

**Dead Ends and Passageways:  
Temporary Migrant Workers in the long 1970s**

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In September 1963, a train in California smashed into a flatbed truck packed with human cargo. Thirty-one Mexican “braceros”—contracted temporary workers—and one undocumented man who accompanied them died, bringing national attention to the abuses of the program that had brought millions of such men to the United States since 1942.<sup>1</sup> The following year, U.S. farmworker advocates finally achieved their long-cherished goal of convincing U.S. Congress to end the so-called Bracero Program once and for all—in turn, creating the conditions for the successful strikes of the United Farmworkers union, headed by iconic labor leader César Chávez, in the subsequent decade.

In the summer of 1970, the embers of an outdoor fire—used for cooking in the absence of a modern kitchen—spread to the wooden barracks where Spaniard Jesús Santiago, his wife, and their six children slept in a vineyard near Elne, in southern France. Like millions of other Spaniards throughout the twentieth century, the Santiagos spent part of the year picking grapes in France, with husband, wife, and older children all working in the fields. Four of the couple’s children died in the fire while the parents escaped with their other two children.<sup>2</sup> Word of the tragedy quickly reached Paris, where France’s main labor union, unlike their U.S. counterparts following the bracero truck disaster, used the children’s deaths not to call for an end to the migration flow but rather to demand more laws and protections for migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> When France announced on July 3, 1974 that it would end decades of immigrant labor recruitment, labor leaders offered little opposition when an exemption was carved out for seasonal workers.

In April 1974, a plane carrying Malawian mineworkers home from South Africa crashed due to gross negligence, killing 75 men. Mine labor had always been deadly for dozens of Malawians each year, but as in the United States a decade earlier, the shock of the crash created a moment of opportunity. President-for-life Hastings Kumuzu Banda, who had allowed colonial-era labor recruitment practices to continue during the decade since his country’s independence, declared that recruitment would now end. Hundreds of Malawian miners hearing the news demanded to return home immediately on chartered planes, and the following year, Malawian labor recruitment to South Africa was “permanently” suspended.

These stories of migrant worker tragedies on three continents show the diversity of ways that the so-called “recruitment halt” (*anwerbestopp* in German) of the long 1970s played out in practice. At the broadest possible level, these stories show a convergence: receiving and/or sending societies deciding that the migration programs of the post-World War II “thirty glorious years” must now come to an end. Yet when we zoom in to the more granular level of not just policy but its implementation, and not just governments’ plans but migrants’ lives, a different

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<sup>1</sup> Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 148–57.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Monde*, “Quatre Enfants Périssent Dans L’incendie D’un Baraquement,” August 11, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Monde*, “La C.G.T. Demande Le Vote D’une Loi Portant Status De L’immigré,” August 15, 1970.

picture emerges. Indeed, if we for a moment lift away the master narrative of the *anwerbestopp* and the presumed links between economic troubles and reduced labor migration, we can come to understand the long 1970s as not the moment when temporary migrant labor programs actually ended, but rather, the time when they became newly entrenched.

In this chapter as in my larger research project, I explore the social and policy histories of temporary migrant labor programs via a close focus on migration from Spain to France, Malawi to South Africa, and Mexico to the United States from the early twentieth century through the 1970s. Each of these migrations began in the late nineteenth century prior to the establishment of bilateral agreements that ostensibly put these states in the business of controlling migrant recruitment, screening, transport, labor, remittances, and return. Most of these agreements tried to limit family migration practices and encourage men to travel alone. Yet even once they were signed in 1932 (Republican Spain-France), 1936 (British colonial Nyasaland-South Africa), 1942 (Mexico-U.S.), 1961 (Franco's Spain-France), and 1967 (independent Malawi-South Africa), well-developed transborder networks gave migrants multiple options for crossing borders and finding employment informally, which large numbers did in each case. When the latter group of unofficial migrants is included in our frame, a different picture of temporary migration in the decades of postwar prosperity emerges.

