Crucible of Struggle

A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era

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citizenship classes to instill American values and habits and, more so, to acquaint them with factory discipline. More important, employers saw Americanization as an effective antiunion device, just as employers maintained an ethnic mix in the workplace to perpetuate mutual distrust among their workers.

Public education was a training ground for U.S. citizenship. Educational theories emphasized English usage, American values, and work as vehicles for acculturation to American language and society. However, these theories also embraced the prevailing racist stereotypes of the Mexican's innate intellectual inferiority. Bolstered by biased tests and surveys, Anglo teachers and administrators believed that Mexican students, because of their intellectual limitations, had few aspirations and limited abilities beyond manual or domestic work. Consequently, the vocational curricula in "Mexican" schools served to funnel youth into low-wage work. Schooling for Mexicans essentially trained them for the menial roles they would play in American society.73

The efforts to Americanize Mexicans were thwarted because of Mexico's proximity, which made visits and permanent return possible. This homeward orientation resulted in low naturalization rates. In addition, the Mexicans' relative isolation at railroad, mining, agricultural, and similar work campsites enabled them to retain their native culture and language while limiting opportunities to gain familiarity with American society. Moreover, the everyday reality of racism made the Mexicans resist Americanization.74

Various conservative groups loyal to Americanization worked hard politically to curb Mexican immigration. They condemned the immutable foreignness and "inferiority" of Mexican life and deemed this alien menace a threat to the health and morals of the nation. Various forms of outright racial discrimination set Mexicans apart. These included limited job advancement, restrictive housing covenants, separate days in churches, inferior "Mexican schools," separate entrances and Mexican sections in theaters, and special "colored" days in public swimming pools.75

MEXICAN MUTUALISM AND FRATERNALISM

Mexicans created numerous mutual aid and fraternal organizations in the United States. Membership in each varied, reflecting a cross-section of occupations and wealth. Some Mexicans engaged in political activities related to Mexico, whereas labor issues were a matter of concern for many others because of their working-class composition that reflected the backgrounds of the Mexican population as a whole.76 Individuals to whom members could go for help emerged as leaders and became spokesmen for the Mexican community without a public voice.

The mutual aid and fraternal organizations assisted their members in time of need with small emergency loans; medical, life, and burial insurance; and legal services. Some voluntary associations reinforced the customs, language, and traditions of its members through a host of cultural activities, such as the commemoration of Mexican holidays. Others ran schools because of the inferior education Mexican children received in the segregated public schools. Mexican consuls often served as honorary members of the voluntary associations. In the cause of employer
antiunionism, the consuls exerted significant effort in censoring or containing sub-
versive ideas and social unrest and generally maintaining control over Mexican
workers.

Few voluntary associations subscribed to American assimilation. Instead,
they promoted Mexican nationalism and encouraged members to maintain close
ties to their homeland. Other organizations, open to the wider issues of class con-
sciousness, encouraged labor activism among its membership. For example, in
1928, numerous Mexican working-class organizations joined millions of people in
the United States and around the world protesting on behalf of the ordeal of Nicola
Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the two Italian immigrants and anarchists con-
victed of murder in 1921 in an atmosphere poisoned by antiradical and racial hys-
teria. Class solidarity, however, was sometimes impeded by the ethnic chauvinism
of members.

In the years following World War I, Mexican labor activism increased and
became a recognizable fixture in the Southwest. Overall, Mexicans recognized the
benefits of involvement in unions for protection at a time when great numbers of
them were unorganized. In November 1927, the Federation of Mexican Societies
in Los Angeles persuaded a number of Mexican local unions to organize into the
Confederación de Uniones Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos or CUOM (Confed-
eration of Mexican Workers and Peasants Unions). With its three thousand mem-
bers organized into twenty affiliated locals, CUOM's goals included wage and job
equality and protecting the members against unjust deportation practices. CUOM
understood that it would fail so long as growers had a surplus labor pool; there-
fore, it called for the United States and Mexico to restrict immigration from Mex-
ico. CUOM declined, but its objective of organizing Mexican workers to strengthen
and improve their position was important in establishing the roots of Mexican
trade unionism in southern California.77

