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Abstract

The political and economic conditions of Mexican workers in the American Southwest during the Interwar Period, their alignment with American and Mexican radical political traditions, and their labor struggles in the region's agriculture.

Keywords

Working Class, Mexican-Americans, US Southwest, Communism, 1920s

Huelgas en el Campo: Mexican Workers, Strikes and Political Radicalism in the US Southwest, 1920-1934

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Workers of Mexican origin or ancestry in the US formed a significant part of the US working class by 1900.[1] Concentrated in Southwestern agriculture, they constituted a ruthlessly exploited section of the working class, enduring long hours and low wages even relative to the contemporary poor conditions of workers. They were regarded as a pool of cheap labor, and those who held the reins of political and economic power chose to invite them in and dispense them out based on how they perceived a profit could best be realized. Mexican workers in the US, rather than acting as passive objects in the Interwar Period, fought to become conscious subjects, wielding their collective power with other workers as a class through strikes wherever they were located. Their relationships with mainstream unions and political parties, such as the AFL and the Republicans and Democrats, were often tenuous, and it was often the case that more radical options, such as the IWW, RILU, and CPUSA, as well as Mexican radical political

[1] Throughout this paper, various terms (such as Mexican-American, Mexican immigrant, Mexican migrant, etc.) will be used to describe workers of Mexican descent in the US Southwest. Although each of these words has a different meaning, for simplicity's sake they will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

traditions, were more appealing to them as they entered into the field of class conflict.[2] Over the course of the 1920s and early 1930s, Mexican workers in the Southwest, particularly in agriculture, demonstrated a growing radicalism and militancy, culminating in a wave of wildcat strikes in the early 1930s.

During the first decades of the 20th century, Mexican immigrants began to represent an increasingly large portion of the overall immigrant body coming into the US. According to US Census Bureau numbers, from 1900-1910 their numbers grew from 1-1.6% of the immigrant population, and from 1910-1920 continued growing to 3.5%.[3] By 1930, the number of Mexican immigrants had jumped 31.9%, from slightly under 500,000 to almost 650,000.[4] The 1920s therefore was a decade in which Mexican immigration to the US expanded noticeably. Mexican

[2] The acronyms in this sentence stand for: American Federation of Labor, Industrial Workers of the World, Red International of Labor Unions, and Communist Party of the United States of America, respectively. For the latter, various terms and acronyms will be used to refer to the CPUSA, including Communist Party of America, Communist Party, the Party, the aforementioned acronym, as well as 'Communists' to refer to the members of the Party.
[3] For 1900-1910, see U.S. Census Bureau, *1910 Census: Volume 1. Population, General Report and Analysis*, 1913, 781, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1913/dec/vol-1-population.html; for 1910-1920, see U.S. Census Bureau, *1920 Census: Volume 3. Population, Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States*, 1922, 18, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1922/dec/vol-03-population.html.
[4] U.S. Census Bureau, *1930 Census: Volume 3. Population, Reports by States*, 1932, 225, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1932/dec/1930a-vol-03-population.html.

immigrants to the US were drawn there for a variety of reasons, some pushing them and some pulling them. The disruptions caused to life in Mexico by the industrialization programs of dictator Porfirio Díaz as well as the Mexican Revolution caused a steadily growing exodus of Mexicans to leave the country, most often to the US. The US as a destination was attractive beyond its proximity. Industrial and agricultural jobs opened during WWI, as the nation tightened restrictions for European immigrants while loosening them for Mexican ones.[5]

Most of the immigrants from Mexico who arrived in the US ended up in the Southwest, both for the proximity of the region to Mexico as well as for the jobs there. By 1920 Mexican immigrants already composed large portions of the foreign-born white population of those states, with Mexican immigrants composing 68.5 and 69.2%[6] of those populations in New Mexico and Texas respectively. Although they made up only 12.7% of the foreign-born white population in California, Mexican immigrants still numbered nearly 90,000 in the state.[7] Over the course of the 1920s, due to immigration restrictions such as the Immigration Act of

[5] Brian Gratton and Emily Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950," *The International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 946.
[6] In the U.S. Census Bureau, Mexicans were listed as part of the 'Foreign-Born White' population; numbers in U.S. Census Bureau, *1920 Census*, 667, 987.
[7] U.S. Census Bureau, *1920 Census*, 109.

