

Labouring for Citizenship: Immigration and the Mexican American Labour Movement

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Introduction

The central objective of this paper is to highlight the roles and struggles of Mexican-American labour organizers and activists, to better explain the nuances of organized labour's attitudes and policies towards restrictive immigration laws. A distinctive feature of this article is an examination of the influence of labour and civil rights movements originating in South Texas, and the later diffusion of their debates about immigration to California and beyond. The most comprehensive book-length texts for this task are Zaragoza Vargas' *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from the Colonial Times to the Present Era* (2017) and his earlier text, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights* (2008).¹ David Gutiérrez's *Walls and Mirrors* (1995) offers an important source of material about middle-class Mexican-American civil rights groups and their internal tensions about accommodating newcomers from Mexico.² But *Walls and Mirrors* is primarily a work of ethnic politics, not a labour history. It covers labour issues in brief without mentioning early American Federation of Labor (AFL) activists like Clemente Idar, who helped mediate negotiations between US-born and Mexican immigrant workers from the First World War to the Great Depression. Gutierrez's account of César Chávez's ambivalence towards immigration from Mexico is complemented by later, more in-depth studies of this issue, including Frank Bardacke's *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (2011).³

A secondary goal of this article involves rethinking Mexican Americans' participation in campaigns to toughen enforcement measures targeting undocumented immigration and guestworkers. Progressives, including African American civil rights leader Barbara Jordan, have long empathized with low-income workers who fear the potential impact of undocumented and expansive legal immigration on their wages and working conditions, even though economic evidence suggests that this negative impact assessment is misleading.⁴ Mexican-American labour leaders including AFL organizer Clemente Idar, National Farm Laborers Union (NFLU) organizer Ernesto Galarza and United Farm Workers (UFW) leader César Chávez provided one response to this challenge. They sought to strike a balance between protecting the rights of immigrants who will take part in labour actions while advocating for immigration policies that would protect the wage and labour standards of US resident workers. Emma Tenayuca provided a more progressive alternative vision that called on the working class to build a new society in the US Southwest, which would bridge immigration status differences to

confront racial and ethnic prejudice and improve the economic well-being of all residents of the region. A similar vision guides the labour movement's support for immigrant rights today. Today, Latinx peoples represent a source of vitality in labour unions despite declines in overall membership. Labour activism still serves as a gateway to further Latinx political mobilization for progressive causes.⁵

Setting Migratory Patterns from Mexico to the US in Motion

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which divided Northern Mexico from the American Southwest in 1848, did not impede the free circulation of Mexican citizens into territory that was now part of the United States. But until 1880, this exchange was limited in number and prompted as much by family, kinship, and community connections that spanned the new border as by economic motivations.⁶ By dispossessing indigenous peasants from their lands and linking them to the US border with the construction of intercontinental railroads, the regime of Mexican President Porfirio Díaz pushed pioneering emigrants from the Mexican interior to seek work in the US-Mexico border region by the late nineteenth century.⁷ Agribusiness operators relied on labour contractors known as *enganchistas* or “the ones who hook you” to solicit prospective workers with no previous migration experience from the Mexican interior.⁸ These emigrants were recruited to work in the cotton fields of Texas, the beet fields of Colorado, and the citrus groves of California.⁹ Agribusiness owners operated on the theory that Mexicans provided a steady source of cheap labour necessary to the development of the Southwest, and they would return home when they were not needed by US employers.¹⁰ The *enganchistas* brought new migrants to the United States from the interior of Mexico, some of whom settled in the United States and recruited family and friends from their hometowns to join them.¹¹ They helped set into motion circular migration patterns that endured for over a century, despite disruptions during the Great Depression and mass deportations in the 1930s.¹²

During the First World War, the US government took the place of private labour contractors by actively soliciting migrant workers to replace American workers fighting overseas, and continued the program afterwards at the urging of agricultural interests in the Southwest.¹³ The objective of the 1917–1921 guest worker program was to foster the development of a flexible, low-cost labour force that would not seek to settle in the United States or aspire to US citizenship.¹⁴ Insofar as Mexicans continued to serve this role, their presence was encouraged by business interests and tolerated by the US government, which exempted migrants from the Western Hemisphere from quota restrictions that all but curtailed legal immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe after 1924.¹⁵

Pull the Ladder after Me: Mexican-Americans and Immigration Restriction

The AFL was intensely concerned with preventing more Mexican workers fleeing economic and political turmoil from entering the United States during the 1910s and 1920s. This concern peaked during economic downturns in the United States, when US workers—including US-born citizens of Mexican ancestry—blamed Mexican workers for breaking strikes and competing with them.¹⁶ The AFL pursued a three-prong strategy to combat further labour migration by Mexican nationals. First, the AFL sponsored the development of a Pan-American Federation of Labour (PAFL) to assist Mexican workers in their home country.¹⁷ Second, AFL President Samuel Gompers used the PAFL as a vehicle to defend the AFL's longstanding opposition to “temporarily admitting illiterate Mexicans” as guest workers during World War I, and its subsequent 1919 resolution opposing all immigration to the US.¹⁸ The AFL unsuccessfully lobbied the federal government to restrict Mexican workers from entering the United States as part of the National Origins Quota Act of 1924.¹⁹ Finally, the AFL backed and organized local Mexican-American trade unions along the US-Mexico border whose members supported restricting further co-ethnic immigration from Mexico.²⁰ This policy was strongly supported by the AFL's Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL) affiliate. At the Laredo Pan-American Labor Conference in 1918, Gompers recruited longtime civil rights activist and labour organizer Clemente Idar to counter International Workers of the World (IWW) influence, propagate the AFL's “pure and simple” business unionism philosophy, defend the AFL's restrictionist policies, and organize Mexican-American workers across the Southwestern United States.²¹

