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The Ohio State University, 1992
UNLIKELY STRIKERS: MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN STRIKE ACTIVITY IN TEXAS, 1919-1974

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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* * * * *

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Chapter I

Introduction

Mexican American women workers, because of their ethnicity, gender and class, have until recently been triply obscure historically, hidden in what Paulo Freire called the "culture of silence" and what feminist historians refer to as the invisibility of women in American history. Labor historians interested in the new social history have since the 1960s emphasized native-born and European immigrant workers; feminist historians have focused on Anglo women; and Mexican American historians have tended to look generally at the Mexican American population or, if interested in labor history, to concentrate on male workers. Because of the Mexican cultural tradition of the male-dominated family, both scholars and the general public have assumed that Mexican American women have been and continue to be private figures in the shadow of the macho Mexican male. The various union and strike actions of Mexican American women in Texas between 1919 and 1974 prove otherwise. My study deals with a group of women, considered doubly unlikely to organize, who frequently joined unions and went on strike to protest their work situation publicly.

Traditional craft unions considered women and minority workers as unorganizable. Mexican American women, then, were
characterized doubly as not organizeable. I will show in this study that Mexican American women strikers were not passive victims of their workplace. They resorted not only to typical union tactics but to Mexican culture and to violence in their efforts to have an impact on the course of strike events.

From my research I found that the level of organization and attention to women's issues in the strikes I have studied varied dramatically over the course of the 20th century. Labor historians have noted since the 1960s that labor unions had by the 1920s become as bureaucratic as the other big institutions in American society. David Montgomery, in the Fall of the House of Labor, pointed to the decline of labor unions as progressive reforming agents and contended that unions had become just another arm of the establishment, intent on saving themselves rather than meeting the needs of their constituents. Women historians, likewise, began in the 1970s to explore the ways that labor unions have worked hand in hand with employers to keep women segmented and stratified in low-skill jobs and paid less than male workers doing the same work. Ruth Milkman, in her study of women workers in the electrical industry, and Nancy Gabin, in her book on women in the automobile factories, both documented that reality for working women in the United States.

What we know about union organizing among Mexican American working women supports this picture. In a 1975 article on the 1933 garment strike in Los Angeles, Mexican American historian
Douglas Monroy charged that the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) was so determined to play a role in the direction of the garment industry that it failed to address adequately the concerns of the Mexican American women strikers.

My work builds on the studies of Milkman, Gabin, and Monroy to show that American unions at first ignored the Mexican American women workers and then neglected their particular needs, leaving room for the women to act on their own behalf and in their own ways to advance interests not being met by the unions.

My study will also show that Mexican American women advanced their interests through the use of Mexican culture and traditions and through extensive use of violence. While some labor historians were exploring changes in the traditional labor unions, others had begun to look at the life and job experience of the ordinary worker. One of the most prominent of these was Herbert Gutman. Gutman's seminal essay on the worker in Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America examined the "form and content" of workers' reactions to attempts by employers to make them more efficient factory employees. According to Gutman, workers often relied on the culture and traditions they brought with them from the Old World or the farm to temper employer controls in the workplace. In the same manner, Mexican American women in Texas turned to Mexican customs and ways in order to retain some power in the face of the many forces arrayed against them, including sometimes the unions.
Violence against the opposition, who most often were other Mexican American women, was frequently the "form and content" of Mexican American working women's responses to their sense of powerlessness during union and strike activity. Women historians Susan Porter Benson and Leslie Woodcock Tentler have posited that ethnicity sometimes took second place when working women developed a women's or work culture on the job. Vicki Ruiz's 1987 study of cannery women in California in the 1930s noted that Mexican and Russian women on the assembly lines forged ties based on shared experiences at work that later led to unionization. Although the development of a work or women's culture may explain how Mexican American women in Texas were able to organize and strike, it does not explain how the women could act so violently against other women of their own ethnic background.