1924 which set up strict quotas for immigrants from various countries, workers from Mexico took up an increasingly large share of the migratory workforce, with "Mexicans [comprising] the vast majority of agricultural workers" in California by the mid-1920s.[8] Once they had arrived in the Southwest, Mexican immigrants often took up jobs in agriculture, particularly in the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys, California's largest agricultural belts, although they also increasingly began to fill blue-collar roles in urban spaces.[9]

While conditions for the entire working class during this period were inadequate across the board, workers from Mexico endured a particularly exacting exploitation. Agricultural labor itself was harsh, and in addition to being required to perform grueling physical labor for long hours, Mexican workers were often paid the "Mexican wage," a substantially lower wage than their fellow workers in the fields or elsewhere.[10] In one instance, Southern Pacific railroad paid Greek, Japanese, and Mexican

[8] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A history of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 24, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.33876.
[9] Justin Akers Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio: Magonistas, Socialists, Wobblies, and Communists in the Mexican American Working Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 9792, Kindle; Elliot Robert Barkan, "From 'Reoccupation' to Repatriation: Mexicans in the Southwest between the Wars," in *From All Points: America's Immigrant West, 1870s-1952* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 326, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005wmq.39.
[10] Barkan, "From 'Reoccupation' to Repatriation," 326.

workers $1.60, $1.45 and $1.25 per day, respectively.[11] Generalized economic crises which affected all workers, such as the Great Depression, compounded their problems. Not only did Mexican workers receive a lower wage than their white or fellow non-white workers, as was sometimes the case with Japanese workers for instance, but when the Great Depression struck, agricultural workers were hit particularly hard. During President Herbert Hoover's last years from 1931-1933, the daily wages of agricultural workers dropped more than a third, going from $1.87 per day in January 1931 to $1.06 per day in January 1933. Their wages also plummeted at a more extreme pace than their urban counterparts, with the daily wages of agricultural workers in January 1931 amounting to 65% of those of urban workers, and by January 1933 amounting to 41%. Workers in agriculture faced a slower recovery pace than workers in cities, with their income continuing to fall in proportion to urban workers until the summer of 1934, in addition to an unsteady path to pre-Depression wages, as wages fell repeatedly after slowly rising during FDR's first term. Even in the instances in which wages rose for agricultural workers, they continued to rise at a sluggish pace from 1933-1935, suggesting to many that a return to the conditions before the

[11] David M. Struthers, "Economic Development, Immigration, and the 'Labors of Expropriation,'" in *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 30, https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctvh8r1s3.5.

Depression might not be possible.[12] Mexican workers were among the hardest hit agricultural workers in large part because of their racialized economic exploitation, as well as the fact that due to their non-citizen status, they often could not qualify for most, if not all, New Deal programs.

Nationally, Mexican workers were regarded above all else as a source of cheap labor. At times, the wielders of economic and political power saw this as a benefit and worked to either stimulate Mexican immigration to the US or at least retain the presence of those already in the country. In fact, Mexican immigrant workers held a unique status among foreign-born workers in the US at the time. The 1920s was a period of rising nativism in the US, and political leaders worked to both tighten the domestic labor market and direct popular outrage to the bogeyman of foreign-born radicals in the wake of the international revolutionary upheaval with the end of the First World War. One of the most significant pieces of legislation which enforced this nativism was the Immigration Act of 1924, which established strict quotas for immigrants entering the country, fixed at 2% of the population of immigrants of a given country in the US in 1890.[13] Despite the fact that this measure was intended not only to limit immigration as a

[12] Numbers are found in Sidney C. Sufrin, "Labor Organization in Agricultural America, 1930-35," *American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 4 (1938): 551, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2768483.
[13] *Immigration Act of 1924*, Public Law 68-139, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 43 (1924): 5, https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1924ImmigrationAct.pdf.

whole but also to curtail the number of non-white immigrants, the law excluded, among other nationalities, Mexicans. Political leaders at the time reconciled their white supremacist views on immigration with their tolerance for Mexican immigration by arguing that they mostly kept to the Southwest and that they were useful economically. The economic logic of this unique status for Mexican immigrant workers was summarized by the Dillingham Commission when it stated that they "[provided] a fairly acceptable supply of labor in a limited territory in which it [was] difficult to secure others."[14]

On the other hand, more trying times of economic crisis caused political leaders to reverse their position of granting somewhat favored status to Mexican immigrant workers, opting for the employment of tools of state repression to restrict them from the labor market. This is the very reason for which the Border Patrol was created in 1924, as the nativist climate was beginning to extend to Mexicans after they had been excluded from the 1924 Immigration Act.[15] When provisions were created in 1925 for the Border Patrol's actual enforcement powers, they named them as acting as the enforcers of "the laws regulating immigration of

[14] Katherine Benton-Cohen, "Other Immigrants: Mexicans and the Dillingham Commission of 1907-1911," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 30, no. 2 (2011): 38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.30.2.0033.
[15] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!*, 28-9.