Clemente Idar: The AFL's Bridge-Builder with the Tejano Community in the Interwar Period

Few Mexican-American labour leaders were better suited for this bridge-building task than Clemente Idar, a US citizen born on November 11, 1893, in Laredo, Texas, with deep social and political connections on both sides of the border. Cynthia Orozco notes that Idar has been unfairly “slighted in discussions of leadership” in earlier leading histories of labour and the Mexican-American civil rights movement, given his importance as a journalist, community leader, and labour organizer for the AFL in the US Southwest.²² This omission of Idar and other early Mexican-American labour leaders is evident in David G. Gutiérrez's *Walls and Mirrors* (1995).

Gutiérrez does briefly mention Idar's father, Nicasio Idár. Before joining the AFL, Clemente Idar was already an opinion leader in the Tejano²³ stronghold of Laredo. There, his family published a leading newspaper, *La Cronica*. His father organized a political movement, *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista*, which brought together Mexican-American mutual assistance or *mutualista* and labour groups across the South Texas border region to defend Mexican-Americans against lynchings and other civil rights abuses perpetrated by Anglo-Texans.²⁴ Though the Idars were a transnational family, they looked to the United States to defend their community's

well-being before many of their compatriots in South Texas came to the same conclusion.²⁵ Clemente Idar and his family are briefly featured in labour historian Zaragosa Vargas's *Crucible of Struggle* (2017) as champions for "progressive national and local issues" who "were devoted to achieving social justice for Tejanos" in South Texas.²⁶

Idar was able to forge coalitions across class lines to further the interests of Mexicans working in the United States. His views on immigration were fluid and calculated to serve the best interests of his community of established US citizens with ancestors including Mexican immigrants of the past century, settlers who first arrived in South Texas when the area was under the control of the Spanish crown, and the indigenous peoples of the region. During World War I, Idar and fellow Tejano community leader José Tomás Canales participated in a statewide pro-immigration campaign alongside conservative business groups, which encouraged Mexican labourers to stay in the United States to help the war effort.²⁷ World War I and the Selective Service Act's draft registration requirement for resident aliens highlighted divided allegiances among Texas residents of Mexican ancestry. Thousands of Mexican nationals fled the United States to avoid being drafted into the US military.²⁸ Affluent Mexican émigrés claimed draft exemptions through the Mexican consulate as non-declarant aliens, while Anglo-Texan employers and politicians lobbied for exemptions for Mexican agricultural labourers.²⁹ Between them lay a growing class of longtime resident and US-born Mexican-Americans who proudly served in the US military during World War I, and differentiated themselves from "slackers" who fled to Mexico to avoid conscription.³⁰ These patriotic, upwardly mobile, and rights-conscious Mexican-American veterans returned to South Texas to found organizations to defend their community's right to educational services, legal rights, and political representation.³¹ As an AFL organizer, Idar helped returning veterans regain their jobs and fight for better working conditions under a union charter.³²

Idar believed that the Mexican-American community in South Texas needed to identify with the United States, and fight for civil rights and equal labor protections as US citizens. With this view of his community's interests in mind, Idar embraced Gompers's charge to organize Mexican-American workers, while persuading his Mexican counterparts to voluntarily limit emigration to protect Mexican nationals from corporate exploitation in the United States.³³ Following initial organizing successes along the US-Mexican border in 1918 and 1919, Gompers expanded Idar's mandate to the diplomatic arena. In 1920, he met with incoming Mexican president Alvaro Obregon, urging him to adopt emigration controls and to establish border area labour agencies that would negotiate contracts meeting union wage standards.³⁴ Canuto Vargas, the Spanish-language secretary of the PAFL, put the matter in stronger terms. Guest workers, "though they cross the border legally," were merely "temporary slaves" who "have not the right to quit their employer at any time ... the continued importation, then, of this class of labor,

is harmful to the very same workers who are thus imported, and is harmful to the interests of organized labor in the Southwest. It benefits only the employers.”³⁵

In 1921, Idar turned his full attention to the immigration issue, aiming to convince Gompers that the unrestricted movement of transient labourers from Mexico was just as harmful to American organized labour’s interests as labour migration from Europe. He urged AFL leaders to more aggressively protect Mexican workers from abuses at the hands of Anglo employers.³⁶ Idar described their plight and ongoing tensions with Anglo workers in economic, rather than ethnoracial terms, emphasizing:

American unemployed workers resent the opportunity being given to ... many Mexicans at wages much lower than what the average American worker would be inclined to accept in view of the present cost of living conditions. We must be very clear in stating these are not race riots. They are hunger riots.³⁷

