

# Los Trabajadores **The Workers**

by Heather Courtney

## Discussion Guide

**It's 1999 and the booming city of Austin,** Texas, keeps on growing—thanks largely to men like Ramón Castillo Aparicio and Juan Ignacio Gutiérrez. They work some of the hardest jobs in an America that wants their labor but fails to provide legal channels for them to immigrate and work. Through the two men's lives and a controversy surrounding a local day labor center, LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS explores the many contradictions that haunt America's dependence on and discrimination against immigrant labor.

### **Purpose of the guide**

This guide is designed to facilitate discussions about LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS for both immigrant and non-immigrant audiences, either separately or together. It is a tool for community organizers, teachers and social service providers to examine attitudes towards immigrants, the impact of globalization and the process of labor organizing. Use it to foster a greater understanding of the immigrant experience in your own community.

# Los Trabajadores | The Workers

**LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS** tells the stories of two immigrants, Juan Ignacio Gutiérrez and Ramón Castillo Aparicio, who have come to Austin, Texas, from Nicaragua and Mexico, respectively, to find work and support their families back home. Along with other immigrants, they rise early in the morning to stand at a day labor center, hoping to be selected for a day's work. On good days, these day laborers climb in the back of a pickup truck and are taken to a construction site or backyard to do manual labor, landscaping, carpentry or whatever is needed. They endure years of hard labor under poor conditions so they can send money home to their families and build a better life.

In 1999, the Austin city council decided to move the day labor center from a downtown area to a residential neighborhood. Neighbors became upset and began protesting the site relocation. Some residents were angry because they neither were included in the city's decision-making process nor notified of the city's intentions. Others feared their property values would decrease. And still others simply did not want immigrants in their neighborhood.

*"We build the buildings, we do the hardest jobs, and still they don't want us."*  
—Juan Ignacio Gutiérrez

At the same time, Ramón, Juan and the other day laborers took action and began organizing themselves. Through a series of open meetings at the old day labor site, they agreed on policies for how the new center would operate. The men established a basic rule that prohibited anyone from being at the new site unless they were there to work. They also agreed not to work for less than \$8 per hour and to look out for one other. By acting in solidarity, they improved their working conditions and increased their ability to earn money. Slowly, their organization also helped them break down the stereotypes and misconceptions held by many of the residents.

Yet despite the victories achieved in the opening of the new site, Ramón and Juan still faced many obstacles: discrimination and prejudice, fear of deportation, periods of no work and loneliness that compelled them to risk everything to visit their families back home.

Their story is not unlike that of immigrants who have come to the United States before them—the Irish, the Italians, the Jews and many others. The difference for these new immigrants, however, is that most of them neither are encouraged nor permitted to stay. In 1999, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) increased its budget for activities on the U.S.-Mexico border by \$59 million, doubling the number of agents from 4,500 in 1993 to 9,000 in 1999. Even as the U.S. opens its borders for "free commerce" through NAFTA, many immigrants have lost their lives crossing the U.S. border, driven to cross at increasingly more remote and dangerous areas.



## Filmmaker's statement: Heather Courtney

In March 1999, I began research for a documentary that I thought would portray several different immigrants living and working in Austin, Texas, where I was a graduate student at the time. I already had an interest in the topic of immigration, fueled by over eight years working for immigrant and refugee rights organizations prior to graduate school.

I started going to the local day labor site—where many immigrant workers would wait for construction and landscaping jobs each day—in order to meet some of the men and talk to them about my project. Little did I know that a controversy over the day labor site was about to erupt. It was this controversy over the relocation of the site from downtown to a residential neighborhood that motivated me to begin shooting.

The relocation sparked protests from the residents of the proposed neighborhood, and in filming the neighbors' protests and city council meetings, I was struck by the misconceptions many people had about immigrants and day laborers. These experiences became a real motivation for me throughout the making of the film—I hoped to fight those misconceptions and discrimination by telling human stories that everyone could identify with. While the controversy over the day labor site provided the narrative thread and socio-political backdrop, the personal stories of Ramón and Juan made *LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS* a universal story of humanity, dignity, courage and hope.