In the following year, during the Imperial Valley cantaloupe strike, a high-
profile work stoppage by Mexican farmworkers that was marred by vigilantism
and strikebreaking, La Unión de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial (Imperial Valley
Workers Union) was formed from two mutual-aid societies. Changing its name to
the Mexican Mutual Aid Society of the Imperial Valley (MMAS), its members
demanded recognition of their union and better housing conditions for workers.78

The Liga Protectora Latina (Latin Protective League) was founded in Phoenix,
Arizona, in 1914. With its motto, "One for all. All for one," it protected the inter-
ests of its working-class membership, including their civil rights. Although anti-IWW,
it fought against House Bill 54, the Claypool-Kinney Bill, restricting the employ-
ment of aliens (Mexicans) in mine work, and it later fought Law No. 23 that called
for the exclusion of Mexicans from skilled railroad and mining work.77 The Socie-
dad Protección Mutual de Trabajadores Unidos (the Mutual Protection Society of
Mexican Workers) similarly advanced the interests of Mexican workers in the
Rocky Mountain states against discrimination. It was founded in 1900 in Antoñito,
Colorado, as an alternative to the exclusive and racist American Federation of Labor
(AFL) that declared that Mexicans were unorganizable and a threat to white work-
ers. The Sociedad expanded; its members organized additional lodges in southern
Colorado and northern New Mexico, and its influence was also felt in Utah.
Mexicans who were leaders and established members of their communities, with links to established groups and institutions, took on issues on its behalf. Tejano attorney Manuel C. Gonzales, through his law practice, was in contact with Mexican workers from San Antonio to the lower Rio Grande Valley and understood the problems they encountered. In 1917, Gonzales created La Liga Protectora Mexicana (the Mexican Protective League) to provide Mexicans legal advice on such matters as alien residents' rights, workers' compensation, and tenant farmer contracts and due process.

The Mexican Protective League lobbied the Texas State Legislature to halt the exploitation of Tejano tenant farmers by unscrupulous Anglo-Texan landowners who regularly defrauded them. In 1918, the league pushed for a state law requiring landlords to have a court order when law officials accompanied them onto a tenants' rented land. Maintaining Mexican labor in a cycle of indebtedness ensured worker stability. Two years later, in 1920, the league supported legislation to protect tenants' crops on shares. In addition, the league produced a bilingual handbook on landlord-tenant rights, workers' compensation, and on the penal code; it published a weekly legal-aid advice column in the San Antonio newspaper El Imparcial de Texas (The Texas Impartial); and it helped the Democratic Party defeat pro-Ku Klux Klan Republican gubernatorial candidate Joseph W. Bailey. In the same year, the Mexican Protective League founded La Liga Instructiva Mexicana (the Mexican Instructive League) to prepare Mexicans for U.S. citizenship. Mexican Protective League chapters were later established in many parts of the Southwest and in the Midwest.

The Alianza Hispano-Americana (Hispanic-American Alliance) was the largest Mexican American fraternal organization in the Southwest. It was formed in 1894 in Tucson, Arizona, in response to the escalation of discrimination and racism against Mexicans. As an ally to Mexican workers in the copper mining region, Alianza founded chapters in Florence, Clifton, Bisbee, Globe, Tempe, Nogales, Yuma, and Metcalf. Alianza members expanded their organization into the Imperial Valley of California, Texas, and other parts of the Southwest. The Alianza spoke out on a wide range of issues, and the right to vote was an important message. Aware of the various ways Anglos kept Mexicans from voting, the Alianza supported the woman suffrage movement and expanded their membership to women in 1913.