aliens into the United States, including the contract labor laws," among other responsibilities.[16] In other words, whereas US immigration law served as one of the means by which the labor market could be regulated, the Border Patrol was conceived as a new tool to enforce that regulation in a world that, after the First World War, saw increasing global interconnectedness and sustained labor unrest. When economic crisis struck, as happened with the Great Depression in 1929, the Border Patrol was called upon to tighten the labor market by removing around one million Mexicans from the country between 1929-1939.[17] As already low-paid workers in the agricultural sectors of the Southwest, Mexican immigrant workers were an easy scapegoat blamed by political and economic leaders as a cause for the distress of American workers. Popular outrage, instead of being directed towards the bosses themselves, could be channeled against Mexican workers for competing with American workers for jobs and using up valuable national resources.[18] These moves to deport Mexican workers were supported widely at least within the bourgeois political realm, with

[16] *An Act Making Appropriations for the Departments of State and Justice and for the Judiciary and or Departments of Commerce and Labor, for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1926, and for Other Purposes*, Public Law 502, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 43 (1925): 1049.
[17] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9710.
[18] Gratton and Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation," 949.

support from the two mainstream political parties to the AFL itself.[19]

The fact that these political forces viewed Mexican immigrant workers essentially as profit-making objects to be manipulated for the sake of the national economy speaks to the alienation that existed between that population and the mainstream political parties and unions. In the Southwest, the interests of Mexican immigrant workers were opposed by those of the grower companies, who wielded extensive influence within the local Democratic and Republican parties. Working within these parties to advance their own economic interests, the grower companies of the region worked to prevent their immigrant laborers from having the right to unionize, despite the national political climate which was increasingly accepting the usefulness of unions as a tool of mediation between capital and labor.[20] Intimately connected with the economic logic of exploiting these workers was a racist ideology that viewed Mexicans as inferior to whites, and which served as another means to fortify the economic control over these workers. This ideology was shared by both local mainstream parties, particularly so with the Democrats, composed of a large number of landowners from the South who transferred their Jim Crow ideology into the Southwestern context.[21] Both parties

[19] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9701.
[20] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9623-31.
[21] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9639-48.

during this period paid little attention to seeking the support of Mexican immigrant workers, viewed more as an economic tool than as a valuable constituency.

Even more so than the Democratic and Republican parties, the AFL during the Interwar Period distinguished itself as a veritable opponent of Mexican immigrant workers. Throughout the 1920s, one of the most strident campaigners for including Mexicans within the 1924 Immigration Act was the AFL and its president, Samuel Gompers.[22] The AFL had always been a conservative union that opposed immigration from various countries, and as larger numbers of Mexican workers began arriving in the US during and after the First World War, Gompers and his post-1924 successor, William Green, acted as vocal opponents to their continued entry. Whereas Gompers mainly pursued a restrictionist strategy based on forcing the US government to keep out Mexican immigrants, Green pursued a different strategy. His strategy was based on forming an alliance with the *Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana* in Mexico to pressure the government there to restrict emigration from the country.[23] However, this strategy ultimately bore little success and

[22] Harvey A. Levenstein, "The AFL and Mexican Immigration in the 1920s: An Experiment in Labor Diplomacy," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (1968): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/2510743.
[23] Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers, or CROM.

the AFL returned to advocating restriction by the end of the 1920s.[24] The antagonism of the AFL to Mexican immigrant workers was amplified during the Great Depression, when the AFL joined in the state attacks on those workers, calling for them to be sent back to Mexico and for jobs to be given to whites, rather than Mexicans.[25] The attacks of the AFL against Mexican workers reflects their preoccupations that they held about their further employment; they were seen as not only threatening the position of native-born white American workers through displacing them from jobs and causing a downward shift in wages, but they were also seen as a potential liability in industrial organizing, such as strikes.[26] This was a scenario which did occur at times, such as during the Steel Strike of 1919 when the employers brought in Mexican workers, among other non-white workers, to act as strikebreakers.[27] For traditional unions like the AFL that were intent on regulating, and not overthrowing, the labor-capital

[24] Levenstein, "The AFL and Mexican Immigration," 207, 218.
[25] Robert Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO: The California Immigrant Workers Association as an Important New Development" (Thesis M.A., Stanford University, 1990), 28, https://lawcat.berkeley.edu/record/1113982/files/fulltext.pdf.
[26] Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO," 25.
[27] William Z. Foster, "National and Racial Elements," in The Great Steel Strike And Its Lessons (New York: B. W. Huebsch Publishers, 1920), https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1920/great-steel-strike-its-lessons/ch11.htm.

relationship, opposition to Mexican immigrant workers seemed like a strategy for survival.