## Background: Globalization and Migration

*“We don't come here to make problems. We come here to work and nothing else. When I was in Mexico with my family, I worked for the Mexican Petroleum Company (PEMEX) for 11 years. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari came into office, that was when the devaluation of the peso happened, and 22,000 workers were laid off from PEMEX. Then I worked as a temporary for eight years, but there was becoming less and less work in Mexico, and so I was laid off again. That was when I decided to come to the United States.”*

—Ramón Castillo Aparicio

**An appreciation of current trends** in the global economy is critical to understanding immigration patterns. In recent years, the term "globalization" has been used to describe a new era of international economic integration. Implicit in this term is the idea that the breakdown of barriers between nations facilitates the flow of goods, information and technology across borders. While this is true to an extent, the free flow of goods and technology often mainly benefits businesses and corporations, and the trickle down to the average person is slow to happen. In Mexico, for example, the subsistence farmer who used to be able to eke out a living growing corn, beans and sorghum now finds it very difficult to survive in the wake of NAFTA, which has allowed highly subsidized American agro-businesses to flood the corn markets in Mexico and to significantly lower prices.

Globalization has allowed the U.S. and other powerful nations to build an institutional framework that regulates international trade and development on terms favorable to themselves. These institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, have overseen a lowering of trade barriers worldwide and have engineered massive shifts in the economies of poorer nations. Development policies that create a profitable environment for foreign investment have caused huge social, economic and environmental changes, forcing workers to cross borders for low-paying jobs which they can no longer find in their own country.

This divide is also reflected within countries like the U.S., where the gap between rich and poor is widening. In the U.S., median hourly wages have fallen steadily as the economy has become more "globalized." Corporations have laid off tens of thousands of American workers and moved factories to Mexico or Asia, where lower wages increase company profits. The disparity in the U.S. between the top and bottom of the economic strata is increasing exponentially—in 1999, it was estimated that 84.6% of the nation's wealth was held in the hands of the top 20% of the U.S. population. Meanwhile, the bottom 20% held just 0.5% of the wealth.

Source: the National Network for Immigration and Refugee Rights' BRIDGE Curriculum

## Immigrants: Then and Now

Many people have misconceptions about the differences between the waves of European immigrants who came in the 19th and early 20th centuries and those who come today from Latin America and other parts of the world.

**Europeans came here legally.** One hundred years ago there was no system for obtaining a visa before immigrants reached America's shores. Newcomers were inspected at the U.S. ports of entry, where a decision was made whether or not to let them in. The concept of legal versus illegal, or documented versus undocumented, didn't exist.

**Immigrants used to learn English and assimilate into society immediately, but now they don't.** Integration continues to happen over a generation, just as it always has. Newcomers initially live in enclaves among institutions that operate in their home language, but their children learn English and tend to move out of the traditional neighborhoods.

**Immigrants used to stay, but today they only come to earn money, send it back to their home country and ultimately go back themselves.** Half of the immigrants from Italy to the US in the early 20th century returned to Italy. The phenomenon of remittances (or sending money) to maintain families back home also existed then as now. Indeed, many immigrants today would prefer to bring their families and settle permanently and legally in the United States but immigration laws make that all but impossible.

Source: *National Immigration Forum*

**FACT:** In 2000, slightly more than 10 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born, compared to 15% in 1915.

**FACT:** Of the over 150 million migrants in the world today, less than 2% of these migrants come to the United States.

**FACT:** The number of documented immigrants admitted to the U.S. in 1998 totaled 660,000, the lowest level since 1988. 54% of these were female.

**FACT:** The majority of immigrants come to the U.S. legally. About 8 of 11 legal immigrants come to join close family members.

**FACT:** Immigrants provide more to the nation's economy and government services than they use, adding about \$10 billion each year to the U.S. economy and paying at least \$133 billion in taxes, according to a 1998 study by the National Immigration Forum and the Cato Institute. The typical immigrant and his or her descendants pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes that they will receive in local, state and federal benefits over their lifetime.

Sources: *The AFL-CIO and the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights BRIDGE Curriculum*



## Discussion

An experienced facilitator will begin by laying down ground rules for respecting each other's opinions and each other's privacy. Some participants may be vulnerable because of their immigration status; having all participants agree to maintain confidentiality can help protect these individuals and encourage them to contribute. The facilitator should establish a safe and welcoming environment, and keep the discussion on track.



