

Summer carnivals and county fairs across the United States are a highpoint of summer fun for many American families. The tradition of eating corndogs, watching horse races and taking a ride on the Ferris wheel has become a quintessential American cultural event. But these county fairs are also the same places where workers from Latin America, mainly Mexico, experience some of the worst exploitation in the United States.

On the closing day of most summer fairs, the same workers who have spent 12-hour shifts taking tickets, sitting kids on carnival rides and operating the controls in the brutal summer heat set to work dismantling the entire fair around midnight. The only light to see as they work often comes from the blinking neon on the carnival rides themselves; It fades as they take apart the rides making it harder to see. Carnival workers usually stay up all night tearing down the fair, although some report working until noon or later the next day. The tasks are dangerous and accidents frequent. When they finish, many carnival workers have labored for 24 hours straight.

For their efforts, many carnies report daily wages of about \$55 before taxes, regardless of how much overtime they work. Some workers earn less than \$2 an hour.

Walk onto the fairgrounds of most county fairs anywhere in the United States today and you will notice that many of the workers are Latino. The vast majority come from Tlapacoyan, Mexico, a bustling town in the southern state of Veracruz, about an hour away from the Gulf Coast.

Men and women from Tlapacoyan have been coming to work at U.S. fairs for over two decades. Back in the 80s, a man from Tlapacoyan named Victor Apolinar found work with a circus based in Oklahoma. The owner of the circus, Jim Judkins, started recruiting other locals from Tlapacoyan with Apolinar's help to come work for his circus. The two men eventually started a labor recruitment business called JKJ Workforce Agency based in Texas. Apolinar, from his base in Tlapacoyan, recruits locals to work in U.S. carnivals. The Mexican workers enter the United States legally on temporary H-2B visas that allow foreigners to work seasonal, non-agricultural jobs in the United States. JKJ Workforce Agency changed the workforce of America's state and county fairs. About 4,000 workers from Tlapacoyan annually work at fairs all over the lower 48 states.

Foreigners who enter the United States on H-2B visas, as well as those who receive H-2A visas for agricultural work, often fall victim to exploitation by their employers. Often referred to as guest workers, these seasonal laborers are often treated as anything but guests. The H-2 visas do not allow workers to change jobs once they arrive in the United States; workers can only legally work for the employer who sponsored their visa. The limited mobility that guest workers have in the U.S. allows employers to take advantage of them. Stories of employers paying workers below minimum wage, supplying them with substandard housing, denying them access to health services, and holding their passports so they can not easily return home have become commonplace. Some workers report that, even after they arrived to the United States by airplane, they had no idea what part of the country they were living in, or where they even had been on a U.S. map. Workers hired by bad employers often have no idea how to escape.

Carnival employers are often some of the worst offenders. I viewed the working conditions firsthand two summers ago when I went undercover and worked a season as a carny—slang for a carnival worker—myself. I first got the idea to work in a carnival after a chance visit to Tlapacoyan, Mexico, during a year I spent in the country as a Fulbright grantee. I came to Mexico in order to do the preliminary research for a book about the

exploitation of Mexican guest workers, a project that I'm now completing at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Workers in Tlapacoyan told me stories of abusive working conditions at fairs; excessive work weeks of 70 hours or above, for below minimum wage with no overtime, and housing in bedbug-infested trailers had become the norm at many carnival companies. One former carny who I met in Mexico told me that I had to see the conditions firsthand myself to understand how bad things were.

That's exactly what I decided to do.

I got a job operating carnival rides with an outfit called Butler Amusements, one of the largest carnival companies on the West Coast. The company employed several hundred workers; about half came from Tlapacoyan on H-2B visas. The company generally paid us \$5 an hour in cash, although the hourly rate could total more or less depending on our hours. I itched the bedbug bites on my body that I got from staying in the company's trailers during our long shifts. Midway through the summer I suffered a severe contusion in one of my thumbs while helping a coworker move an electric wheelchair out of a bus that an elderly employee used to get around on. I asked to fill out an accident report, but my boss refused to provide me with one, instead claiming that I did not have a work-related injury. By summer's end, when I finally quit, I threw out my backpack and all of my personal belongings. They were all infested with bedbugs.