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) signaled the emergence of new leadership in the Mexican community of the United States. LULAC embraced a conservative point of view in matters of civil rights and race relations. Its goals were "to develop within the members of our race, the best . . . loyal citizens of the United States of America." On August 24, 1927, several dozen Mexican Americans convened a meeting in Harlingen, Texas, to form a new organization based on a coalition with the Sons of America, founded six years earlier in San Antonio. The Sons of America, promoters of loyalty to America, refused to participate as a group, though some members would join with the Tejanos to form the League of United Latin American Citizens. World War I veteran, foreign service officer, and San Antonio attorney Alonzo Perales was one of LULAC's founders and an important figure. In its early
form, LULAC epitomized Mexican American middle-class concerns about maintaining respectability, as well as allaying the tensions and divisions within the Mexican American community over immigration.  

LULAC was an organization driven by the goal of creating a new Mexican American sense of self. It limited membership to American citizens and made English its official language. The founding of LULAC reflected the larger changes transforming Mexican American life in the United States, particularly the struggle to reverse the disenfranchisement that began in the late nineteenth century limiting Mexican Americans' rights as citizens with regard to the use of public facilities, voting, and serving on juries. A chief concern was the growing social restrictions placed on Mexican Americans resulting from the significant increase in the Spanish-speaking population through immigration from Mexico.

Mexican immigrants in unprecedented numbers introduced new conflicts in American society already rife with racial unrest and embroiled in debates about immigrants. To many Mexican Americans, the Mexican immigrants who established enclaves in their communities accentuated differences between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. Specifically, their presence challenged notions of identity.

Much like northern African Americans responding to the Great Black Migration, LULAC's members feared that racial discrimination would force their social
life inward toward the larger Mexican immigrant community rather than outward as they hoped. This is one important reason why LULAC's leadership strongly embraced an identity as Americans. They called attention to the contributions Mexican Americans had made to the United States. LULAC's constitution specified that English was its official language. The organization, moreover, encouraged cooperation with Anglos toward the goal of extolling and attaining the benefits of U.S. citizenship for Mexican Americans and, faced with the influx of laborers from Mexico, pushed for restrictive immigration legislation for that country.88

Through its national office and local branches, LULAC endeavored to be the voice of the Mexican American community. Education became a subject of urgent debate, and the organization took the lead in attempting to better schools for Mexican American children, many whom attended inferior Mexican schools. In many areas of the Southwest local primary schools were widely unavailable, or else Mexican American children were enrolled in school for only part of the year due to the demands of the job market on their parents and the need for children's labor. In its campaign for better education, LULAC formed the School Improvement League. Set in place by custom and local treatment rather than state statute, the school desegregation of Mexican children was left up to the discretion of local officials, the majority overwhelmingly Anglo. Seeking acceptance of Mexican Americans as Caucasian, LULAC began the unusual precedent of using the "legal whiteness" argument.89

Mexican American and Anglo attorneys worked on a pro bono basis to assist LULAC in its legal struggle to desegregate hundreds of local schools in Texas. In 1930, LULAC brought the first class-action lawsuit against segregation of Mexicans in Texas public schools. The Salvatierra v. Del Rio Independent School District case ended the designation of "Mexican schools" in Texas. However, mechanisms for enforcement of school integration were never realized beyond the demand on local school systems. In the same year, LULAC also campaigned for the U.S. Bureau of Census to reclassify persons of Mexican descent as "white." This was done so Anglos would distinguish them from blacks and to blur distinctions between Mexican Americans and Anglos.90 Until the 1930s, when it was overshadowed by progressive class-based organizations, LULAC remained the most influential Mexican American organization in the United States.

CONCLUSION

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, as World War I cut off the supply of immigrant labor from Europe, Mexican immigrants arrived daily in the United States in larger numbers. They found work wherever they could at whatever rate of pay was offered them. As the newest group of workers, Mexicans were often hired for the dirtiest jobs. Together with Mexican Americans, they organized to gain security as workers. Revolutionary politics reflected the era's global wars and revolutions. The IWW, with its inclusiveness and its tradition of leadership, spread industrial unionism among Mexican workers, and many embraced it. Countless Spanish-speaking workers were followers of anarcho-syndicalism or were sympathizers with the socialist movement. All faced repression by police, judicial, and
military agencies as employers unleashed violent repression against them and used deportations to defeat them.