## Before Viewing: Questions

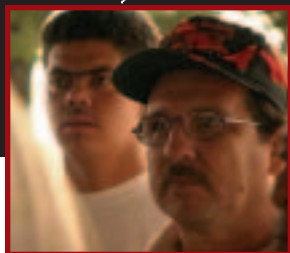
1. Were you born in the United States? If so, when did your relatives immigrate to the U.S. and why did they come? If not, when did you come and why? Bear in mind that the ancestors of many people in the U.S. today did not migrate; for example, Native Americans were here well before the founding of the United States, and many Africans were brought forcibly as slaves.
2. What percentage of the overall population of the United States are recent immigrants? How do you think this percentage has changed in the last 100 years?
3. Are there day laborers in your community? Who are they and what kinds of work do they do?

## After Viewing: Questions

It may be helpful to begin the discussion by reconstructing the story of Ramón and Juan and the relocation of the day labor center, and outlining some of the documentary's major themes. Then move on to some general questions.

1. Did you relate to any of the experiences of Juan or Ramón and his family? Why or why not?
2. What preconceptions of immigrants and/or day laborers did you have before you watched the film? How did the film change your views?
3. What is globalization? What impact does it have on your ability to earn a living? How has it affected your life and your community?

The following discussion points are divided into Immigrant and Non-Immigrant/Native-born audiences. This was done in order to keep the discussion topics focused and specific. We encourage facilitators to use the film with both audiences together as well as separately.



## Discussion Points – Immigrant Audience

1. What are some of the difficulties that Ramón and Juan faced as immigrants to the United States and as day laborers? How do their experiences compare to your own?
2. It took Ramón four times to cross the border, including one time when he and his companions were forced to seek help from "La Migra" because of bad fruit they had eaten. Do you know of anyone who has crossed the border undocumented? What was his or her experience with "La Migra"? Why do you think the U.S. government has such a build-up of agents to prevent immigration across its southern border?
3. Ramón talks about the loneliness of being separated from his family. What are some ways you cope with being separated from your family?
4. Many of the neighbors in the film did not want the day labor site in their neighborhood, including one woman who said they "have mental health problems, they're alcoholics and they don't get employed." How are day laborers and people who work for low wages viewed? What would you say in response to the neighbors in the film if you could speak directly to them? How are immigrants viewed in the U.S. today? Do you think perceptions of immigrants have changed since September 11th, 2001?
5. In the film, Ramón says, "What I did was to cross the border illegally and this is against the law of the United States, but it is not against my law, nor is it against the law of my family. Even if they're American, they can't tell me I can't work to support my family." Are immigration laws fair? Why do you think they exist? How have they changed in the last 100 years? Is the right to earn a living a basic human right, something all people deserve? If so, what needs to be done to guarantee this right—by the government, local communities and immigrants themselves? Why do you think it is so hard to find work in your home country?
6. Ramón and other workers at the day labor site decided they would no longer work for anyone who would not pay at least \$8 per hour. What steps did they take to get organized and establish this minimum wage? If you were to organize for your own rights, what obstacles do you think you would encounter? How would earning a minimum wage like \$8 per hour affect you? What other problems could be fixed by organizing a better day labor center?



## Discussion Points – Non-immigrant/Native-born Audience

1. In the film, many of the residents react negatively to the news that the day labor site will be moving into their neighborhood. How do you think you would react if you were in their position? What would be some of your thoughts, feelings and fears? Do you think the reactions of the neighbors in the film were understandable? Did they turn out to be justified?
2. In the film Ramón says, "What I did was to cross the border illegally, and this is against the law of the United States. But it is not against my law, nor is it against the law of my family. Even if they're American, they can't tell me I can't work to support my family." Do you think undocumented immigrants like Ramón should come to the United States? If you were unable to find work to support yourself and your family, would you do what Ramón and others have done, even if it meant you were doing something "against the law"? Is the right to earn a living a basic human right, something all people deserve? Why do you think Ramón cannot find work at home in Mexico?
3. In the film, Juan says, "they say Austin is growing, but thanks to whom? Who is building this city? They never say because of the immigrant or the poor person, but who is building this country?" In your community and/or city, are there a lot of immigrants working? What kind of work are they doing? What do you think would happen if all the immigrants were forced back to their country of origin? What businesses or institutions would be affected?
4. How do the experiences of Ramón and Juan differ from those of documented immigrants? Compare immigrants today with Irish, Italian, Jewish and other immigrants who came to the United States throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.
5. Would you hire a day laborer to do some work around your house? Why or why not? If so, what do you think you would pay them? Are all day laborers undocumented immigrants? Why do you think day laborers don't have permanent jobs?

