-wage U.S. jobs. As one former dairy worker in Tabasco explains, "It's not what you earn; it's what you send." And dairy work allows them to send more money to Mexico, because "many of the employers give you housing. If you work in construction, you have to pay rent and transportation." A Oaxacan dairy worker reiterates that on a dairy farm "they give you more working hours; you don't pay rent; you don't pay for electricity or water. The boss pays for that, and the work is steadier; you're not struggling to get it." Another person from the same town emphasizes that the effect on their community in the Mixteca region has been undeniable: "From 2000 to today, things are starting to change here in

FIGURE 4
STATE OF ORIGIN OF
MIGRANT DAIRY WORKERS IN VERMONT (n=172)



Source: Migrant Justice, "Milk with Dignity Survey," 2014, <http://migrantjustice.net/sites/default/files/FinalSurveyMay2015.pdf>, accessed February 2, 2015.

Monteverde now, because most people go into dairy. And that's where jobs are steady and you earn more. So, then you come back, you build your house, you buy your car, and now you can live more or less a little better."

Compounding the physical and social isolation of dairy work is the active presence of the Border Patrol in the region, often making workers fearful to leave the farm. Many farms are located within 100 miles of the Canadian border, where U.S. Border Patrol has jurisdiction and a great degree of legal autonomy to profile and detain Latino farmworkers to meet deportation quotas.¹¹ Local and state police also collaborate regularly with the Border Patrol, and Border Patrol agents monitor police radio for traffic stops and 911 calls, then rushing to the scene to offer their services as "translators" for Spanish speakers—only to detain them.¹²

This dynamic, in which Latino workers put up with isolation and persecution to save money as fast as they can in order to support their families back home, has made for a notable gender division of labor. Approximately 94 percent of migrant workers on Vermont dairy farms are men who work for two to five years there before returning home.¹³ All but one of the interviewees for this project regularly sent money to their families in Mexico or Guatemala, and it is typically women—sisters, mothers, or wives—who receive this money and distribute it to family members in the community of origin, in addition to taking care of children, cooking, and often helping with agricultural production. Immigration scholar Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo notes that these transnational family strategies do not always indicate cooperation or fam-

ity unity; they also often reflect hierarchies of power, authority, and resources.¹⁴

MIGRANT NETWORKS: A PRECARIOUS SOLUTION TO THE PROFIT SQUEEZE

Sixty-three percent of workers surveyed for this project have built, are sending money to build, or plan to build a house in their community of origin. In other words, migration is often a strategy to avoid displacement. This is not unique to the dairy industry, but the greater opportunity for remittances in dairy work have led some communities to re-orient their migratory networks toward the farms of Vermont and New York and away from more traditional, seasonal agricultural migration routes.

In my Vermont research, I asked interviewees where they had previously worked in the United States and in which states they currently had family or friends, in order to get a sense of this labor market's relationship to agricultural migration nationally. Upon mapping these connections statistically, there turned out to be strong ties between Vermont dairy workers and the eastern United States—and to a lesser extent the West Coast—but by far the strongest correlation was with New York State: 16 of 30 Vermont workers had worked in New York, and 28 of 30 Vermont workers had family or friends there. In other words, the northeastern dairy industry is a destination unto itself. When I mapped data on the general Mexican-born population living in the United States, I found that comparatively few Vermont dairy workers have spent much time or have many contacts in the southwestern United States, despite having crossed the border there.

