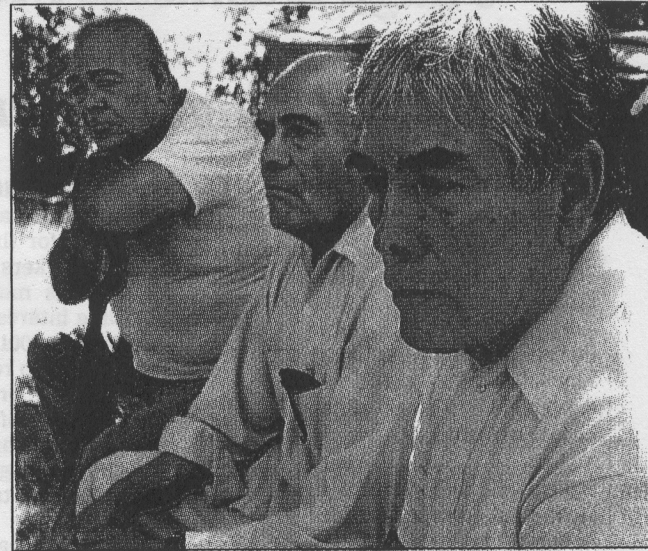


BRACERO: Group takes hope from bills to move lawsuits forward at last

Waiting for justice

Former temporary guest 'bracero' workers say they are being denied wages earned some 50 years ago



Reyes Baltazar, far right, along with Ignacio Mares, center, and Ramon Trujillo say they want justice. They said they never saw money that was garnished from their checks in the 1950s and 1960s.

By OLIVIA REYES GARCIA

Californian staff writer

e-mail: ogarcia@bakersfield.com

Retired farm laborer Joaquin Diaz has waited nearly 50 years to see justice served on money he said he was cheated out of by the U.S. and Mexican governments.

And he's not ready to give up his cause. Not even the latest blow — a federal court ruling against the "bracero" claim — has diminished Diaz's hope.

"We worked for that money," Diaz said. "We're not asking for anything that belongs to (either governments or banks). That was our money.

"We're fighting for a case of justice. As long as I can fight, I'm going to fight for it."

Diaz, 67, organized a gathering Wednesday at his east Bakersfield home, where he was joined by other local retired farm laborers who initially arrived in the United States as braceros, or temporary guest workers, a half century ago.

The older men, now U.S. citizens and legal residents, say their bracero days are still fresh in their minds.

"We worked like animals," said Ignacio Mares, a Bakersfield resident.

On Wednesday, Mares and his companions discussed their concerns over money they believe the governments and banks still owe them.

Between 1942 to 1964, the men were among other Mexican nationals who were granted temporary U.S. guest worker status to work agricultural and railroad jobs as many Americans were needed for World War II duties.

The guest worker program continued past wartime, shutting down in the early '60s amid charges that braceros suffered from abuse and other mistreatment.

In the bracero program's early years, the U.S. government withheld 10 percent of the workers' wages and put it into savings accounts in a Mexican bank.

The money was to be given to the workers at the end of their contracts, but many say they never received the funds.

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"Fifty years is too long," said Jesus Navarro, another bracero and Bakersfield resident.

A class-action suit was filed last year on behalf of braceros across the country seeking the money. The suit names both governments, Wells Fargo Bank and three Mexican banks as defendants.

The U.S. government had argued that the case be dropped because it had exceeded the statute of limitations.

The Mexican government said that the U.S. court lacked jurisdiction.

Though sympathetic and supportive of the braceros' claim that many of them are likely owed savings funds, U.S. District Court Judge Charles Beyer recently dismissed the suit.

But the braceros say they are not losing hope. The bracero issue is gaining political momentum, they said.

Proposed state and federal bills — Assembly Bill 2913 and House Resolution 4918 — seek to move the lawsuits

forward and allow the courts to examine the cases.

Leonel Flores, a coordinator with the Coalition for Immigrant Rights in the San Joaquin Valley who's been assisting the braceros in their claims, said an appeal is possible, but proposed legislation could make a difference.

Aside from the proposed bills, bracero festivals are being planned throughout the state.

A "Day of the Braceros" festival is planned for Sept. 29 in Delano.

Diaz said the bracero issue has given him an educational lesson.

Many of the braceros were poor and uneducated and, as a result, did not know what was going on. They never spoke up, he said.

He worries their time for justice is running out.

"That's why we tell our children and grandchildren that they need to educate themselves," Diaz said, "because ignorance won't get you far."