Idar believed that the union workers he represented—including Mexican-American US citizens—were concerned about maintaining their jobs in the face of competition, and not by ethnocentrism towards their co-nationals or distant relatives. He worked to convince transient Mexican workers to return to their country of origin during the Depression of 1920–1921.³⁸ Idar then turned his attention to keeping the border “tightly closed against imported strike-breakers,” boasting to Gompers that by working with Mexican officials, they were able to persuade “a train load of strike-breakers who were about to cross the Rio Grande at Laredo” to return to their homes.³⁹ Idar’s early 1920s work on the repatriation and immigration restriction issue laid the groundwork for a 1925 accord with the Mexican Federation of Labor (CROM) to discourage transient labour migration to the United States, notwithstanding legal protections for migration rights in Mexico.⁴⁰ At this conference, AFL and Mexican CROM delegates agreed to a nationalist “principle of voluntary restraint” on labour migration and emigration, “recogniz[ing] their own obligations to restrain their own people from moving across boundaries in such a way as to menace the conditions of life and institutions of other peoples.”⁴¹

In Texas, Idar forged a bridge between newer labour and established Mexican-American mutual assistance groups, leveraging their organizational power to deliver Mexican-American votes for labour-friendly local and statewide candidates. The most prominent of the groups led by the new generation of Mexican-American World War I veterans, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), was founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, on a charter that excluded non-US citizens from its ranks. LULAC’s founders narrowly agreed to bar non-US citizens from the organization in an effort to achieve equal rights and recognition from Anglo political leaders, based on their allegiance to the United States.⁴² One

of LULAC's founders, Alonso S. Perales, justified this policy to exclude Mexican immigrants as a short-term strategy that would empower Mexican-American citizens to represent and defend the interests of all US residents of Mexican descent.⁴³ LULAC stood outside the working-class labour movement, representing middle-class US citizens descended from Mexican immigrants, Spanish settlers, and the indigenous inhabitants of South Texas. They also represented the business interests of the region.

After making the controversial decision to exclude non-citizens, LULAC's leaders remained divided on the issue of immigration restriction and how to respond to new labour migration from Mexico. Speaking as a representative for both LULAC and the Chamber of Commerce in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, José Tomás Canales testified against a renewed effort at restricting Mexican immigration, sponsored by east Texas Congressman John C. Box in 1930. Canales sought an enforcement regime that was more responsive to "local conditions" and the citizenship claims of Mexican-Americans on the border.⁴⁴ Perales denounced "statements made by some [Anglo] sponsors of this quota bill, to the effect that the Mexican people is an inferior and degenerate race ... and that they do not want to become American citizens."⁴⁵ Perales challenged the sponsors of the bill to find proof that "the Mexicans—that is, those from Mexico, are a menace to the American workingmen, because they come here and work for lower wages, then I say all right; good for you, more power to you."⁴⁶ Furious at Perales's intervention against the Box immigration restriction bill, Idar and San Antonio LULAC vice president M.C. Gonzales denounced Canales, Garza and Perales's Congressional testimony. Idar and Gonzales stated that they "have no authority to speak for us nor the league on this subject ... and further, the problem of immigration from Mexico is foreign to the general purpose and aims of the league."⁴⁷

Canales responded by excoriating "the virus of the American Federation of Labor" at LULAC's next general meeting, underscoring divisions between organized labour and middle-class business interests, both in LULAC and the broader Mexican-American civil rights movement.⁴⁸ Thereafter, Canales led a successful movement to expel Idar from LULAC for advancing the AFL's restrictionist agenda over LULAC's campaign to "defend the honor and integrity of [the Mexican-American] race."⁴⁹ For Canales and his supporters in LULAC, the AFL's class politics threatened Mexican-American assimilation and acceptance into the Anglo-dominated middle class. By 1932, as economic conditions worsened and Anglo support for the deportation of Mexican labourers strengthened, Canales adjusted his position. LULAC's middle-class leadership joined the AFL in abandoning thousands of American residents of Mexican descent to the care of Mexican consuls.⁵⁰ LULAC's debate with Mexican-American US citizen AFL representatives over the future of Mexican immigration to the US in the late 1920s and early 1930s shows how distinctions in social class and citizenship status divided a Mexican-American US citizen middle class from Mexican working-class

immigrants living in the United States and their US-born children.

Deportation and Forced Repatriation of Mexican Immigrants

The deportation and forced repatriation of Mexican immigrants is a shameful chapter in American history that has been covered by many historians and scholars of American political development. Zaragosa Vargas offers the most extensive discussion of the role of labour unions in this process.⁵¹ Cybelle Fox provides a broader view of how Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American US citizens, African-Americans, and whites were treated by relief and immigration officials during the same period. Finally, Francisco Balderamma and Raymond Rodriguez recount the human tragedy of the deportation period, detailing the impact of immigration raids, detentions, and deportations on mixed-citizenship status families of Mexican origin.