Historians have done little to explain the existence of violence among workers during a strike. In order to understand the persistence of violent behavior among Mexican American women strikers in Texas, I employed the work of sociologist Rick Fantasia in *Cultures of Solidarity*. In his work, Fantasia contends that solidarity is not a static emotion discernible by querying members of a particular group on their value system or political beliefs. Instead, Fantasia sees solidarity as an attitude or position liable to change depending on the circumstances to which group members are subjected. Thus, when Mexican American women strikers experienced negative acts from strikebreakers, the company, the establishment, and sometimes
their supporters, they saw themselves tied together by each successive action and reaction from the opposition: they developed a "culture of solidarity". It was no longer ethnicity, class, gender, or nationality that held them together, but the experiences they were undergoing as strikers that made them one unit against others, whether strikebreakers, the company, or union officials. In this study of Mexican American women unionists in Texas, I explore the development of a culture of solidarity among a group of women who, given the great odds against them, believed they had no one but each other to rely upon.

Literature on the Mexican American Experience

Prior to the ethnic identity movements of the 1960s, historical studies of Mexican Americans were nonexistent. The economic and sociological studies that were available tended to focus on immigrant and migrant agricultural workers and only incidentally mentioned women. In the 1960s, scholars, including historians, became more interested in the Mexican American. While Ernesto Galarza continued with his studies of migrant workers in Merchants of Labor and Spiders in the Fields, other scholars produced general histories of the Mexican American people, socio-economic works on Hispanics, regional and community studies, family studies and labor studies, and eventually, works on Mexican American women. Most anthologies and general histories made mention of Mexican American women only in passing. Socio-economic and regional and community studies tended to include
women within the family. Even early labor historians were content with making occasional references to Mexican American women. It was not until the late 1970s that works specifically dealing with Mexican American women saw the light of day.

The ethnic movement of the 1960s in which Mexican Americans took part led to the publication of works on Mexican American women, too, but at a less rapid pace than those on men. Two early works on Mexican American women were Marta Cotera's Diosa y hembra and Alfredo Mirande and Evangelina Enriquez's La Chicana. Cotera compiled information on 200 years of Mexican American women's activities in the United States in an effort to dispel notions of the women's submissiveness. The authors of La Chicana also tried to counter prevailing myths about Mexican American women's cultural position by emphasizing the atypical Mexican American woman and by concentrating on the origination of the separate sphere for Mexican American women.

Historians of Mexican American women from the 1970s and 1980s exhibited the effect of the new social and women's history with its focus on women as actors in American society. Historical studies of Mexican American women continued to be limited in several ways, however. Most focused on women within one city or one industry or in connection with a particular event. Many concentrated on Mexican American women in California, neglecting those women in the Midwest and other Southwestern locations. Most have been articles; only five full length studies have
appeared. Mexican American women in social movements, in civic organizations, in religious work, in politics, and Mexican American women's activities over a period of time continue to be neglected.

Even though much of the research on Mexican American women has been widely scattered as to topic and time, and that on work experiences has been focused on a particular event, the studies have revealed important patterns. We know from these studies that married women did not generally work and that working women did so out of necessity, but that, like other American women, Mexican American women with families increasingly took paid work outside the home as the century progressed. Work participation led to some changes in their roles at home, but the ideology of separate spheres persisted. We know that a women's work culture developed and sometimes led to union efforts and strikes, proving time and again women's ability to organize. We learn that Mexican culture affected Mexican American women's work and union activities in both positive and negative ways. We know, too, that unions neglected the particular needs of Mexican American working women. My study builds on existing scholarship on the Mexican American—especially on the Mexican American female—experience by exploring the patterns of women's labor protest.

The Study

This study focuses on nine strikes in four different industries in Texas between 1919 and 1974. All the strikes took
place in either El Paso or San Antonio. Research on the labor experience of Mexican Americans by Juan Gomez-Quinones, Victor Nelson-Cisneros, and Emilio Zamora served as the springboard for my own work. Their occasional references to Mexican American women's participation in strike activity led me to newspaper accounts of the strikes, from which I eventually chose nine actions to be included in the study. From an early consideration of Mexican American women's strike actions in the southwestern United States, I narrowed the choice to those strikes in Texas in which at least 85% of the workforce or strikers were of Mexican origin. I felt that too often the women had been looked at in relation to other groups and now deserved an examination on their own merit. Because of the size of the Mexican American population in Texas and because of the long history of immigration, Texas serves as a useful case study. It allows us to explore a cohesive Mexican American community in both rural and urban areas that has close ties to its country of origin as well as a history of interaction with the dominant Anglo population.