## For the Classroom

Screen *LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS* for a high school, college or ESL class and use it as a starting point for other activities. For example, high school teachers can develop lesson plans incorporating the film for history, social studies or language arts.

**History:** Develop a unit on labor history in the United States. Since the 19th century, immigrants have made their living by performing some of the most difficult manual labor in the country: working in factories and slaughterhouses, building railroads and skyscrapers, sewing garments and picking grapes. These immigrant workers suffered exploitation and abuse at the hands of their employers until they began organizing in labor unions. Look at the impact of unions in employment today and some of the protections workers now enjoy, such as the eight-hour workday, OSHA and child labor laws.

**Social studies:** Compare the perception of immigrants with statistical facts. Who makes up recent immigrant populations in the United States today? Are they viewed in the same way as previous immigrants such as Europeans? Do immigrants today assimilate at the same rate and in the same ways as those who arrived here 100 years ago? Have students conduct opinion polls of fellow students, teachers and other staff at the school. Deconstruct myths about immigrants and their role in the national and international economy.

**Language arts:** Create a family narrative in book form. Have students write a first-person narrative of their own family's migration to the United States. Interview parents and/or grandparents and incorporate their oral history. Copy or recreate family photos, world maps or even official documents such as passports or birth certificates to illustrate the story.

## Immigration and Day Labor Resources

AFL-CIO  
[www.afl-cio.org](http://www.afl-cio.org)

American Friends Service Committee  
[www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
[www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org)

Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
[www.maldef.org](http://www.maldef.org)

National Day Labor Organizing Network  
[www.losjournaleros.com](http://www.losjournaleros.com)

National Immigration Forum  
[www.immigrationforum.org](http://www.immigrationforum.org)

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights  
[www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org)

National Organizers Alliance  
[www.noacentral.org](http://www.noacentral.org)

## Additional resources

Several of the national partners in the LOS TRABAJADORES/THE WORKERS outreach campaign have produced fact sheets, quizzes, glossaries and other material that can be used in conjunction with this discussion guide. Please visit the ITVS website at [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org) to download the following documents:

AFL-CIO Glossary of Labor Terms  
The BRIDGE Quiz  
Cycles of Nativism: Discriminatory Laws in U.S. History  
Immigration Employment Facts  
Immigration Law Chronology

## Suggested Reading

**Migration News** (online publication): <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/>

**Migration News** provides monthly summaries of recent immigration developments. There is no charge for an email subscription to Migration News.

**Network News** (quarterly news magazine): [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org)

**Network News** is published by the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and provides analysis, commentary, immigration news updates, and timely perspectives on the immigrant rights movement.

**From the Borderline to the Colorline: A Report on Anti-Immigrant Racism in the United States** finds that racism against immigrants is on the rise in the United States. Based on a nationwide survey of conditions for immigrant communities conducted by twenty-five organizations, this groundbreaking report concludes that anti-immigrant racism poses significant barriers to equality and inclusion for citizens and non-citizens alike. Available from the National Network of Immigrant and Refugee Rights, [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org).

**American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins** by Sarah J. Mahler. Princeton, 1995.

**A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America** by Ronald Takaki. Little, Brown, 1993.

**Immigrant America: A Portrait** by Alejandro Portes and Rubin G. Rumbaut. University of California, 1996.

**Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society** by Leo Chavez. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1992.

**Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail** by Ruben Martinez. Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2001.

**UPROOTED: Refugees of the Global Economy** Video produced by National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights with Sasha Khokha, Ulla Nilsen Jon Fromer, and Francisco Herrera, 28 min, 2001. For more information, see [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org).

## Acknowledgements and Credits

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**To purchase a tape: New Day Films: 888/367-9154 or [www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com)**

An Independent Lens premiere, March 25, 2003 at 10:30 PM on PBS.  
Check local listings at [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org).

For additional resources and to learn more about immigration facts, check out the website at [www.pbs.org/theworkers](http://www.pbs.org/theworkers)

Spanish version of website and guide: [www.pbs.org/lostrabajadores](http://www.pbs.org/lostrabajadores)

**For more information** about ITVS's Community Connections Project, contact Jim Sommers, National Outreach Manager, 415-356-8383 ext 242, [jim\\_sommers@itvs.org](mailto:jim_sommers@itvs.org), [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org)

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