In contrast to their exclusion from the AFL throughout most of the Interwar Period and the twin tools of economic exploitation and political repression that the mainstream parties wielded against them, Mexican immigrant workers found a much more welcoming political home in the various organizations of the labor movement's radical wing.[28] By the early 1920s, Mexican workers in the Southwest had already had at least two decades' worth of experience in the radical sections of the US labor movement, and their participation in it was continuing to grow. The primary vehicles through which they had done this were the Socialist Party of America[29] and the Industrial Workers of the World[30] union, although the latter tended to be a much more responsive and potent force for addressing their concerns, due to the SPA's relative neglect of Mexican workers.[31] An internationalist union composed of a large number of immigrants

[28] William Z. Foster, "National and Racial Elements," in The Great Steel Strike And Its Lessons (New York: B. W. Huebsch Publishers, 1920), https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1920/great-steel-strike-its-lessons/ch11.htm; The AFL did begin to direct some attention to Mexican workers in the Southwest starting in the late 1930s, although even this was mostly undertaken by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), rather than the AFL as a whole. For more information, see Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO," 30-1.
[29] SPA.
[30] IWW.
[31] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 4705.

from many countries, the IWW was dedicated to organizing workers regardless of their "race, creed, sex, ethnicity or citizenship."[32] The IWW's peak prominence occurred during the first two decades of the 20th century, and during that time it directed much attention to organizing those workers that the AFL either ignored or campaigned to have deported. In California for example, the IWW worked to organize "unskilled workers in mining, lumber, and farm industries" which were left out of the official labor movement.[33] Many of these workers, especially those in agriculture, were Mexican immigrants, and their portion of those industries would only grow over time as their immigration to the US increased.[34]

The IWW also served as a conduit by which Mexicans in the US could maintain ties to their own country's recently strengthened radical political traditions and vice versa, as Mexican immigrants brought their radical political sensibilities north of the border. The Mexican Revolution from 1910 to around 1920 was a decade of political awakening for the poorest sectors of workers and peasants across the country, as those in the fields turned to the radical ideas of land distribution promoted by Emiliano Zapata, and as those in the factories increasingly turned to the anarchist

[32] Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO," 29.
[33] Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO," 29.
[34] See previous U.S. Census Bureau numbers.

syndicalism promoted by Ricardo Flores Magón and others.[35] While both of these ideologies were carried to the US by Mexican immigrants during the decades succeeding the Mexican Revolution, the anarchist syndicalist ideas and movement proved to be particularly influential in the Southwest. The followers of Magón, known as magonistas, organized themselves into the anarchist *Partido Liberal Mexicano*,[36] a party which had tendencies ranging from radical liberalism to anarchist communism but which, significantly, expanded their work beyond the Mexican border and into the Mexican immigrant worker communities of the Southwest.[37] Not only were there significant numbers of PLM branches espousing "worker dignity, livable wages, and women's rights" that sprouted up along the border region in the US, but they also frequently collaborated with the IWW.[38] The IWW and PLM collaborated in numerous ways,

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[35] Arturo Warman and Judith Brister, "The Political Project of Zapatismo," in *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico*, edited by Friedrich Katz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7ztqzt.14; Sonia Hernández, "Caritina M. Piña and Anarcho-Syndicalism: Labor Activism in the Greater Mexican Borderlands, 1910-1930," in *Writing Revolution: Hispanic Anarchism in the United States*, eds. Christopher J. Castañeda and M. Montserrat Feu López (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019): 137-8, https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctvscxs19.13.

[36] Mexican Liberal Party, or PLM. Despite their name, they were a largely anarchist organization.

[37] Juan Gómez Quiñonez, "Sin frontera, sin cuartel. Los anarcocomunistas del PLM, 1900-1930," *Tzintzun: Revista de Estudios Históricos*, no. 47 (2008), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A370214177/IFME?u=gett36723&sid=bookmark-IFME&xid=ccc5d4e4.

[38] Sonia Hernández, "Caritina M. Piña," 140.

holding joint meetings and events throughout their periods of activity, as well as coordinating industrial actions with each other and giving positive press coverage to each other's organizing efforts, as the PLM did with an IWW miners' strike in Arizona in 1917 for example.[39] While both the IWW and PLM would reach their peaks by around 1920, their years of collaboration had inculcated the Mexican-American and immigrant workers in the region with valuable political lessons on class organization which would reveal itself in future class battles.[40]

The successors to the legacies of the IWW and PLM, and to a lesser extent the SPA, in the Southwest for Mexican workers largely fell into two camps; on the one hand the newly formed Communist Party of America made inroads with Mexican agricultural workers while promoting an anti-capitalist vision of society; on the other hand, the Mexican government inherited from

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[39] Christopher J. Castañeda, "Moving West: Jaime Vidal, Anarchy, and the Mexican Revolution, 1904-1918," in *Writing Revolution: Hispanic Anarchism in the United States*, eds. Christopher J. Castañeda and M. Montserrat Feu López (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019): 131, https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctvscxs19.12; "Hablan los mineros," *Regeneración*, September 1, 1917, Archivo Digital de Ricardo Flores Magón, 2, http://archivomagon.net/wp-content/uploads/e4n259.pdf.