Because the history of Mexicans in the U.S. has been one of low skill work, I chose to concentrate on Mexican American women in factory work. I excluded agricultural laborers on the basis that women in field work had a story of their own to tell. And Mexican American women did not enter clerical and technical jobs in any numbers until the 1950s. Thus, I begin with the 1919 laundry strike in El Paso, in which more than 300 Mexican American
women walked off the job to protest the firing of two fellow workers. In the 1930s in San Antonio, Mexican American women went on strike in the cigar, pecan, and garment plants to protest their wages and hours of work. Cigarworkers in San Antonio struck against harsh new rules imposed by management, some of which included raising the penalty for bad cigars, imposing clean-up duties, and demanding that work clothes be worn even during lunchtime. The pecan shellers rose in protest against a reduction in wages, a frequent occurrence in the thirties. Their dispute brought national, and not favorable, attention to San Antonio as the rest of the country read about the city police’s repression of strikers’ activities. The three garment strikes in San Antonio in 1936, 1937, and 1938 were much less spontaneous and better directed by a union with deep roots and a well-established structure. The garment strikes of the 1930s exhibited a phenomenon that was to be part of a pattern of garment strikes in Texas—bitter antagonisms that often led to violence.

The post World War II strikes in El Paso and San Antonio all involved the garment industry. The flight of the industry from the northeast to the south and west to avoid the unionization of its workforce proved futile to some extent. The anti-union attitude and right-to-work law in Texas arrayed the power of the establishment on the side of industry. But this did not entirely eliminate strikes for better contracts or for union recognition. In El Paso, the 1953 Hortex strike, 1965 Top-Notch dispute, the 1971 walkout at Levi-Strauss, and the two-year long boycott of
Farah in 1972-74 and the 1959 Tex-Son strike in San Antonio are proof of that.

Newspapers and interviews with strikers form the bulk of my sources. Newspapers provided me with the names of the women most deeply involved in the strikes and with incidents of protest. Each paper, however, had its own agenda and audience. Nonetheless, the accounts of strike activity from the various papers helped me develop a fairly clear and rounded out picture of each strike incident.

The labor press in both El Paso and San Antonio appealed for support for the strikers from other unionists and the general public, and their stories were often florid accounts of workers' struggles against greedy property owners. The El Paso Labor and County Advocate in 1919 was owned and edited by the male clique that ran the labor movement in El Paso. Men such as William Moran, the editor, and J. L. Hausewald, vice-president of the state federation of labor, used the paper to support the strike efforts of the laundry workers. In San Antonio, the long-time labor editor of the Weekly Dispatch, W. R. Arnold, and later J. H. Hoefger, and J. L. Haffner of the San Antonio Trades Council, performed similar duties for Mexican American strikers there. In both cases, the labor papers chose to represent the women as American citizens deserving of all Constitutional rights in order to blunt the hostility of Anglo readers towards Mexican origin people.
The regular press, as a pillar of the establishment, tended to depict the women negatively. In the 1919 laundry strike and the post WWII garment disputed in El Paso, the El Paso Herald, even more so than the El Paso Morning Times, employed the words of industry officials to denigrate the women's ethnicity and strike efforts. In San Antonio, the San Antonio Express and the San Antonio Light did likewise, accepting owners' and local government officials' evaluation of a strike situation with little attempt to present the workers' side of a disagreement. Although an author of a work on the history of El Paso called the Times a mouthpiece for the leaders and businessmen of the city and the Herald-Post editor the opposition, such a distinction was not evident in the lack of coverage and later pro-Farah biases of the two papers during the 1972-74 strike.

