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## Visa issue keeps carnival workers from crossing border

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TLAPACOYAN, Mexico — Atop a hill just outside of this small city in Veracruz, between patches of banana and coffee plants that grow wild in the tropics of southern Mexico, a church stands unfinished. Wood and nails are strewn on the concrete altar. Two cinderblocks take the place of pews.

Inside the church, Pablo Juarez Mendoza kneels in rubble.

Mendoza — square-jawed, solemn, in his mid-30s — wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of a brightly colored Ferris wheel, advertising a carnival in Tempe, Ariz., that has long since passed. Inside of the skeletal gray building, the graphic is a striking incongruity.

But in Tlapacoyan, from which thousands of men and women leave annually to work for circuses and carnivals throughout the United States, the unfinished church and the American amusement industry have become inextricably linked.

For more than 30 years, the industry has recruited a growing portion of its workforce from Tlapacoyan, a city of 72,000. By 2007, almost a third of all carnival workers in the U.S. were Tlapacoyanos.

Every year H-2B workers poured millions of dollars in remittances into the local economy, funding houses, small businesses, and, thanks to Juarez's fundraising effort, the first stage of the church's construction. But in September, when the Congressional Hispanic Caucus blocked voting on legislation that would have allowed employers to rehire foreign workers, Tlapacoyan's economy was paralyzed. The caucus is withholding its approval in an attempt to galvanize support for comprehensive immigration reform.

As a result, the government will issue only 66,000 H-2B visas in 2008.

Last year, more than 120,000 workers entered the country under the H-2B program, which serves unskilled, non-agricultural workers who work in the U.S. for six to nine months before returning home.

The 66,000-visa quota means that only a fraction of Tlapacoyanos will have access to the seasonal jobs that some have held for more than 25 years.

Businesses in the city have closed. Unemployment has skyrocketed.

In his uncompleted church, Juarez now prays silently for his old job assembling and disassembling carnival rides.

"It's hard because if you want to build something, your own house or whatever, you have to go to USA," he said. "Without work there, we can't make nothing. We can't even build our own houses."

Last year, Juarez made \$450 a week working at livestock shows around Texas and state fairs in California. In Tlapacoyan, where the average wage is approximately \$50 per week, he can't find employment. The city's decades-long dependence on temporary American jobs has shaped the local labor market. Now that those jobs are no longer available to Mexican workers, even low-paying employment is scarce in Tlapacoyan.

By the time Juarez leaves the church, a small group has gathered under the building's concrete cornice. Together, the men tell the story of a city whose bus drivers, armed guards, and coffee farmers all lead double lives under the American big top, or beneath the fluorescent glow of the Ferris wheel.

It's a surreal tale of place, but it's also the story of a city now paralyzed by a seemingly minor legislative action, a political calculation that has crippled Tlapacoyan, as well as the circuses and carnivals to which Tlapacoyanos have longstanding ties.

## Caught in the headlights

At 5 a.m., two hours before the sun will appear over Veracruz's lush hills, the streets of downtown Tlapacoyan are lined with men looking for work. They are here every morning, 400 of them, waiting to be picked up by banana and coffee farmers in trucks that rattle as they approach the crowd. Out of darkness, headlights illuminate their faces.

They are young and old, college graduates and primary school dropouts.

Last year they were selling cotton candy in Iowa, assembling merry-go-rounds in Massachusetts. Now, waiting on the dimly lit street, they wear shirts with the logos of their former employers. There are embroidered clowns and elephants. There are names like "Interstate Amusements" and "Jolly Shows."

Today, in Tlapacoyan, just over half of them will be recruited to work.

The lucky ones will make less than \$10 for 10 hours of work.

Day labor is nothing new in Tlapacoyan, but because of the freeze on H-2B visas, men with American jobs last March have since joined the ranks of the already-saturated labor market. Local officials estimate that this influx of job seekers has increased the city's unemployment rate by more than 25 percent.

"Last year I made enough to send \$280 home to my family every week," Jose Herrera said, waiting under a flickering streetlight. "Now, I can only find work two days a week. I bring my family \$20 every seven days."

At 8 a.m., four hours after Herrera's wife cut slices of papaya for her husband's breakfast in their one-room home, he is still waiting for work.

"Here's a man, a hard worker, whose former American employers need him desperately," said Jim Judkins, the founder of JKJ Workforce, who recruits workers from Tlapacoyan on behalf of American circuses and carnivals. "And instead he's stuck here — waiting for low-paying work that he can't always secure."