The Great Depression heightened racial and ethnic aversion to the presence of Mexican immigrant labourers, fueling demands by the AFL for their removal once they began to be regarded as competition for jobs that white US citizens formerly refused to take.⁵² The Federal Bureau of Immigration began conducting raids in Los Angeles in February, 1931. Immigration officials detained and removed Mexican-Americans from the United States without attempting to distinguish between them based on their immigration or nationality status.⁵³ Similar actions were undertaken in 1931 by immigration officials across the United States, and were followed up by “voluntary” repatriation drives by local welfare and law enforcement agencies anxious to remove Mexican nationals from the relief rolls.⁵⁴ Local and state relief agencies denied assistance to US-born citizens of Mexican origin and their migrant parents alike.⁵⁵ Relief agencies pressured both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans with US citizenship to leave the country.⁵⁶ Between 1930 and 1933, the number of semi-voluntary repatriates and forced deportees to Mexico increased by 50 percent from the 1926–1929 period, according to Mexican Migration Service figures compiled by economist Paul S. Taylor.⁵⁷ US census figures report that the Mexican-born population in the United States decreased from 639,017 in 1930 to 377,433 in 1940.⁵⁸ More importantly, a much higher proportion of the returnees after 1930 were forced to leave the United States by immigration authorities.

Anglo opinion leaders in the US Southwest did not uniformly support the deportation drive. At the outset, the AFL—with the support of Mexican-American AFL organizers affiliated with LULAC in Texas—demanded interior immigration enforcement to spare US resident jobs and wage scales.⁵⁹ Conversely, business interests fought the deportation campaign because they sought to maintain access to Mexican migrant labour at steadily decreasing wages. In California, Harry Chandler’s pro-agribusiness *Los Angeles Times* condemned

the fact that the immigration service can seize and deport—or scare out of the country useful and harmless laborers, while wild-eyed alien Communist agitators who, at best, are purely parasitic, and at worse are serious disturbers of the public peace, go about freely and unmolested.⁶⁰

Chandler's ethnoracial and class prejudices were widely shared by business interests across the Southwest, which depended on a steady supply of low-wage Mexican labour. Throughout the US Southwest, agribusiness owners turned on Mexican farmworkers when they went on strike in large numbers in 1932 and 1933. Then, strike leaders were reported to authorities for deportation.⁶¹ Similar actions were taken by growers during strikes and protests in other parts of the US Southwest. Agribusiness support for Mexican migrant workers against immigration raids and mass deportations remained contingent upon the willingness of Mexican labourers to work for diminishing wages without complaint.⁶²

Emma Tenayuca: A Voice of Progressive Solidarity in Conservative South Texas

Like Clemente Idar a generation before her, Emma Tenayuca was deeply concerned with the labour rights of the Tejano people of South Texas. Both fought to protect socioeconomically disadvantaged workers in a variety of industries, in a state where organized labour faced considerable resistance from business, local government, and the downward wage pressure of a large influx of recent immigrants. Yet whereas Idar was from a prominent middle-class family, Tenayuca came from a more humble, working-class background in San Antonio. Her experiences led her to focus on the struggles of Latina workers who were all but ignored by the AFL. While Idar stayed with the AFL and assiduously avoided socialist organizations throughout his career, Tenayuca's activism gradually led her to gravitate towards the left, culminating in her membership in the Communist Party and her leadership of the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938, for which she is best known.⁶³

Tenayuca led a number of labour protests and strikes in the San Antonio area before she graduated from high school. In a 1987 interview with historian Gerald Poyo, she recalled that her interest in civil rights and racial reconciliation arose from the discrimination her father and grandfather faced, even among Tejanos, because of their indigenous ancestry.⁶⁴ Her interest in labour issues arose from the losses that her working-class family faced during the Depression.⁶⁵ In her first year of high school, Tenayuca joined the Ladies Auxiliary of the League of Latin American Citizens, because she felt drawn to their stance against discrimination and their activism on behalf of the poor. However, she quickly left the organization because of its policy of excluding Texas residents of Mexican birth.⁶⁶

In 1934, while still a student in high school, Tenayuca was arrested for

picketing in support of striking Finck Cigar workers.⁶⁷ The experience left a lasting impression on her views on women's rights, immigrant rights, and "how difficult it would be to make [San Antonio] a union town."⁶⁸ Picketing alongside the mostly female workforce at Finck Cigar, Tenayuca gained a "very strong feeling, that if this world is civilized, that it would be more the work of women."⁶⁹ She became disenchanted with the Catholic Church of her birth and baptism for its clergy's role supporting the Finck Cigar company against the striking workers, and expressing "an attitude that every union is a communist union."⁷⁰ The Finck Cigar strike made her aware of the extent of the collusion between immigration authorities and business leaders to suppress labour activism. She recalled later that one political leader "made a statement that all he had to do was notify the immigration authorities and they would go to the picket line and that would break up the strike."⁷¹ The police raided the strikers' homes and threatened them and their families with deportation.⁷² Tenayuca's growing consciousness of the rights of labourers, immigrants, and women led her towards the left. Looking back on the Finck Cigar Strike more than fifty years later, she recalled in an interview that "I don't think women" like the strikers she picketed with "will be completely and totally free—or any of the minorities—until you have socialism."⁷³

Convinced that local leaders in LULAC, the Catholic Church, and the city government were unreliable defenders of workers' rights, Tenayuca joined the Young Communist League in 1935, and the Communist Party in 1937.⁷⁴ Tenayuca also recalled that the labour movement in San Antonio was centered on craft unions within the AFL. When the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) split off in 1935 to form a more progressive federation representing industrial workers across trades, San Antonio workers initially had limited representation in what was a very conservative city in terms of labour and civil rights.⁷⁵ The AFL affiliate in San Antonio assisted Tenayuca's organizing efforts until she became known as a Communist, at which time she was cut off from AFL assistance.⁷⁶