A survey of Hispanic papers in the United States carried out by Mexican immigration scholar Manuel Gamio, indicated that most of the pre-WWII papers were owned by middle-class Mexicans with aspirations to return to their homeland. Most papers were shortlived and local in distribution. Gamio argued that the reason many newspapers started and died out just as quickly was their reluctance to identify with those Mexicans permanently in the U.S. Spanish-language papers in the United States were not as common after WWII, except for El Continental during the 1953 Hortex strike, so I relied on two Mexican newspapers in Ciudad Juarez, La Cronica and El Fronterizo, instead, for a different viewpoint on the strikes in El Paso.
Background information on the owners and editors of La Prensa in San Antonio is available, and from it one can glean the nature and outlook of Hispanic papers in Texas. The owner of La Prensa, Ignacio Lozano, and his mother and sisters had immigrated to San Antonio in 1908, where Lozano worked in a bookstore. By 1913, he had started a weekly newspaper and opened his own store and, by the 1920s, he had founded another weekly in Los Angeles, La Opinion. Both papers carried the same editorials and reflected the owner's and editor's sense that they were temporarily in exile in the United States. Thus, coverage in the papers of social, political, and economic events in Mexico was extensive. In Lozano's view, the purpose of the two papers was to help prepare the way, from the U.S., for a better Mexico to which all Mexicans would eventually return.

Related to the issue of a temporary period of residence in the U.S. was that of reinforcing Mexican culture for Mexicans in this country. The papers lauded events and people that expressed Mexican customs and traditions. The papers also exhorted U.S. Mexicans to behave in a way that negated stereotypes, praising Mexicanos who behaved correctly and defending those whom the papers believed had been treated badly by Americans. By the 1930's, Lozano had accepted his own permanent residence in the U.S. That may explain the overriding concern of La Prensa with Mexican Americans behaving peacefully during strikes. If so, La Prensa's owners were reflecting what historians Mario and Richard
Garcia see as the shift toward the development of a Mexican American mentality that began in the 1930's among middle-class Mexicans in Texas.

Newspapers proved to be a valuable starting point for locating the names of women strike participants who might be interviewed. I used phone directories to find names and addresses of women arrested during strikes. In addition to utilizing phone books, I advertised for strike participants with personal ads in the local papers and a Catholic newspaper in San Antonio. In El Paso, Cesar Caballero of the University of Texas at El Paso library's Special Collections directed me to one prominent Farah striker, and she opened the door to two others. The publicity director of Amalgamated headquarters in New York City provided the name of the local business manager of the ACWA in San Antonio, Louisa Hernandez, who, in turn, enabled me to locate Sophie Gonzales, who had moved to El Paso after leading the unsuccessful strike at Tex-Son in 1959. Another local union official in Austin, Glenn Scott, gave me the names of union officials in El Paso. After I gained the confidence of Sophie Gonzales, she was invaluable in referring me to ex-strikers in both El Paso and San Antonio.

Some local union officials were unwilling to help locate former strike activists. The AFL-CIO council in San Antonio, for example, never returned my phone calls. The ACWA's business manager in El Paso, Tony Sanchez, was not very cooperative, although he did give Sophie Gonzales a message to contact me. the
business manager appeared suspicious of my motives and questioned me about where I had gotten his and the women's names. The lack of cooperation from several local officials was an indication of the problems that I later faced with the subjects. All in all, I conducted interviews with ten women strikers, one male striker, one owner, and five strikebreakers.

Two major problems arose in the personal interview process. I was able to interview only one worker from the 1930s strikes; all of the other interviewees were involved in the strikers of the 1950s through the 1970s. One of the problems that came up was the reluctance of a number of women, especially in El Paso, to be interviewed. Although the current economic situation that had resulted in instances of runaway shops was part of the reason, often unexpressed but still evident fear lay behind their reluctance. Some of the women told me they did not want to lose their jobs. Some told me they had to talk to the union first, and then told me they would rather I spoke to union representatives. One woman told of having been hoodwinked earlier by a man claiming to be a doctor studying labor disputes and then finding out he was a Communist. Most had to be reassured about who would be reading the material I was writing on them. Sophie Gonzales' approval of me led three strikers to reverse their decision not to be interviewed.

The other interesting problem that surfaced in the interview process was the reluctance of the strikers to discuss the violence
that had occurred in the strikes. It was very clear that they preferred not to talk about it. A good example is in the interview with a 1953 Hortex striker who never once brought up directly that she was the woman frequently named in the newspapers as being a leader in the attacks on strikebreakers. Only when I asked for her formal name did the connection with the person I was interviewing, and the person named by the press become evident.