The term “guest worker” is of course a translation of the German *Gastarbeiter* and the most common image of the postwar European “guest worker” is of a Turkish migrant in Germany. Yet this image represents contemporary anxieties about assimilation far more than historical predominance. In fact, the largest groups of temporary workers during the “thirty glorious years” in Europe were Italian migrants to Germany and Spanish migrants to France. The latter included industrial workers in industries like automobile production, seasonal workers recruited on tightly controlled programs to cultivate and harvest beets and rice, and the massive workforce of grape pickers, Spanish *vendangeurs*, that came to France, usually on tourist visas, from the early twentieth century through the 1980s aside from war-related interruptions. These foreign workers were not particularly popular with local French laborers. Nonetheless, French intellectuals and policymakers far preferred them to the alternative, North Africans. Migration enforcement ebbed and flowed, and opportunities for those who wished to adjust to a more permanent status while in France remained generally open throughout the postwar economic expansion. An estimated 70-80% of Spaniards who went to work in France during the years of “managed” migration actually went on their own. For this reason, the historiography has seldom even bothered to distinguish between officially Spanish recruited workers and those who avoided the official program and instead entered France on tourist visas.

On the surface, then, it may seem that one of largest groups of post-World War II temporary labor migrants in Europe, Spanish migrants to France, ironically did not fit the typical profile of “guest worker” history because they were poorly controlled and in many cases, not actually required to return home at the end of their contracts. Yet when we look across continents, we see that whatever governments’ rhetoric, key aspects of the French story are actually representative of what occurred elsewhere in practice. In the Americas, scholars estimate that 50-80% of Mexican migration during the Bracero years occurred outside of the program.<sup>4</sup> In Malawi, from the program’s establishment in 1936 through the 1950s, 50-75% of migrants to South Africa traveled on their own, though as South African authorities tightened control over

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas de Genova, “The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant “Illegality”,” *Latino Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 164–65; Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley, *The Oxford History of Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 593.

all Africans' movements in the 1960s, the official program likely gained the upper hand.<sup>5</sup> Overall, these statistics show that the control sending and receiving country governments sought from bilaterally negotiated migration programs was achieved for brief periods of time at best—in large part because it was nearly always the sending societies that had the deepest interest in achieving it, while the more powerful, labor-hungry receiving societies were typically quite lax in practice, at least until the mid-1950s.<sup>6</sup> They more often prioritized their economies' labor needs over the bureaucratic and political impulse to truly control migration.

Our larger narrative of the *anwerbestopp* (recruitment halt) focuses on the experiences of industrialized Europe, where countries such as Germany and France unilaterally ended transborder labor recruitment programs in 1973-4 amid economic malaise and rising anxiety about Turkish and North African immigrants. But a more careful look at specific cases both within and beyond Europe reveals both substantial ambivalence in policy and a much wider variety of motivations for the recruitment halts of the 1960s-70s. At the same time, it shows one key convergence in the results of these stoppages. Paradoxically, they inadvertently proved to policymakers in both sending and receiving societies that following a half-century in which governments actively facilitated “temporary” labor migration, the phenomenon had become too entrenched economically, socially, and culturally to simply halt—even during a period of economic stagnation. As a result, it was the long 1970s that set the stage for the explosive growth of bilateral agreements for “temporary” labor migration during the late 1980s and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

To appreciate the nuances of the 1970s, it is most helpful to consider the ends of these three migration programs not in chronological order, but rather proceeding from the policies that were most to least transparent about the actual dynamics of the period. To that end, I will begin with France, which has played an outsized role in larger narratives of global migration history. When the government of French President Jacques Chirac announced the “suspension” of labor immigration on July 3, 1974—eight months after Germany had done the same—he seemed to be reversing a century of nearly uninterrupted policy that sought immigrants to fill factories and their children to serve as potential soldiers for France. But only a few French agricultural and migration historians have pointed to the major asterisk at the end of the new policy.<sup>8</sup> Two days after the policy was announced, a government circular clarified the details. A number of specific categories, including artists and white-collar workers, were exempted. But the largest exemption by far was for “seasonal workers whose inclusion is particularly requested by the agricultural and hotel sectors, or by companies whose activity is essentially seasonal and which usually call for seasonal foreign labor.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, recruitment of explicitly temporary workers could proceed as usual despite the seismic overall change in migration policy.