Tenayuca's involvement in the Communist Party of Texas increased after she married the Party's State Secretary, Homer Brooks, in 1937. Tenayuca remembered Brooks as "one of these inflexible Communists" who "would not make an allowance for anything" outside of Marxist doctrine, while she regarded herself as a pragmatist, always seeking allies for her causes.⁷⁷ Even as a Communist, Tenayuca remained first and foremost an activist for working-class Latinas in her hometown of San Antonio. She believed that no other group, including middle-class Mexican-American organizations like LULAC and craft union federations like the AFL, had an interest in the most disadvantaged workers in her community.⁷⁸ Tenayuca organized 10,000 pecan shellers during their 1938 labour action, with minimal assistance from national labour federations.⁷⁹ During the strike, Tenayuca condemned the CIO for ignoring the pecan shellers "just as the CIO neglected sharecroppers elsewhere."⁸⁰ From her vantage point, "there was no CIO here in San Antonio ... The CIO came in after the strike and after we had organized it

here. So how could the CIO have ever authorized a strike and an organization that it had never even lent one blessed dime to organize?"⁸¹ Tenayuca embraced the Communist Party because its local leaders fully supported her activism on behalf of unemployed and striking workers, as the General Secretary of the National Workers Alliance.⁸²

The Bracero Program and Backlash against Mexican Immigrant Labourers (1942–1954)

During the Second World War, agricultural labour shortages led to the creation of a new guest worker agreement between the United States and Mexico. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of temporary Mexican migrant workers undermined transnational labour solidarity. Months before Pearl Harbor, farm lobbyists once again began demanding new Mexican migrant labourers. These demands increased in urgency as internal US resident migrant workers were drafted or found work in the higher paying defense-related industries.⁸³ Organized labour vigorously opposed allowing new guest workers to enter the United States, following their use as strikebreakers in the 1930s. Agribusiness operators wanted to import guest workers without government interference. But as Emilio Zamora notes, the exigencies of wartime diplomacy gave the Mexican government added leverage as a sought-after partner in the war effort, allowing it to secure treaty protections for its citizens that lacked in previous agreements.⁸⁴

The United States government signed the Mexican Farm Labour Program Agreement with Mexico on August 4, 1942, allowing for the legal importation of Mexican guest workers to the United States on the condition that they were guaranteed a minimum wage, individual contracts, and free return transportation.⁸⁵ In 1943, Robert Medellín of the Mexican Ministry of Labor announced that no more contract labourers would be authorized to work in Texas, because of the number of cases of "extreme, intolerable racial discrimination" by state officials and private employers that were reported to Mexican consular officials.⁸⁶ In response, Texas Governor Coke Stevenson (D-TX) signed a "Caucasian Race—Equal Privileges" resolution on May 5, 1943, which had been proposed in the Texas House and passed the Senate the previous month.⁸⁷ This proclamation acceded to demands by LULAC leaders like Alonso Perales and M.C. Gonzales for the Texas government to prevent discrimination against individuals of Mexican descent.⁸⁸ US citizens living in Texas were left out of this accord that arguably advanced Mexican-American social rights at the expense of African-Americans, who remained subject to segregation legislation in the state.⁸⁹ The Mexican Government went so far as to bar its citizens from working as guestworkers in Texas in June 1943, in protest against the discriminatory treatment of its nationals there.⁹⁰

After the Second World War, agribusiness interests lobbied for and secured an extension of the US-Mexico guest worker program commonly known as the "Bracero Agreement," while Texas growers circumvented the statewide ban by

hiring undocumented migrant labourers.⁹¹ Wages fell and working conditions quickly deteriorated for US-born Mexican-American workers in the Southwest, who were again forced to migrate as far as Michigan and Washington every Spring to support their families.⁹² In short, the post-war bracero program did not function as Mexican government negotiators intended. US farm worker unions lacked the political clout, organization and financing needed to effectively challenge the agricultural bracero program in Congress.⁹³ The Mexican government periodically barred the emigration of its workers to secure leverage to bargain for better contracts after World War II, but undocumented workers continued to cross illegally into the United States. There, they were legalized by US authorities and offered employment on the spot.⁹⁴ The use of Braceros and unauthorized immigrants to break an epic 1947–1950 strike fought by a multiracial, mixed-citizenship status workforce organized by the AFL-affiliated National Farm Labor Union (NFLU) in California aroused the furor of labour federations on both sides of the border.⁹⁵

The Struggle over Immigration in Ernesto Galarza's National Farm Labor Union

To help fight the bracero program, University of Texas professor and LULAC Secretary-General George Sánchez reached out to union leaders like California-based Ernesto Galarza, and urged him to recognize that

the root of much of the evil as regards Mexicans in the United States stems from the fact that, just across the border, there is a reservoir of cheap labor that growers in the United States can tap at will. The alien worker becomes, in effect, a strike-breaker or 'scab' who is used as a potent club to prevent the 'Mexican' already here from improving his lot.⁹⁶