The two problems that arose during the interview process affected my study directly. I contacted more than fifty people and ended up with 17 interviews. I had constantly to watch how I phrased questions relating to violence and I always felt as if I had missed out, that if only I had asked it another way, I would have received more information. The interviews I did conduct were all with women no longer associated with the industries concerned because the women who still worked feared the consequences of talking to a stranger. My ethnicity and gender were not the means of easy access I had expected them to be. Non-strikers repeatedly refused to be questioned about strikes that had occurred thirty years before, again because most of them still worked. The reluctance of some women came not from fear of losing their jobs, but, I believe, because the union had cautioned them against allowing themselves to be duped by outsiders. In any case, the results of my study are based on a much smaller sample of interviews than I had expected and wanted.

The reluctance of strikers to discuss the violence that occurred in their disputes with the companies created gaps in my
understanding of what motivated them to engage in such behavior. The newspapers often focused on the violence and provided details, but the women's reticence on the subject left me with more questions than answers as to motive. I had to rely on sources such as newsreports, government documents, and union material rather than on the actual participants, which meant that I had to "read against the grain" to try to understand the whole picture.

Collections of existing interviews helped provide some answers to my questions. But because other interviewers had a different focus or perspective, the picture remained incomplete. For details on conditions in the various industries, the oral history collections at both the University of Texas-El Paso and the University of Texas-Arlington were quite helpful. The Laura Coyle, et.al., interviews of the Farah women strikers contained a wealth of information on the backgrounds, organizing experience, and strike influence of the women. The People's History in Texas interviews, in the labor archives of the University of Texas at Arlington, with women unionists from the 1930s gave me insights into the work situations in the pecan and garment industries. The files on George Lambert and the ILGWU files at the labor archives at the University of Texas-Arlington contained clippings, photographs, union memoranda, and some correspondence for both the 1938 pecan strike and the 1959 Tex-Son garment strike.

Another very valuable source on the 1930s strikes was the government document collection at the National Archives in
Washington, D.C., particularly the Women's Bureau files and those of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The Women's Bureau records included surveys of the industries and workers in Texas as well as other general work information. The Mediation and Conciliation Service files contributed to the picture of the militancy and activism of the Mexican American women through reports and correspondence from field representatives to higher-ups in the capital. The discussions by these white, male officials about the women were often negative, but they helped to reveal, in the process, the consciousness of the women as workers, as Mexican Americans, and as women.

I begin my consideration of Mexican American women's involvement in labor protest by setting the scene. Chapter 2 surveys the patterns of Mexican immigration to Texas and the development of the industries in which Mexican American women worked. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the strikes themselves, exploring first the pre-WWII strikes and then the labor protests of the postwar period. In chapter 5, I deal with the ways that companies, relying on help from other establishment institutions, opposed the Mexican American women strikes. Chapter 6, the conclusion, pulls together the themes laid out in chapters 3, 4, and 5, pointing to the patterns of activism of these "unlikely strikers."
Endnotes

1 The term "Mexican American" is used throughout the study to denote Mexican-heritage people living in the U.S. regardless of their length of residence or their citizenship. Anglo society referred to Mexican Americans as "Mexicans" for most of the twentieth century. I employ the term "Mexican" only to designate citizens of Mexico. Paulo Freire discusses the culture of silence in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1960). For mention of women's invisibility in American history, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," JAH (1986).

2 Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1949); Factories in the Fields: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California (Boston: Little Brown, 1935); Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1942); Ernesto Galarza, Strangers in Our Fields (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1956); Paul Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States (Berkeley: University of California Press, vols. 1-6, 1928-34); Manuel Gamio, Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930). Two scholars who did study women were sociologist Ruth Allen in Texas and Paul Taylor in California who sought to study those factors that affected Mexican American women's work situation. In addition to their work, a 1936 government study of women workers in Texas included details on Mexican American women. In both The Labor of Women in the Production of Cotton (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1933) and "Mexican Peon Women," (Sociology and Social Research 1934), Allen castigated the women for their poverty and questioned their value to American society. In his 1928 study of Mexican American women in Los Angeles industries (Aztlan, reprint 1980), Taylor was primarily concerned with the two issues of motivation towards and impact of work on the women's Americanization. He concluded that Mexican American women worked only if they absolutely had to and that while work helped acculturate, the process was generational. The government study by Mary Loretta Sullivan and Bertha Blair, Women in Texas Industries: Hours, Wages and Conditions (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1936), surveyed 43 cities and towns to determine hours, wages, and conditions in those industries employing women—factories, stores, laundries, hotels, restaurants, telephone exchanges, garment plants, and pecan sheds. The results of the survey made obvious the second-class status of Mexican American working women in Texas.