[40] Devra Anne Weber, "Mexican Workers in the IWW and the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM)," *IWW History Project: Industrial Workers of the World 1905-1935*, University of Washington, 2016, https://depts.washington.edu/iww/mexicaniwws.shtml; Phil Melanger, "How the IWW Lost Its Western Heartland: Western Labor History Revisited," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1996): 304, https://doi.org/10.2307/970142.

the Revolution of the 1910s tried to continue exerting influence over Mexican workers in the region. The CPUSA had been formed in 1919 as the result of a split by the radical members of the SPA who desired to emulate the recent successes of the Bolsheviks.[41] From the beginning, the young party worked to express solidarity with the working class in Mexico through opposing American intervention in the country.[42] Additionally, at the time of its infancy in 1920 the Communist International[43] pronounced that it was a fundamental task for communists in all countries to organize the "agricultural proletariat."[44] By the late 1920s, the Party was paying specific attention to workers of Latin American heritage in the US, noting their numerical strength of around four million and that it reflected a fault of the communists if those workers remained unorganized.[45]

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[41] "The Communist Party of America (1919-1946)," *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/eam/cpa/communistparty.html.
[42] Linn A. E. Gale, "Intervention in Mexico and the Class Struggle," *The Worker*, December 15, 1919, 10, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/mass-worker/v1n5-dec-15-1919-ma-worker.pdf.
[43] An international communist organization and network of communist parties set up by the Bolsheviks and revolutionaries of other countries in 1919 to spread international workers' revolution globally.
[44] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question," *Marxists Internet Archive*, June 1920, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/x01.htm.
[45] Harrison George, "For a Real Fight on Imperialism," *Labor Unity*, December 1928, 10, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/labor-unity/v2n11-w30-dec-1928-TUUL-labor-unity.pdf.

All of these factors combined, this translated into active efforts by the CPUSA to organize the Mexican agricultural workers in the US. However, this effort only really picked up pace with the onset of both the announcement of the 'Third Period' by the Communist International in 1928, and the Great Depression in 1929.[46] A fundamental consequence of the former was that the CPUSA, under the aegis of the RILU, now began to create its own 'red' unions in the fields of the Southwest in the form of its Trade Union Unity League.[47] Partly due to the AFL's near-total refusal to even acknowledge these Mexican immigrant workers, the CPUSA was able to make significant inroads into these communities during the Depression years.[48] In addition, understanding the continued deterioration in the conditions of those workers even with the introduction of the New Deal, the CPUSA correctly "anticipated the possibility for renewed struggle in agriculture" and acted accordingly in their organizing efforts among Mexican immigrant workers in the region.[49] The most significant Communist Party-affiliated union which emerged in the fields of the Southwest

[46] This was a period from 1928-1935 in which the Communist International took an ultra-left position and denounced collaboration with non-communist 'workers'' parties. For more context, see Earl Browder, "Economic Crisis and the Third Period," *The Communist*, March 1930, 236-8, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/communist/v09n03-mar-1930-communist.pdf.
[47] TUUL.
[48] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9882.
[49] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10320.

during this period was the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union,[50] a union which brought together workers of all races, ethnicities, and national backgrounds in multiple strikes from 1930 until the mid-1930s.[51] The union was founded against the backdrop of a wave of strikes in the region beginning in 1928, and critically, from the start it involved a great degree of participation from Mexican workers in the US and attention to their significance within the working class.[52] During the first half of the Depression, "there were seven predominantly Mexican branches formed along the agricultural corridor," and the rest of the party's growth throughout the Southwest had a significant number of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.[53]

The other principal successor in the region to the political legacy of the IWW and PLM, but especially the latter, took the form of both the Mexican government, as well as Mexican-American militants adhering to the more radical political trends of the revolutionary period. In Mexico, the 'revolutionary' government developed an increasingly conservative character,[54] as the governments of Álvaro Obregón and, after 1924, Plutarco

[50] CAWIU.
[51] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9924.
[52] Gilbert G. González, "Company Unions, the Mexican Consulate, and the Imperial Valley Agricultural Strikes, 1928-1934," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1996): 56. https://doi.org/10.2307/969921.
[53] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10468, 10443.
[54] Excluding the government's strident state atheism.