Galarza was already well aware of the threat to the livelihood of US-born Mexican-American workers posed by legal "Bracero" and undocumented "wetback" Mexican migrant labour. His California-based NFLU was on the frontlines of the struggle against imported labour. In committee work that brought the Texas and California Mexican-American immigration restriction movements together, Sánchez reminded Galarza to "avoid 'civil rights' or 'civil liberties' in committee name—those phrases are a red flag in Texas and would automatically arouse unnecessary antagonism."⁹⁷

While Sánchez and other LULAC leaders emphasized their patriotism and solidarity with business interests, Galarza's NFLU led wildcat strikes against growers using migrant workers, where "Mexican-American G.I.'s and wetbacks have had small outbreaks of violence" competing for diminished wages and job opportunities.⁹⁸ Rank-and-file NFLU members viewed Mexican immigrants—both braceros and undocumented workers—as a threat to their livelihood. While the US citizens and lawful permanent resident rank-and-file of Galarza's union were not

always prepared to cooperate with bracero workers, Galarza worked with *Alianza*, a transnational labour organization aimed at extending the NFLU's protection to braceros.⁹⁹ This coalition did not necessarily make the NFLU more inclusive or protective of all immigrants. Like the Mexican-American US citizen rank-and-file, *Alianza* refused to extend membership to Mexican co-ethnics who were undocumented workers in the United States.¹⁰⁰ Working in cooperation with Galarza's NFLU, *Alianza* organizers asked their bracero members in the United States to report on undocumented labourers, as a sign of goodwill towards US citizen and legal permanent resident workers and their unions.¹⁰¹ Stephen Pitti describes Galarza's joint venture with *Alianza* as "perhaps the most creative turn in ethnic Mexican efforts to think creatively about pressing political matters."¹⁰² *Alianza* attempted to open a channel through which Braceros could complain to representatives of their government and US labour leaders about the problems associated with widespread grower refusal to honour the terms of the agreement. Rank-and-file NFLU members remained highly skeptical of Galarza's transnational labour organizing efforts. They blocked bracero workers from joining local unions, and then blamed braceros for undercutting key labour actions in the Imperial Valley in 1951.¹⁰³

As Mexican migrant workers continued to arrive as legal guest workers during the 1950s, Mexican-American labour organizations maintained a united front against the bracero program while differing on tactics. In Texas, national AFL leaders touted the group's restrictionist policy credentials as part of an overture to middle-class LULAC members outside the labour movement. They were encouraged to "set aside a carefully nurtured and developed prejudice on the part of some of you against organized labor" by joining unions that were ready to embrace Mexican-American US citizens.¹⁰⁴ In Southern California, by contrast, veterans of the *Congreso* movement like labour activist Bert Corona carried on its message of transnational labour solidarity, organizing bracero strikes and offering free legal assistance to migrant labourers as "fellow workers who needed to be helped."¹⁰⁵ Ernesto Galarza's NFLU offered a middle ground, balancing sympathy for migrants who were "exploited even more greatly than our own American people" with demands for strict immigration enforcement, since "the contract Mexican Nationals and the 'wetbacks' are being used by the growers to destroy American living and working standards."¹⁰⁶

Upon their return from military service in the Second World War, many Mexican-American veterans turned their energy to fighting for labour rights in the fields and factories where they worked.¹⁰⁷ When the Border Patrol refused to apprehend undocumented immigrants during the NFLU's labour actions, striking workers took matters into their own hands, staging citizen arrests and setting up "baseball bat brigades" and picket lines at border posts to prevent new workers from entering the United States.¹⁰⁸ Galarza never advocated the violent tactics his rank-and-file union members used against Mexican immigrant workers, but he did

appreciate their frustration and desire for enforcement of existing immigration laws, which would keep Mexican immigrant strikebreakers out of their fields. Galarza recognized that his union's younger members, Mexican-American veterans of a war that "proved the courage, tested the loyalty, broadened the experience, and tempered the will of young men born and bred in a no-man's land of social rejection and lack of civic opportunity for adult citizenship" were itching for a fight for labour rights at home.¹⁰⁹ While leading anti-bracero strikes in the Imperial Valley, Galarza wrote for a national civil rights audience in the Common Council for American Unity's *Common Ground* that "the conditions of life and work of the Spanish-Speaking minority in the United States are no longer a problem only of the borderlands."¹¹⁰ Mexican-Americans had served their country valiantly alongside other citizens in the Second World War, and now, displaced by Bracero workers, they fanned out across the country in pursuit of work and fair wages. On the homefront, Galarza conveyed the image of a national, multi-racial worker-peasant army on the picket lines, fighting the same battles for equal citizenship "in the cotton fields, the truck farm, and the corporation ranches" as they did "in the armed services." Amidst all these shared struggles,

the Mexican has mingled with other minority groups more experienced in the defense of human rights and dignity, especially the Negro. He has rubbed his shoulders with the militant Nisei GI's who did not come back from Monte Cassino to take it lying down. Through these contacts, methods of action have been learned and techniques of organization have been discovered and communicated. The language of protest, pure and simple and almost always unheeded, has been supplemented by self-education and the discovery of the methods of redress available in the larger society by which he is surrounded.¹¹¹

Of all these methods of redress, Galarza saw the union as the most "vital point of contact" between Mexican-Americans as workers and the broader community, laying the groundwork "for a broad[er political] program on the whole front of problems which face them."¹¹² Faced with repeated contract breaches by growers towards their bracero workers, Galarza became convinced that the bracero program could not be reformed, and he advocated for its end after 1952.¹¹³ Galarza's stance against the use of legal bracero and undocumented migrant workers as strikebreakers shaped a generation of labour activists, including César Chávez.