5 As more Mexican American social historians began to write about Mexican Americans, they turned to regional and community studies, but continued to include women only marginally. On California communities, see Albert Camarillo's work, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara*
Two areas of Mexican American life that generated the most studies after 1960 were the family and labor movements. Calling for further research on the family as a "multifaceted" concept, Ann Pescatello, in *Power and Pawn: The Female in Iberian Families, Societies, and Cultures* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), pointed out that because the Hispanic "women's sphere of influence has been accepted as the 'private' arena of family and household or domestic sphere, while the man's has been 'public' or social activities..." her relationship to the family and home, to activity outside the home and to other institutions were important areas for exploration. David Alvirez and Frank Bean, in an article on the Mexican American family ("The Mexican American Family," *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations*, edited by Charles Mindel and Robert Habenstein, New York: Elsevier, 1976), challenged the notion that machismo meant sexual triumphs and public bravado for males by noting that it also meant caring materially for immediate and extended family members in balance with women's role as provider of personal care for the family. Such conclusions, however, focused attention on male dominance rather than on women's experiences. The discussion of the Mexican American family offered one area that eventually generated an examination of the Mexican American woman's role. In his article on the Mexican American family ("The Chicano Family: A Reanalysis of Conflicting Views," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1977), sociologist Alfredo Miranda rejected comparisons of the Mexican American family to the Anglo middle-class family. He argued that while Mexican American mothers did not have access to public arenas, their responsibilities at home brought prestige and
status equal to that of the male. Others soon picked up the subject of gender roles and patriarchy in research on the Mexican American family. Four psychologists in an article seeking the impact of acculturation on marital roles (Roland Tharp, Arnold Meadow, Susan Lenhoff, and Donna Satterfield, "Changes in Marriage Roles Accompanying the Acculturation of the Mexican American Wife," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1968) interviewed a group of Mexican English speakers and another of Spanish speakers and found that unacculturated Spanish speakers kept more "traditional attitudes and values" and had less companionate marriages than the other group. The husband-is-boss, unacculturated, Spanish speakers were also the unskilled, lower-class group. Another sociologist, Maxine Baca Zinn, took up the gender role theme in the 1980s. In an article on the Mexican American woman and marital roles (*Hispanic Report on Families and Youth* Washington D.C.: National Coalition of Hispanic Mental Health and Human Service, 1980), Zinn disagreed with the argument that modernization and acculturation changed gender roles in Mexican American families. She contended, instead, that socioeconomic improvements were cause for changes in some areas but that often families clung to older values and traditions. Lea Ybarra, likewise, took on the study of changing sex roles in Mexican American families in an article entitled, "When Wives Work: The Impact on the Chicano Family," (*Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1982). While noting the variety found among Mexican American families, she agreed that work and the resultant economic status were factors in role changes but not necessarily in ideology. Norma Williams has written the latest work on gender roles and Mexican American families, *The Mexican American Family: Tradition and Change* (Dix Hill, New York: General Hall, 1990). Williams examined the decision making patterns among working-class and middle-class Mexican Americans in Austin and Corpus Christi. The one historical work on the Mexican American family is Richard Griswold del Castillo's *La Familia: Chicano Families in the Urban Southwest, 1848 to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). Once again, the Mexican American woman emerges as part of a patriarchal family structure that refused to go away even as the family struggled with Mexican values, customs, and traditions and an American capitalist system intent on the use of Mexican labor.