It wasn't always like this. When Carson & Barnes Circus began recruiting workers from Tlapacoyan in the 1970s, there was effectively no cap on the number of seasonal guest workers. American politicians paid little attention when about 100 workers made the trip from Veracruz to Hugo, Okla., From Hugo, or "Circus City, USA," they traveled to five ring circuses throughout the United States.

It was the beginning, Judkins says, of a beautiful binational relationship.

Judkins dropped out of college to join Carson & Barnes in 1977. When he founded his own circus in 1998, he returned to Tlapacoyan to find workers.

Soon, more than 100 of the United States' largest circuses and carnivals were asking for his help to do the same. But to officials in Tlapacoyan, who watched over 3,500 residents leave for the U.S. last year, the relationship between their city and the American amusement industry is as much a curse as it is a blessing.

"What are we supposed to do here?" asked Silvio Mendoza, a city commissioner. "We don't want to lose our youngest, strongest workers to American jobs, but we don't have the capacity to generate needed employment in Tlapacoyan."

With the current freeze on H-2B visas — which are designed to ease labor shortages in the United States — the city is now seeing just how debilitating its dependence on American jobs has become.

"We've noticed a large increase in people without jobs, people without incomes," said Emilio Lozada Hernandez, the city manager. "Much less money is coming into Tlapacoyan, and that phenomenon affects everyone."

## **If not legally, illegally**

Outside of the unfinished church, Oswar Garcia — short, stocky, his thick brown hair neatly gelled back — sits on the hood of his red Toyota hatchback.

Garcia, who has a college degree in business administration, earns \$40 a week driving a taxi in Tlapacoyan. The job and the wage, he says, are belittling. "I can only take this for so much longer," he remarks, his expression souring.

"If I can't get a visa in the next two months," he says, "I'm going to the United States anyway. I don't care how I have to get there, legally or illegally. Walking, swimming, flying."

He turns around to inspect the car.

"If I sell it, I can afford to pay a coyote."

Garcia's parents both have diabetes, but the family can't afford treatment without the income that he has provided for the last two years by working at Reithoffer Shows. He inherited his job with Reithoffer from his father who, now 65, has become too weak to do the heavy lifting the job requires.

"I'll stay in the U.S. for three or four years," he said. "Maybe I'll live with some relatives there."

Most workers in Tlapacoyan express a willingness to wait until the visa situation is remedied before seeking American jobs illegally. But for those like Garcia, men and women with families in critical need, even a temporary delay is untenable.

It's a question of simple math, Garcia says. Forty dollars a week is not enough to pay for his parents' treatment. An American salary, even if it's below minimum wage and paid under the table, would likely be sufficient.

## **God's work, great and small**

In Judkins' Tlapacoyan office, 3,000 visa applications spill onto a wooden bench, each with a photo, a resume, and an address in Tlapacoyan. Another 2,000 identical applications fill a file cabinet in a neighboring room.

In early morning, a line forms outside of the office, where circus and carnival schedules are posted. People ask about departure dates, visa regulations and the status of the H-2B program. Almost always, Judkins' office workers deliver the bad news: no visas yet.

Only feet from where the line forms, Judkins' phone rings incessantly.

American circus and carnival owners want to know when they will have their workers. Some are contemplating shutting down for the year. Others tell him they will soon have no choice but to hire undocumented workers.

While Judkins explains the current state of negotiations to a client from Oklahoma, the voice of one of the men outside becomes audible. "Do you know when the visas are coming?" he asks. The answer is muffled.

In Oklahoma, a man needs workers. In Tlapacoyan, a man needs work. Both conversations continue.

Six months ago, before the H-2B visa problem came to a head in Tlapacoyan, hundreds of recently returned temporary carnival workers marched through the city. They held a banner that read, in simple block letters, "Misa de Emigrantes," or "Mass of the Emigrants."

The image touches on the surreal: a procession of Mexican carnival workers marching through a city built with remittances. A priest dipped an olive branch in water and waved it in front of the crowd, thanking God for their safe return. "It was God who enabled you to work," the priest said, "and God who enabled you to return to a healthy family."

But when the procession arrived at the city's main cathedral, the hundreds of H-2B workers and their families didn't fit into the building's long nave. Some were left outside, where they heard the priest's words echo into an open plaza. Months later, with no work and no church to accommodate the overflow of returned workers, Juarez remembers the words.

"This time last year I was working in Houston," he said. "Now I'm back in Tlapacoyan and what can I do? I can wait ... I can pray that the visas come."