“Operation Wetback” and Its Aftermath (1954–1964)

From the perspective of American citizens and legislators who were not directly benefitting from the proceeds of unauthorized agricultural labour, the growth of the unauthorized migration population came to be viewed by conservatives as an affront to the “rule of law.” Mexican-American union leaders including Texas AFL activist Ed Idar and Ernesto Galarza condemned the bracero program as a threat to the wages and working conditions of migrant US citizen and legal permanent resident workers.¹¹⁴ Religious and civil rights activists regarded the growth of the unauthorized population as an invitation to human rights abuses by employers, local officials, and the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).¹¹⁵

But agribusiness owners and their state and federal elected officials actively resisted any measure that would interfere with their customary access to migrant labour, or subject it to the constraints of the bracero program.¹¹⁶ The INS developed a compromise plan whereby the demand for enforcement was met through “Operation Wetback” in 1954—the term “wetback” being a derogatory reference to undocumented Mexican workers. The INS’s strategy resulted in the deportation of over one million migrant labourers. But in most cases, the INS waited to detain and deport workers until after they had completed their work duties for the season.¹¹⁷ To placate agricultural interests, many of the same workers were “dried out” at the border, and either legalized after being removed, or allowed to return surreptitiously the next season.¹¹⁸

The practice of catch-and-release continued throughout the 1950s alongside the official bracero program, which, to the credit of the Department of Labor, was initially expanded after Operation Wetback in an effort to reduce the dependence of Texas growers on unauthorized labour.¹¹⁹ At the same time, the bracero program came up against pressure from civil rights groups that found the existing contracts exploitative. For this reason, Congress finally suspended the program in December, 1964, for the last time.¹²⁰ In 1965, Congress enacted legislation restricting legal immigration from the Western Hemisphere, which contributed to the expansion of the undocumented immigrant population from Mexico in the United States.¹²¹

César Chávez’s Ambivalence Towards Immigration from Mexico

César Chávez and the farmworker movement that he led for over thirty years exemplified the ambivalence of the Mexican-American working class towards immigrant workers from Mexico during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout his early career, Chávez blamed undocumented workers, legal bracero guest workers, and commuter green card holders for keeping Mexican-American US citizen wages and labour standards down.¹²² Shortly after Chávez was discharged from the US Navy in 1948, he participated in his first strike as a member of Ernesto Galarza’s NFLU, targeting cotton growers for using braceros as strikebreakers.¹²³ Chávez worked towards the same goals as other young veteran

activists in LULAC on labour, immigration, and citizenship issues throughout his early career as a labour activist and community organizer. But his tactics and ideology were different. He defined himself as a poor people's advocate from the start, often refusing to work with "middle-class Chicanos" unwilling to take on the system to fight for their rights.¹²⁴

Chávez founded the United Farm Workers' (UFW) union with Dolores Huerta, leveraging labour shortages following the 1964 end of the *bracero* program to organize Mexican-American and Filipino US citizen grape workers in successful strikes that led to wage increases across the industry.¹²⁵ By 1967, agribusiness operators targeted by UFW organizing efforts adapted, replacing *Bracero* strikebreakers with legal commuter workers with green cards near the border and unauthorized immigrants in the interior. The United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) responded with a zero-tolerance position against unauthorized immigrants and "green carders" who refused to settle in the United States and honor picket lines.¹²⁶

By 1968 in California, it was becoming more politically challenging for a mixed-citizenship status union like the UFW to demand immigration enforcement than its predecessors. The NFLU's restrictionist campaign in the early 1950s had the ideological cover of Cold War patriotic xenophobia, and the support of a Mexican-American middle-class movement that emphasized citizenship distinctions and insisted on the cultural, linguistic, and ideological assimilation of immigrants. Assimilation on this order was not part of the UFW's agenda, as an intentionally multiethnic and multilingual movement where Chicanos laboured and organized alongside Filipinos and other minority workers.¹²⁷

The UFW boycott movement relied on the support of stakeholders in the Chicano movement. This movement included young activists who moved away from their parents' "Mexican-American" identifier in the 1960s by identifying with their indigenous ancestry, and insisting upon solidarity with new arrivals from Mexico.¹²⁸ Many immigrant farm workers were already represented by the UFW, and were angry about the union's seeming willingness to sell them out to the hated *migra* or immigration police. Publicly, in the pages of the UFW's newsletter *El Malcriado*, UFW Vice President Julio Hernandez apologetically insisted that "we do not oppose immigration, we oppose scabbing."¹²⁹ Hernandez issued an appeal to migrants to follow his example as an immigrant by staying in the United States and joining the union, which "helps Mexican citizens with their immigration problems and helps them to bring their families to this country."¹³⁰ Immigrants could earn community membership and respect by sharing in the sacrifices of striking US workers. The union would in turn help their families to earn US citizenship.