If family studies had to include the Mexican American woman, early post 1960s labor studies either ignored her, marginally included her, or focused on other aspects of an event in which she was a participant. See, for example, Jack Cargill's "Empire and Opposition: The 'Salt of the Earth Strike'" (Robert Kern, ed., *Labor in New Mexico: Unions, Strikes, and Social History Since 1881* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983); Robert Landolt's *The Mexican Workers of San Antonio, Texas* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); George N. Green, "ILGWU in Texas, 1930-1950<" (*Journal of Mexican American History* 1972); Kenneth Walker, "The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio and Mechanization," (*Southwestern*


8 See, for example, Julia Kirk Blackwelder, Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1984); In an article in Frontiers ("Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: 'Mothers of East Los Angeles'" 1990) on Mexican American women's grassroots community organizing, Mary Pardo chronicled the story of how mothers in a Los Angeles barrio were able to prevent the establishment of a proposed prison and later a toxic waste dump in their neighborhood by skillfully transforming traditional, informal social networks associated with schools, the block, church, and work into a political coalition that pressured local government into a second consideration of the projects. Mary Romero, in "Domestic Service in the Transition from Rural to Urban Life: The Case of la Chicana," (Women's Studies Quarterly 1987), sought to explain why Mexican American housemaids did not acquire the connections and skills to move up the job ladder as had European immigrant house-servants. Richard Croxdale, in "The 1938 San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike," and Melissa Field, in "Union-Minded: Women in the Texas ILGWU, 1933-1950," (Women in the Texas Workforce: Yesterday and Today Austin: People's History in Texas, 1979), attempted to show that the women strikers, rather than being unorganizable, made things happen during strike disputes. Mario Garcia, in "The Chicana in American History: The Women of El Paso, 1880-1920—A Case Study," (Pacific Historical Review 1980), offered a description of the work situation and consequent strike of laundry women workers in 1919. One of the labor studies on
women, "The Tolteca Strike: Mexican Women and the Struggle for Union Representation," by Magdalena Mora (in Mexican Immigrant Workers in the U.S., edited by Antonio Ríos-Bustamante, Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, UCLA, 1981), provided an account of Mexican American women rank and file members of culinary local and their push to make the union more responsive to their needs. Clementina Duron's "Mexican Women and Labor Conflict in Los Angeles: The ILGWU Dressmakers' Strike of 1933," (Aztlan 1984), tried to show the women's role in the ILGWU in the thirties to disprove allegations of their unorganizability. Representative of the newer approaches and emphasis on women as actors are works by Margaret Rose on women in the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) and by Devra Weber on a 1930s farmworkers' strike in California. Rose's articles ("Traditional and Nontraditional Patterns of Female Activism in the United Farm Workers of America, 1962-1980," Frontiers 1980; "From the Fields to the Picket Line: Huelga Women and the Boycott, 1965-1975," Labor History 1991) have discussed the varied roles that Mexican American women in the UFW took on, from Dolores Huerta's "male" model to Helen Chavez's "female" model of activism. In "Raíz Fuerte: Oral History and Mexicana Farmworkers," (Oral History Review 1989), Devra Weber used facial, tonal, and hand expressions, as well as the narratives, of women cotton strikers, to find the connections between gender consciousness, class sense, and ethnic identity. My study will expand on the work on Mexican American women workers by looking at several decades of strike experiences in four industries in Texas.


12 Ibid, 67 and 71-74.
Chapter II
Mexican American Women in Texas

The history of Texas has been one of the clash and later co-existence of various cultures. The first clash was that of the Native Americans with the Europeans, especially the Spaniards. After 1821, with the entrance of Anglo Americans into Mexican Texas, the stage was set for a three-way clash in the 20th century. Settlers poured in after annexation in 1848, coming mostly from other Southern states and bringing their slaves with them. In 1861, Texas chose to join the rest of the South and seceded from the Union. Except for East Texas and, at the end, in South Texas, little fighting occurred in Texas during the Civil War, and the people of Texas continued to grow cotton and produce goods that they tried to ship out through Mexico. From 1865 to 1900, the character of the state became that of a western frontier ripe for settlement and development. After the war, the cattle industry developed into an important economic sector in the state. As the population grew and moved westward, railroads increased their mileage, and port cities, like Houston, flourished with trade from the rest of the U.S. and from Mexico. Only South Texas remained virtually rural and populated by Mexican Americans.