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Independent Africans: Migration from Colonial Malawi to the Union of South Africa, c.1935-1961” (M.Sc. thesis, African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2014), 30, 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> On histories emphasizing sending-country emigration control, see Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Adam Chilton and Bartosz Woda, “The Expanding Universe of Bilateral Labor Agreements,” *Theoretical Inquires in Law* 23, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>8</sup> Piotr Plewa, “The Politics of Seasonal Labour Migration in Switzerland, France and Spain,” *International Migration* 51, no. 6 (2013): 106; Ronald Hubscher, *L’immigration Dans Les Campagnes Françaises: 19ème - 20ème Siècle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), 380.

<sup>9</sup> Ministère du Travail, Circulaire No. 974, July 5, 1974, 19950493/5, Archives Nationales de France (ANF), Paris.

In 1976, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), one of France's largest labor unions, noted that the "suspension" of foreign workers was nowhere evident in the trajectories of Spanish agricultural workers, more than 120,000 of whom continued to travel to southern France to pick grapes and other fruits and vegetables during each of the two years after the policy was announced. Together they comprised nearly 90% of the seasonal labor force, followed by Moroccans at 9%. These numbers were by design, as administrative directives flowing from the 1974 policy explicitly stated that the number of workers from non-European countries (eg. Morocco) must be reduced while there would be more flexibility in numbers for European (eg. Spanish) seasonal workers.<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding this exceptional flexibility, agricultural employers pushed the limits of the new regulations still further in their quest for low-wage labor. In 1975, the Ministry of Labor increased the maximum length of a "temporary" worker's stay from eight months to nine, while workers and employers found ways to stack one "temporary" contract onto another to extend their stays through the majority of the year.<sup>11</sup> In sum, employers remained dependent on migrant labor, the French state preferred Spaniards to Moroccans, and the migration continued as an official temporary labor program until European integration gave Spanish farmworkers freedom to cross borders for work in the 1990s.

In Malawi just a few months earlier, the migration program had ended on very different terms. In the Depression of the 1930s as in the recession of the 1970s, Africa's premier country of organized migrant labor recruitment did not fit generalizations because its labor programs were tied to the counter-cyclical gold industry. In periods of high inflation and economic uncertainty, investors whose bank withdrawals destabilized the European and U.S. economies fled into gold investments, stimulating South Africa's key labor-recruiting industry even as other parts of the country's economy suffered.<sup>12</sup> The 1970s was no different. The ends of labor recruitment programs instead came on ideological grounds, as newly independent African governments including Tanzania and Zambia ended official migration relations with the South Africa's despised apartheid regime quickly after independence in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

The singular trajectory of Malawi in this regard had roots back into the 1950s and the origins of the movement for independence itself. There, returned migrants from both South Africa and Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) played key political and financial roles in the growth of the nationalist Malawi Congress Party (MCP).<sup>14</sup> The independence movement's leaders articulated post-colonial visions of freedom and opposition to white rule that they shared with countless other freedom struggles of the period, but their pivotal mass appeal took its most

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<sup>10</sup> Ministre du Travail, Note - Provisoire concernant les modalités d'introduction des travailleurs saisonniers étrangers, February 27, 1975, 19990260/15, ANF.

<sup>11</sup> Ministre du Travail, Note - Provisoire concernant les modalités d'introduction des travailleurs saisonniers étrangers; Hubscher, *L'immigration dans les campagnes françaises*, 380.