Calles took increasingly repressive measures against labor militancy and radicalism.[55] Part of their strategy was to control organized labor through state-sponsored labor organizations, the most important of these being the aforementioned CROM. Calles and his clique from 1924-1934 used the CROM as a way to "[ensure] labor allegiance" from workers in Mexico to strengthen the "corporatist state" that had emerged after the Revolution, but the Calles government applied this strategy to Mexican workers outside of the country as well.[56]

Beginning in 1928 and continuing until 1936, the Calles government helped bolster the *Confederación de Uniones Obreros Mexicanos*[57] as the CROM's sister organization for Mexican migrant workers in the agricultural areas of the Southwestern US, but particularly California.[58] Calles and his government recognized the necessity of both using revolutionary language to gain the support of workers and improving Mexican migrant workers' conditions so that the US could act as an "outlet for displaced and impoverished workers" in Mexico, while also controlling labor so that its militancy wouldn't spread into Mexico.[59] This union

[55] Manuel Reyna, Laura Palomares, and Guadalupe Cortez, "El Control Del Movimiento Obrero Como Una Necesidad Del Estado de México (1917-1936)," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 34, no. 3/4 (1972): 795-7. https://doi.org/10.2307/3539258.
[56] González, "Company Unions," 55.
[57] Confederation of Mexican Workers' Unions, or CUOM.
[58] González, "Company Unions," 55.
[59] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10059.

confederation was not entirely monolithic in terms of ideology or aims. On the one hand, the Calles government worked to exercise as much control as it possibly could over the organization, with the effect of pushing the CUOM into a more conservative direction. In its intervention in and involvement with the labor struggles of Mexican agricultural workers, the CUOM, unlike the Communists, acted to "counteract a revival of radicalism and labor conflict."[60] On the other hand, a key cohort of the CUOM's membership, particularly its founders, was made up of radicals of the Mexican and labor traditions of the 1910s, former and veteran members of the PLM and IWW, as well as a few Communists.[61] These radicals worked to push the CUOM to the left, causing the organization to proclaim that "the exploited class . . . is right in establishing a class struggle in order to affect . . . its complete freedom from capitalist tyranny," among other statements using revolutionary phraseology. However, due to the influence of the Calles government, revolutionary phraseology was often all that the CUOM was able to muster in the labor battles that took place in the California fields.[62] Additionally, those elements in the strikes aligned with the Mexican government were often engaged in simultaneous struggles against the Communists, the two parties competing for

[60] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10067.
[61] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10035-42.
[62] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10042-51.

the allegiance of the workers involved. While the CUOM and other such bodies worked to tame the labor unrest so as not to pose a direct threat to capital, the Communist Party denounced these groups, such as the *mutualistas*,[63] as gangsters, class collaborators, and instigators of racial animosity between Mexican and non-Mexican workers, such as Filipinos.[64]

During most of the 1920s, class peace reigned on the fields of the Southwest. However, the 1922 Mexicali-Imperial Valley strike stands out as an early exception to this trend. In that strike, Mexican migrant cantaloupe harvesters struck along with their companions on the southern side of the border, demanding a raise of four cents per crate, from twelve to sixteen. The strike was quickly repressed, both with the use of state repression, as well as through the Mexican workers' replacement with Filipino workers.[65] Despite its failure, the strike nevertheless acted as a precursor for future conflicts between workers and management in the region, and also imbued the workers of the region with lessons on organization. Additionally, one pattern which was present in the

[63] The *mutualistas* were class-collaborationist organizations among Mexican-Americans supported by the Mexican government.
[64] Frank Spector, *Story of the Imperial Valley* (New York City: International Labor Defense, 1931), 15, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/labordefender/pamphlets/imperial-valley.pdf.
[65] Spector, *Story of the Imperial Valley*; "Strike Perils Cantaloupes in Valley," *Santa Ana Register*, May 25, 1922, 1, https://newspaperarchive.com/santa-ana-register-may-25-1922-p-1/.