The geographic specificities of these networks are not accidental; everyone interviewed for this project had contacts in Vermont when they arrived, and most made the journey with a loan from a friend or family member to cover the prohibitively expensive cost of crossing the border by land. (Costs averaged from US\$2 500 to US\$3 000, but were often much higher when considering transportation on either side of the border.) Although a number of *contratistas* in Vermont recruit Latino workers for dairy farmers, many farmers rely heavily on their own employees to invite friends and relatives when a new worker is needed, in this way cutting out the intermediary. Both farmers and farmworkers see some benefit in this arrangement: farmers essentially outsource recruiting costs to farmworkers themselves, while farmworkers can some-

times reserve jobs on the farm for their friends and relatives. In this way, workers take a more active role in expanding their networks to the benefit of their families and communities. Nonetheless, the practice of hiring through social networks also reflects the precariousness of both farmers and migrant workers in an agricultural industry where less and less profit makes it back to producers; farmers and workers look to squeeze more income out of their employment relationship rather than from the corporations whose pricing strategies pit farmers and farmworkers against each other.

CONCLUSION

The industrialization and commercialization of agriculture throughout North and Latin America has generally driven down profit margins for small-scale producers in all sorts of rural settings, thereby intensifying a particular transnational labor dynamic in agriculture: the displacement—or migration to avoid displacement—of rural producers in Latin America, many of whom go on to work in U.S. agriculture. This keeps down costs for U.S. producers who find themselves in varying degrees of economic hardship. Nonetheless, this cycle of “exclusion and exploitation” does not advance mechanically according to labor-market pressures,¹⁵ even if its effect on small agricultural producers has been almost universally devastating. Agricultural workers' particular responses to their own exclusion from profitable production in Latin America reflect their specific interests as families and communities. Migration to the Vermont dairy industry is one such response, where migrant workers have carved out space in a labor market that allows them to send more remittances to Mexico and Central America. **VM**

NOTES

¹ Subjects were selected based on demographic criteria from previous surveys with larger sample sizes.

² Dennis A. Shields, *Consolidation and Concentration in the U.S. Dairy Industry* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010).

³ Notable examples include John A. Cross, “Restructuring America's Dairy Farms,” *Geographical Review* vol. 96, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 1-23; and Harry K. Schwarzweller and Andrew P. Davidson, eds., *Dairy Industry Restructuring* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Insight, 2000).

⁴ National Milk Producers Federation, *The Economic Impacts of Immigration on U.S. Dairy Farms* (Arlington, Virginia: NMPF, 2009).

⁵ Walcott MacCausland, interview with the author, St. Albans, Vermont, July 22, 2014.

⁶ Thomas R. Maloney and Nelson L. Bills, “Survey of New York Dairy Farm Employers 2011” (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2011).

- ⁷ Vermont Folklife Center, anonymous interview, "All the Fears Went Away," <http://goldencageproject.org/voices/index.htm>, accessed January 1, 2015.
- ⁸ Imtiaz Hussain, "NAFTA, Agriculture, & Mexico: As Tears Go By," in Imtiaz Hussain, ed., *North America at the Crossroads: NAFTA at 15 Years* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2009).
- ⁹ Migrant Justice, "Milk with Dignity Survey," 2014, <http://migrantjustice.net/sites/default/files/FinalSurveyMay2015.pdf>, accessed February 2, 2015.
- ¹⁰ John Harris and Michael Todaro, "Migration, Unemployment, and Development: A Two-sector Analysis," *American Economic Review* vol. 60 (1970), pp. 126-142; Arthur Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labor," *The Manchester School of Economics and Social Studies* vol. 22 (1954), pp. 139-191.
- ¹¹ Spencer S. Hsu and Andrew Becker, "ICE Officials Set Quotas to Deport More Illegal Immigrants," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2010.
- ¹² Lisa Graybill, "Border Patrol Agents as Interpreters along the Northern Border," Immigration Policy Center Special Report, September 2012.
- ¹³ Migrant Justice, op. cit.
- ¹⁴ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "La incorporación del género a la migración: 'no sólo para feministas'—ni sólo para la familia," in Marina Ariza and Alejandro Portes, ed., *El país transnacional: Migración mexicana y cambio social a través de la frontera* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM), pp. 423-451.
- ¹⁵ Blanca Rubio, *Explotados y excluidos: los campesinos latinoamericanos en la fase agroexportadora neoliberal*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Plaza y Valdés Editores, 2012).