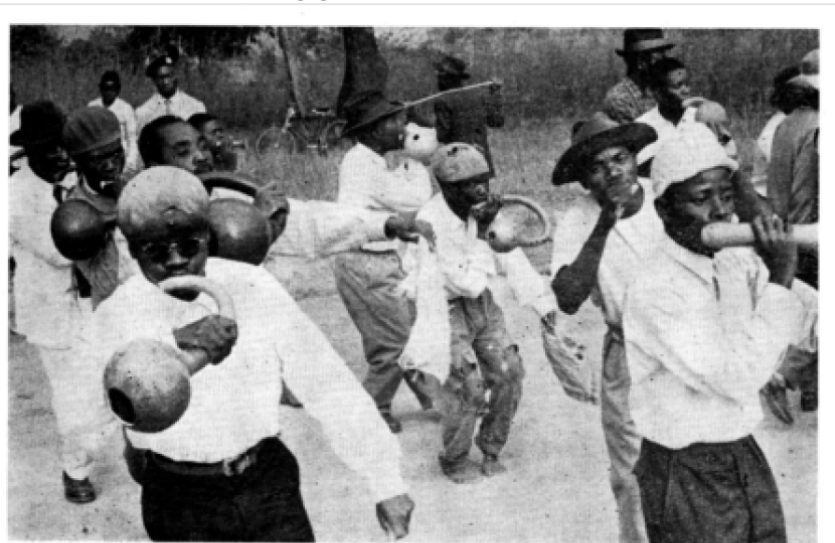
<sup>12</sup> V. L. Allen, *The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa: Volume II, Dissent and Repression in the Mine Compounds, 1948-1982* (Keighley, UK: The Moor Press, 1992), 327; Bill Freund, *Twentieth-Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Crush, Alan Jeeves and David Yudelman, *South Africa's Labor Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 105–6.

<sup>14</sup> Kings M. Phiri, "The Nyasaland State of Emergency as Remembered in Zomba District," in Phiri; McCracken; Mulwafu, *Malawi in crisis*; Anusa Daimon, "'Ringleaders and Troublemakers': Malawian (Nyasa) Migrants and Transnational Labor Movements in Southern Africa, C.1910–1960," *Labor History* 58, no. 5 (2017).

concrete form in opposition to British-imposed farming conservation practices.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, there were nationalist leaders whose politics explicitly connected the dots between European colonialism and labor recruitment to South Africa, opposing the second as a logical extension of their opposition to the first.<sup>16</sup> For example, the movement’s most prominent female leader, Rose Chibambo, recalled years later that women in particular hoped independence would lead to an end to South African labor recruitment because, “We are the mothers” of the men who die in the mines.<sup>17</sup>

But the views of Chibambo and the few male MCP leaders who felt similarly never gained traction. Rather, returned migrants in the movement collectively cultivated a nostalgic attitude towards their time in South Africa, speaking the Fanagalo mineworkers’ language amongst themselves when they didn’t want others to understand and performing dances they had learned in South Africa at MCP events. In this context, opposition to South African labor recruitment never became an animating goal of their movement for freedom.



Nyasaland Congressmen at Nkata Bay dancing to the music of their gourd instruments. Their dance is the “pick-up,” named after the police vans in South Africa where these men all once worked as migrants.

Figure 1 Photo and caption from *Contact: South Africa's Non-Racial Review*, 1959.

This context, along with Banda’s generally capitalist economic views, helps explain his decision to sign a labor agreement with South Africa in 1967 that essentially continued the colonial-era recruitment system.<sup>18</sup> It also explains his visit to the country in 1971—the first official [visit](#) of a postcolonial African leader to the apartheid state. “Kwacha!” he cried as he greeted 5,000 of his countrymen at a rally on the arid Witwatersrand with their national rallying cry, “a new day dawns.” To roaring applause, he noted that many African nationalist leaders

<sup>15</sup> John McCracken, *A History of Malawi: 1859-1966* (Woodbridge Suffolk, Rochester NY: James Currey; Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 321–45; Wapulumuka Mulwafu, “‘Malimidwe’ and the Agrarian Origins of the Nyasaland State of Emergency,” in Phiri; McCracken; Mulwafu, *Malawi in crisis*.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the obituary of Yekweniya Liwonde Kaunda. *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, “Early Christian Convert Dies in Nyasaland,” March 20, 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Joey Power, *Political Culture and Nationalism in Malawi: Building Kwacha* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>18</sup> Agreement between the Governments of the Republic of South Africa and Malawi relating to the employment and documentation of Malawi nationals in South Africa, Republic of South Africa Treaty Series (August 1, 1967).