In the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas what remained of the old Tejano ranching society disappeared, destroyed by Anglos drawn to the region by new opportunities for profit. Tejanas, among them Laredo's Jovita Idar and sisters Andrea and Teresa Villarreal of San Antonio, eloquently addressed class, race, and gender inequities at this time in speeches and through newspapers they established for this purpose. In response to the explosion of race hatred in this region, local Tejanos rose up against the repression under the banner of the Plan de San Diego and were mercilessly defeated.

Immigration from Mexico proceeded apace during World War I as the first large wave of Mexican immigrants came to the United States. This immigration was a product of chain migration. Meanwhile, unauthorized immigration from Mexico was sustained by the recruiting efforts of greedy American employers and the pressure they placed on their congressional allies to relax border restrictions. Mexican immigration from this point on would present challenges to those concerned with the absorption, assimilation, and control of this group.91

Mexican Americans volunteered for service overseas with the American Expeditionary Force and fought in the Great War. To show their citizenship, and despite discrimination, Mexican American women volunteered for patriotic service at home, such as buying and selling Liberty Bonds and working for the Red Cross. Though their ability was doubted, Mexican American soldiers conducted themselves with bravery and courage. Little tribute was paid to the valor of Mexican American soldiers who fought for the flag of the United States in Europe.

The immigrants responded directly to the impact of industrialization and modern American values and adjusted to living in the United States, though they retained an attachment to their homeland. Women ran boardinghouses or procured work as domestics, waitresses, cooks, hotel maids, nannies, and factory workers. Mexicans recreated the familiar aspects of their home country in the United States. They lived and worked together, established their own Catholic parishes and other formal institutions, and possessed an elite, many of whom became community leaders. Mexicans, largely from the working classes, created the mutual-aid and fraternal organizations that gave voice to their myriad needs.

Anglos did not distinguish between the newcomers from Mexico and Mexican Americans. Both were perceived as foreigners, even though the latter's ancestors had been in the United States for generations or had become Americans with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexican immigration reinforced and intensified both the external Anglo hostility and the internal pressures within the Mexican communities. As evidenced by the rising tide of class and political polarization, Mexicans were divided between American-born citizens and immigrants. The persistent curse of racism dominated the lives of Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike, however. Some employers refused to hire Mexicans or utilized mandatory language tests to weed out non-English-speaking immigrants. State and municipal laws segregated the races. Whether as migratory farmworkers who moved their camps with the changing agricultural seasons or as factory workers
who turned their efforts to a mechanized and subdivided process, Mexicans became the dregs of twentieth-century America.

The Great Depression forced Mexicans further into austerity and marginalization as their traditional institutions proved unable to give assistance and collapsed. As the economic crisis unfolded, controls were implemented on Mexican immigration. Nativist sentiment against them intensified, and additional numbers departed for their homelands.

Through the practice of mutual alliance that helped them develop their communities, Mexicans now turned to developing unions and methods of resisting employers. Leaders helped generate new forms of worker protest and association as Mexicans now turned to building an inclusive democratic union movement in the United States.

NOTES

4. Montgomery, Fall of the House of Labor, 332.
5. Ibid., 36–37.
7. An important document bearing on the subject of farm labor was Carleton H. Parker's The Casual Laborer and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).
8. Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, Mexican American People, 10.
10. Montgomery, Fall of the House of Labor, 333, 344.
11. Ibid., 346.
12. Ibid., 346–351.
13. The United States Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional in December 1915.
14. Truett, Fugitive Landscapes, 174–175; George Soule, "The Law of Necessity in Bisbee," Nation 113 (1921): 21–23; Colleen O'Neill, "Domesticity Deployed: Gender, Race, and the Construction of Class Struggle in the Bisbee Deportation," Labor History 34 (Spring 1993): 256–273. Columbus officials refused to take charge of the prisoners, and the Mexican strikers were taken out to the desert, where they were released and left to make their own way back home. McWilliams, North from Mexico, 197.
15. Gregory Andrews, Shoulder to Shoulder?: The American Federation of Labor, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1924 (Berkeley: University of California Press,