The UFW did not speak with a single voice on immigration policy. Chávez urged other union leaders to demand a harder line on immigration enforcement.¹³¹ By the early 1970s, Chávez shifted his focus from blocking green card holders living in Mexico from commuting to American jobs to preventing unauthorized

immigrants from competing with US farmworkers. In 1971, over the objections of Chicano movement leaders including Bert Corona, the UFW supported California State Senator Dixon Arnett's immigration enforcement legislation, which had provisions similar to the employer sanctions demanded by the AFL-CIO's national leadership.¹³² Unmoved by Corona's criticism, César Chávez intensified the drive against potential unauthorized immigrant strikebreakers in May 1974, issuing a memorandum to "all UFW entities in California, Arizona and Florida," announcing "the beginning of a MASSIVE CAMPAIGN to get the recent flood of illegals out of California."¹³³ The campaign started as a letter-writing initiative to members of Congress, built on past lobbying efforts for more border and interior enforcement to protect US resident farmworkers. By August, the "Campaign Against Illegals" escalated into the "wet line," a massive vigilante operation led by César's cousin Manuel Chávez, which accosted and assaulted migrants crossing the US-Mexico border near a Yuma, Arizona labour dispute.¹³⁴ The lead article in the October 1974 issue of UFW's *El Malcriado* exclaimed that the "wet line" was "50 times more effective than the highly paid US Border Patrol."¹³⁵ Manuel Chávez boasted that thanks to the "Striker Border Patrol ... soon, the only thing that will be able to cross the border will be desert rats, and even those will have to go underground."¹³⁶

While UFW assaults on migrants crossing into Arizona continued into 1975, some union leaders away from the "wet line" maintained the UFW's longstanding position differentiating between transient undocumented migrants prone to strikebreaking, and settled immigrants willing to stay in the United States and fight for union representation. Texas UFW organizer Bill Chandler pressed for a compromise solution involving federal sanctions against growers who hired unauthorized immigrants coupled with comprehensive immigration reform favouring the permanent settlement of migrant farmworkers in the US. To promote unionization and better working conditions, Chandler urged that "the immigration of entire families to the United States must be encouraged" through new immigration legislation, "instead of the current illegal smuggling of largely young, single males with no stake in the community to which they are coming, and no reason to struggle for its improvement."¹³⁷ At the UFW's August 1977 convention, Chávez showed signs of relenting on this issue. There, he committed the union to "support granting of a total amnesty to undocumented aliens" while prioritizing "immigration of the families of aliens."¹³⁸

Conclusion: Towards a Latinx-Labour-Immigrant Alliance

Veterans of the UFW and other "social movement" unionist campaigns helped to build support for the AFL-CIO's move to officially support the legalization of undocumented immigrants in 2000.¹³⁹ With this decisive policy change, an institution that long advocated for more immigration enforcement stood up for immigrant workers' rights, regardless of their legal status. The new Labour-Latinx-immigrant alliance is still fluid and prone to divisions over how to respond

to business-driven immigration policy initiatives. Growing immigrant-led unions including the UFW, SEIU and UNITE HERE left the AFL-CIO in 2005 to form a new federation, Change to Win, which supported a new guest worker program in exchange for the promise of labour protections for migrant workers.¹⁴⁰ The AFL-CIO continued to defend one position that César Chávez advocated: amnesty and a pathway to citizenship for all immigrant workers, ensuring that every labourer has the same stake in providing for long-term labour, wage, and job protections. Despite these strategic differences, the leadership of the US labour federations emerging from the split is outwardly committed to a message of solidarity between workers of all races and immigration statuses.¹⁴¹

The history of distrust and tension between organized labour and newly arrived foreign migrant workers was motivated by a fear that employers would use both unauthorized immigrants and temporary legal guest workers as a reserve labour force. This would undercut wages, working conditions, and labour organizing actions by long-term resident immigrants and citizens. The twentieth-century union leaders discussed here, who lobbied for immigration restrictions and increased enforcement against transient labour migration were themselves immigrants—like Mexican-born Ernesto Galarza. Or they were the sons of immigrants, like Clemente Idar and César Chávez. Emma Tenayuca is a notable exception, as a descendant of the indigenous peoples and early Spanish settlers in Texas, and she spoke out more strongly about the rights of immigrants than Idar, Galarza, or Chávez. Each of them tried to educate immigrants about the importance of worker solidarity in the face of employer abuses. They were willing to enroll immigrants who settled in the United States and accepted the economic discipline of their unions by foregoing wage-earning opportunities as strikebreakers. Their organizations also helped immigrant union members to stay in the country and successfully apply for naturalization.

NOTES

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¹³ Reisler, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, 24–48.

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S. Taylor, *An American-Mexican Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 287; McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, 166.

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⁴⁷ *Immigration From Countries of the Western Hemisphere: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization*, 71st Cong., 191, January 29, 1930 (statement of Clemente Idar, President, San Antonio Council of League of United Latin American Citizens and Lead Organizer, Texas State Federation of Labor and M.C. Gonzales, Texas Vice President, League of United Latin American Citizens)

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¹⁴⁰ Brian Burgoon et al., “Immigration and the Transformation of American Unionism,” *International Migration Review* 44, no. 4 (2010): 952.

¹⁴¹ AFL-CIO and Change to Win (American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organizations), *The Labor Movement’s Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform*, 2009, accessed March 26, 2018, https://aflcio.org/sites/default/files/migrate/2009res_11.pdf.