thought he should end recruitment by South Africa's Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), but "I have defied them! And I will go on defying them." Touring the mine compound where he himself had worked as a young man, Banda nostalgically recalled his time in South Africa. "I remember we used to get fish every Wednesday and sometimes on Friday," he regaled his entourage as they toured the kitchen facilities.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than leftist ideology or economic downturn, then, it was the labor demands of the new African landowning class that provide the backdrop for Banda's decision to suspend mine labor recruitment following the tragic plane crash of April 1974.<sup>20</sup> The end of WNLA recruitment "affected me badly," explained a former mineworker, Alabi Mitawa. In those days, he recalled, "WNLA was the only source of income and capital to start a business, etc. It was a difficult decision and we could not do anything about it."<sup>21</sup> Among returned migrants, Mitawa was hardly alone in this view—particularly as the era's high oil prices drove inflation in Malawi as elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> The mid-1970s revealed once and for all that, in the words of Malawi's premier historian, "if there was one thing worse than working in South Africa, it was being deprived of the opportunity of doing so."<sup>23</sup>

It is perhaps little surprise then that in 1977, Banda restarted official recruitment to South Africa "without any explanation."<sup>24</sup> Malawi's *anwerbestopp* had shown Banda and his allies what they had probably always known: migrant cash had become an intractable part of Malawi's economy, and in turn, the stability of Banda's increasingly repressive regime.

In the Americas, the Bracero Program had been in numerical decline since 1959, as both farmers and workers tired of its bureaucratic requirements and turned towards undocumented migration as well as some mechanization. Yet even in its final year, nearly 200,000 braceros were recruited, and in some areas they still constituted between half and 90% of the agricultural workforce. Under pressure from labor advocates, Congress refused to renew the program in 1964. Yet in California, farmers unable to cope with the sudden loss of their predominant labor force managed to extend it unofficially through 1968.<sup>25</sup>

In California and beyond, circular Mexican migration to the United States did not stop—it simply shifted form to occur outside of official legal channels (a description that indeed, already characterized the majority of this migratory movement even during the program). Social scientists estimate that 87,000 Mexicans entered the United States as undocumented immigrants in 1965, rising to nearly 1.5 million per year by the end of the 1970s—far exceeding the bracero-era peak of around 400,000 formally recruited workers annually.<sup>26</sup>

Many of these workers were the very same people who had participated in the Bracero Program. For example, Juan Torres Briones picked vegetables in California and Texas as a bracero from 1959 through the end of the program in 1964. Just as the labor movement advocates of the programs' end would have wanted, Torres Briones returned home to his *pueblo*

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<sup>19</sup> John Miller, "Banda Asserts Defiance," *The Daily Telegraph*, August 19, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *The history of black mineworkers in South Africa*, 435.

<sup>21</sup> Alabi Mitawa, interview by Elias P.K. Mandala, April 24, 2022, Mangochi, Malawi.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, *The history of black mineworkers in South Africa*, 435; Geoffrey Traugh, "Yielding Trouble: Development Dilemmas and the Political Uses of Bad Data in Malawi, 1964-1978," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 244; McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 261.

<sup>23</sup> McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, *The history of black mineworkers in South Africa*, 435.

<sup>25</sup> Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming*, 157-77.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas Massey and Audrey Singer, "New Estimates of Undocumented Mexican Migration and the Probability of Apprehension," *Demography* 32, no. 2 (1995): 209.

of Dolores Hidalgo in the state of Guanajuato, where he no longer posed a threat to U.S.-based farmworkers' union organization. And just as the Mexican bureaucrats who first enacted the program would have wanted, he built upon his experiences with farm labor in the United States to become a tractor mechanic, contributing as intended to the modernization of Mexican agriculture. He got married and started a family.<sup>27</sup>