1922 strike, and which would appear in others was the participation of veteran Mexican radicals in the struggle. These veterans "[brought] their experiences and skills into farm labor organization," and furthermore capitalized on the as-yet unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution, such as land redistribution from powerful landlords and US companies to those that worked the soil.[66]

For approximately six years following the 1922 strike, a period of relative class peace on the part of Mexican immigrant workers emerged in the Southwest, with an absence of major strikes in the agricultural sector. However, by 1928 large numbers of Mexicans had settled more permanently into the Southwest, driven out of the country by the Mexican government's refusal to adequately carry out land redistribution as well as by the state of near-civil war during the Cristero Revolt.[67] This influx of more permanent workers from Mexico in the US set the stage for a rise in strikes and labor militancy on the part of these workers, which is what occurred in 1928 with the wildcat strikes by workers in the cantaloupe fields of the Imperial Valley. In contrast to future strikes, the Communists were largely absent in any organized

[66] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9984.
[67] The Cristero Revolt was a widespread rebellion in the Mexican countryside during the late 1920s on the part of Mexican Catholics in response to the government's state atheist policies. Information found at Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10018.

fashion; instead, the primary political force in the events was the *Unión de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial*,[68] affiliated to the CUOM.[69] With its CUOM affiliation, the union both excluded non-Mexican workers, and additionally positioned itself as an anti-communist and class-collaborationist force, with "the union head, Filemon González . . . a labor contractor."[70] The lack of any significant organized Communist force among these workers at this time gave the union an advantage in attempting to shift worker militancy away from any direct confrontation with the employers, and towards the negotiating table instead. After the representatives of the union failed in negotiating with the heads of the farms for a raise from fourteen cents to between fifteen and twenty cents per crate, up to three thousand of the Mexican workers that they claimed to represent took strike action despite the union's wishes. However, the strike was defeated due to a combination of state repression, the union's denunciation of the actions, and the lack of participation by non-Mexican workers, such as Filipino laborers.[71]

The primary lesson learned by Mexican agricultural workers in the 1928 wildcat strikes was the need for coordination between themselves and workers of other ethnicities and national backgrounds. This lesson was applied by them two years later in

[68] Workers' Union of the Imperial Valley.
[69] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10091.
[70] González, "Company Unions," 56.
[71] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10100-26; González, "Company Unions," 56-57.

January of 1930, as the agricultural workers of the region again began taking strike action, again in the Imperial Valley, this time at a greater tempo than 1928, largely due to the effects of the Depression and a more stable population of Mexican workers. Both Mexican and Filipino lettuce workers suffered from being paid a lower wage than their white counterparts; this formed the principal grievance of the strike that emerged that month. Despite being separated by union membership, with the Mexican workers belonging to the CUOM affiliate, the workers were able to coordinate between each other and went on strike after the growers refused to negotiate.[72] This strike was notable for the shift in political forces influencing the strike. Not only were the political forces of the Mexican state and middle-class diaspora either absent or against the strike; beginning in 1930, and extending throughout the decade, the Communist Party made a concerted effort to intervene in and strengthen the strikes involving Mexican agricultural workers in the region.[73] This strike was the first in which that strategy was applied. Through the organizational infrastructure of the TUUL, Communist organizers formed the Agricultural Workers Industrial League[74] as a method to gain leadership in the strike.[75] The bold demands of the AWIL,

[72] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10170.
[73] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10177.
[74] AWIL.
[75] González, "Company Unions," 57.

including “doubling the hourly wage to 50 cents for all workers” and an end to “discrimination based on race or sex” put them in stark contrast with the anti-strike *mutualistas* supported by the Mexican government, and allowed them to win the support of the workers involved.[76]

The strike, in addition to marking Communist Party inroads into the community of Mexican agricultural workers in the Southwest, also marked the beginning of a recognition on the part of business, the state, and the Mexican government of communist influence on labor. These forces acted decisively to repress, weaken, and isolate the striking workers and radical political elements, a trend which would be reflected in successive labor disputes in the region. One of the main means by which the state was able to crack down on the strike was through the use of California’s Criminal Syndicalism Act, which “allowed for the arrest of labor activists who purportedly advocated for crime, sabotage, violence, or any other unlawful method as part of conducting a strike.”[77] The local law enforcement sided with the grower companies, and through the application of the act, were able to arrest the three main AWIL organizers in the strike.[78] The highest levels of the state were aware of the strike and the danger posed by it to their interests through its communist influence. The

[76] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10202-11.
[77] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10211.
[78] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10228.

Department of Labor's representative in the dispute, Charles T. Connell, made clear to his employers his intention to side with the growers, as well as to weaken the AWIL through both refusing to recognize them and strengthening their competitors, the CROM and Mexican government-affiliated political forces among the workers. The Mexican government, for its part, worked to communicate to their allies present in the strike to strive to bring the workers back to passivity.[79] The strike was defeated after only a few weeks due to the combination of state repression, isolation, and political inexperience on the part of the Communist organizers. While another wildcat strike emerged a few months later in April, this too was repressed in a similar fashion, although the Communist Party again played a significant role and gained valuable experience. Nevertheless, the crushing of these strikes in 1930 presaged a period of about two years in which Mexican workers in the region largely refrained from striking.[80]