Some workers in Tlapacoyan decided to fight back against the abuse. Three years ago, a group of migrant carnival workers in Tlapacoyan filed a class action lawsuit against their employer, Deggeller Attractions, hoping to receive lost wages. Deggeller Attractions is one of the largest carnival employers on the East Coast and provides the rides for the Midways at many state fairs.

Vicente Guerrero became one of the star plaintiffs in the case, delivering a heartfelt deposition about the exploitation he experienced. Rather than settle, Deggeller Attractions chose to fight the case. It has dragged on for three years, and although the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, a final appeal by the employer has stalled any resolution. The carnival workers who joined the case have started to lose hope.

The chief carnival recruiter in Tlapacoyan blacklisted the Deggeller plaintiffs from getting another visa to work at U.S. carnivals. As the years passed, many started to regret their decision to take part in the lawsuit. They did not like the fair work, but they made better money at the U.S. carnivals than back in Mexico. Many of the plaintiffs had small children, and in hindsight, the carnivals no longer looked so bad. The case represents the difficulties that foreign workers experience when attempting to take advantage of the U.S. legal system when employers abuse them after they return home.

I wanted to find out what had happened to the Deggeller plaintiffs three years after the case began. With the generous support of a travel grant from the Tinker Foundation and the UC Berkeley Center for Latin American Studies, I traveled back to Tlapacoyan in summer 2016. I spent most of my time in Mexico with Vicente Guerrero, one of the main characters in the book I'm writing. Like most of the plaintiffs, Guerrero never realized how much the case would change his life. Intoxicated at first with social justice ideals and a desire to take a stand against his bosses in the United States, the romanticism quickly wore off. Guerrero could no longer afford to buy nice things for his family without the carnival income. He said the lawsuit, and the financial burden it caused, had taken a strain on his marriage, more so than when he used to spend eight months of more working at fairs in the United States each year.

Depressed and with few jobs available to him besides fruit-picking in the banana and citrus plantations outside town, Guerrero left home again and became one of the millions of rural migrants who have started a new life in Mexico City, a five-hour bus ride west of Tlapacoyan. Known by many urban Mexicans as *la mancha urbana*, literally, the urban stain, the millions of migrants who have started a new life in the poor neighborhoods of the Mexican capital have long looked to the city as an alternative to migrating north.

Guerrero's journey to the city began like most rural Mexicans: crashing with a distant family member who lives in the outskirts of town. He found a job bagging groceries and then a higher-paying gig as a bodyguard for the son of a wealthy businessman with the Bimbo bread company. Things started looking up for Guerrero, until the morning an armed gang attacked the SUV that the family's driver used to take their son to school in an attempt to kidnap the child. The car's windows shattered in the gunfire. Guerrero dove over the boy to protect him with his own body, while his partner returned fire and took a bullet in the shoulder. The assailants fled when a passing police officer showed up just in time. The story made national news. Witnesses of crimes in Mexico sometimes go missing, so Guerrero returned to Tlapacoyan.

Back in his hometown, Guerrero started driving a taxi. He worked 10-hour days, but with the rental fee he paid to use the taxi from the man who owned it, most days he made just enough to buy beans and tortillas to get him through the following workday.

When I met with Guerrero last summer, he had grown desperate. Once a vocal opponent of the carnival industry, he now longed to return to the American fairs. When his old supervisor at Deggeller Attractions offered him a job if he agreed to drop out of the lawsuit, Guerrero told him that he would even take a pay cut for the opportunity to work with them again.

There are thousands of Tlapacoyans scattered across Mexico. About 90 percent of all foreign workers recruited on H-2B visas come from Mexico, mainly because it is so convenient to bring them north over the border by bus. The hope of what temporary work in the United States can provide rural Mexicans—food on the table, a new house, better education for children—often makes workers turn a blind eye to abusive employers. Those who speak out against exploitation put themselves at great risk. Not remaining silent frequently results in them losing the one economic opportunity that exploitative employers offered them.

Vicente Guerrero dropped out of the lawsuit earlier this year. Shortly after, his former carnival employer told them that they had not received permission to get him a visa. They said that they could sponsor him for a visa, according to Guerrero, in several years time. Guerrero felt that his employer had set him up as payback for joining the lawsuit in the first place.

Now Guerrero had lost his place in the lawsuit and the right to work in the United States.

Some names in this story have been changed to preserve the identities of those involved.