Yet that was precisely when Torres Briones' cooperation with the *anwerbestopp* broke down. Needing money to support his growing family, Torres Briones began to cross the border again in 1968. The official program had ended, but border enforcement was ineffective—reflecting the ambivalence at the heart of a state that had “ended” Mexican migration despite agribusinesses' utter dependence on it. Crossing back and forth each year just as he had with the program, Torres Briones was apprehended by immigration authorities just once. Two weeks later he tried again successfully. He spent a decade and a half working part of each year in the United States in farm labor and construction as an undocumented immigrant. Legal status through an amnesty law in 1986 only eased his seasonal migrations. He never moved his family to the United States, instead continuing to visit them in Mexico each winter.<sup>28</sup>

### Reconsidering the *anwerbestopp*

As we have seen, the much-vaunted economic stagnation of the 1970s and much-discussed *anwerbestopp* of Europe's largest economies had almost no concrete, lasting results in the arena of circular labor migration from Spain to France, Malawi to South Africa, and Mexico to the United States. Spanish temporary migration from Spain to France remained legal and prevalent; from Malawi to South Africa, it ended “permanently” only to restart three years later; and in the United States, it ended on paper but was replaced by similar flows of many of the same people to many of the same workplaces, tacitly encouraged by both governments because of the economic value it held to each.<sup>29</sup>

Recruitment had begun in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at the initiative of capitalists in receiving countries; bilateral agreements had begun in the interwar period largely at the demands of sending countries to assert more control over their citizens' and subjects' movements and conditions. Now in the 1970s, bureaucrats high and low in both groups of governments came to believe that stopping such migrations was not actually possible, even during an economic downturn. Just as in the Depression of the 1930s, unemployment among domestic workers and the recruitment of foreign workers to poorly paid jobs could easily coexist. The cases explored here thus challenge the idea that economic downturns such as the 1970s inevitably lead to reduce demands for immigrant workers.

The 1960s-70s thus simultaneously oversaw the end of migrant recruitment *and* its profound entrenchment. Before long, the United States followed in the footsteps of France and Malawi to reopen legal channels for temporary labor migration. In 1986, U.S. Congress authorized the start of a new temporary labor recruitment program known as H2-A; Mexican authorities, who had been petitioning throughout the 1970s to restart such a program, were happy to cooperate with it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Violeta Domínguez, Interview with Juan Torres Briones, May 26, 2003, Item #91, Bracero History Archive.

<sup>28</sup> Domínguez, Interview with Juan Torres Briones.

<sup>29</sup> Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Minian, *Undocumented lives*; Julie M. Weise, “Migrating Concepts: The Transatlantic Roots of the Bracero Program, 1919-42,” *American Historical Review* (forthcoming).

Today, numbers of workers recruited annually from Mexico via H2-A have reached their bracero-era peak and are on a rising trajectory; France continues to operate several temporary labor migration schemes, including one that brings South Americans with legal residency in Spain across the border to work agricultural jobs; Malawians continue to migrate to South Africa, and South Africa continues to recruit labor from throughout the region.<sup>31</sup> The long 1970s' economic recession and general discourse that the time had come to stop migrant labor recruitment did not halt processes set into motion a century before; rather, they demonstrated, clearly and for all to see, just how entrenched such processes were. Fifty years on, advocates on both sides of the political spectrum who believe these migrants' abject conditions or their threat to domestic labor and citizenship call for a new *anwerbestopp* will find their goals still harder to achieve.

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<sup>31</sup> Frédéric Décosse, "Persistent Unfree Labour in French Intensive Agriculture: An Historical Overview of the 'OFII' Temporary Farmworkers Programme," in *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area*, ed. Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro and Domenico Perrotta (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01353877/document>; Frédéric Décosse, Emmanuelle Hellio, and Béatrice Mesini, "Le Travail Détaché En Europe: 25 Ans Après Son Instauration, État Des Lieux Et Perspectives," *Migrations et Société* 34, no. 190 (2022); Dossier "Migration et travail détaché en Europe"; Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman, *South Africa's Labor Empire*.