Although state repression was able to temporarily forestall the will of Mexican (and non-Mexican) agricultural workers to strike in 1930, it was unable to alleviate their economic suffering that came from the Depression and their already intense economic exploitation at the hands of the grower companies.[81] As their

[79] González, "Company Unions," 57-8.
[80] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10252-320.
[81] See earlier information on the effects of the Depression on Mexicans in the US in Sufrin, "Labor Organization," 551.

conditions continued to deteriorate, and as Communist organizers in the CAWIU continued to maintain an active presence amongst the workers in the fields, strikes again exploded in 1933-1934. Against the backdrop of the broader class conflict during the Depression, the strikes in the Southwest were some of the "bloodiest" and most intense.[82] The strikes that arose during this strike wave mirrored some of the aspects of the strikes in 1930 and earlier. The grower companies, through the state, continued to deploy its arsenal of repression against the strikers, particularly the Communists.[83] The Mexican government continued to exercise its influence through its CUOM and *mutualista* associations, with the aim of diluting the demands and unity of the workers through organizing Mexicans along racial, rather than class, lines, and of having their unions negotiate for the workers. These forces backed by the Mexican government again frequently acted as bulwarks against the Communists.[84]

What shifted with the strikes of 1933-1934 in contrast to earlier ones was the extent of Communist influence within the largely Mexican workforce. Not only were the Communists merely active amongst the workers, but they frequently held leadership in

[82] Manuel G. Gonzales, "The Depression: 1930–1940," In *Mexicanos, Third Edition: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 176, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvgs0bsc.10.
[83] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 9623-31; González, "Company Unions," 61.
[84] González, "Company Unions," 60-61.

the strikes. In the most prominent agricultural regions of California between 1933-1934 for example, the CAWIU led 21 out of the 25 strikes that arose.[85] The Communists were the "most active in providing leadership" amongst the workers, and they were able to do this as a result of their by that point years-long effort at forming connections and organizing in the fields of the Southwest.[86] By the time of the 1933-1934 strikes, Mexican agricultural workers were increasingly receptive to the ideas espoused by the Communist Party. Dorothy Healy, a powerful Communist Party organizer in these strikes, recalled how after speaking to some Mexican workers about communism they responded positively to her, saying "Just tell us when the revolution is ready, we'll be there."[87] This interaction also demonstrated how Mexican workers continued to draw on the radical political traditions from the era of the Revolution. Mexican workers went beyond continuing to reject the forces of the CUOM and *mutualistas* which preached a more conservative vision of the Mexican Revolution.[88] They began to more fully imagine themselves as belonging to more radical political tendencies from their country, particularly Anarcho-syndicalism.[89]

[85] González, "Company Unions," 59.
[86] Gonzales, "The Depression," 179.
[87] As quoted in Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10468.
[88] González, "Company Unions," 61.
[89] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10468.

Mexican workers in the US Southwest composed a significant part of the working class in the region and suffered immense economic oppression both before and after the Great Depression struck. Some political forces, such as the AFL and the two major parties, maintained attitudes of either indifference or outright hostility to them, whereas others, mostly emanating from the radical wing of the workers' movement, eagerly accepted them and worked to organize them. Over the course of the 1920s and early 1930s these efforts bore increasing fruit, as strikes among Mexican agricultural workers steadily grew up to the strike wave of 1933-1934. Ultimately however, despite the gains won by Mexican workers in the strikes of 1933-1934, these strikes represented the zenith of political radicalism among Mexican workers in the Southwest during the 1930s.[90] The Communist Party, obeying dictates from Moscow, abandoned its project of creating red unions in the Southwest and in general, following along with the Popular Front strategy which necessarily involved rapprochement with certain left-wing elements of capital. This meant the CAWIU and other CPUSA unions were disbanded, with Party members then opting to work within more 'official' unions such as the CIO and others.[91] The CIO and even the AFL would begin paying more attention to Mexican workers starting in the late

[90] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10975.
[91] Chacón, *Radicals in the Barrio*, 10975-83.

1930s and continuing onwards.[92] Nevertheless, the cessation of the Communist Party's work amongst Mexican workers in the Southwest, based on the momentary needs of Soviet foreign policy, necessarily meant a setback not only for the Party's influence among Mexican workers in the US, but also for those workers themselves in their organizing efforts. The no-strike policy of the Party during the Second World War would only further limit its ability to make inroads with the most intensely exploited workers, such as those Mexican workers of the Southwest.[93]

[92] Lazo, "Latinos and the AFL-CIO," 30-1.
[93] Joel Seidman, "Labor Policy of the Communist Party during World War II," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 4, no. 1 (1950): 62, https://doi.org/10.2307/2519321.

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