The twentieth century was to see Texas become an industrial state on its own, rather than just a producer of raw goods for
the rest of the country. The discovery of oil at Spindletop in East Texas in 1901 meant an energy source and financing for other types of production. Other industrial concerns were soon established, and by mid-century Texas was ninth in the nation in manufacturing. At the same time, irrigation was introduced in South and West Texas, and in 1920 Texas had its first billion dollar agricultural crop. At this time, a huge number of immigrants coming into the state were Mexicans. Socially, politically, and economically second-class, Mexican immigrants in South Texas and Blacks in East Texas worked the farms and made the factory products of Texas. Heavily Southern, Democratic, Anglo, and pro-business, Texas prospered for most of the twentieth century until the drop in oil prices in the 1980s.

Mexican Immigration to Texas

Tracking the immigration and population trends of Mexican heritage people in the United States and Texas has been quite difficult for scholars. The records of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) have not been reliable until quite recently, in part because of the difficulty of counting illegal immigrants. The records of the Mexican Interior Department on immigrants and returnees have helped to produce more accurate estimates, but an exact count remains elusive. Early census counts were tainted for the simple reason that Mexicans were often lumped with other whites, with foreigners, or with people of color. In the 1930s, census takers received instructions to
delineate Mexican Americans based on racial characteristics, but when that proved untenable, the Census Bureau switched to counting people by their mother tongue. That method also did not serve the purpose well, as second and third generation Mexican Americans often did not speak Spanish. Since the 1950s the government has chosen to enumerate Mexicans on a Spanish-surname basis. This procedure has worked as well as possible when dealing with a population that includes many illegal immigrants and non-English speakers who fear answering questions from any government agency.

Between 1901 and 1910, some 49,642 Mexicans chose to migrate to the United States; many left in response to the increasing commercialization of agriculture that left peasants without land or jobs. Mexican government records on the destination goals of those leaving the country indicate that about 68% chose Texas. Although the exact number that went to Texas is unknown, in San Antonio 26% of the population in 1900 and 31% in 1920 registered as having been born in Mexico. Almost 70% of Mexican immigrants were males between 14 and 44 years of age and male and a little better than 70% were unskilled. The social and economic dislocations of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought in not only more skilled workers, but more women and children as well.

The growth of the cotton industry in Texas and the development of a railroad system by 1920 played a large role in the increase in Mexican immigration to the U.S. in the decade that followed. In 1920, Mexican-born persons in Texas constituted 69%
of the foreign-born population. Between 1921 and 1928, 68% of Mexican immigrants noted Texas as their destination on Mexican visa forms. At the end of the 1920s, 683,681 Mexican-born individuals resided in Texas.

The Great Depression of the 1930s put a huge dent in the size of the Mexican immigrant population. Both a voluntary and forced repatriation of Mexicans occurred as Americans sought scapegoats for the economic ills of the country and looked for ways to eliminate or reduce social assistance costs. In 1930, only 12,000 Mexicans came to the U.S. By the end of the decade, only about 27,900 had obtained visas to this country. Not counting those deported by the INS, 89,000 Mexicans left the U.S. during the Depression period. In Texas, the Mexican-born population dropped from 266,046 in 1930 to 159,266 in 1940. Most of the Mexicans who immigrated in 1932 were women and children coming to join their husbands and fathers.

Not until the 1950s did Mexican immigration to the United States reach pre-Depression levels. The bracero program, in which the U.S. and Mexican governments set up and oversaw the recruitment of Mexican farm labor to the U.S., helped to spread the word within Mexican communities about economic opportunities in the U.S. In addition, the urbanization of Mexican immigrants that had barely begun in the pre-WWII period accelerated in the decades after 1945. Furthermore, the number of female Mexican immigrants increased to almost approximate that of the number of males coming into the U.S.
From 1955 to 1964, only 40% (compared to 67% in the 1920s) of Mexican immigrants noted Texas as their intended state of residence. But the process of urbanization of the population continued. Of the total Spanish-surnamed state population of just over one million in 1950, 68% were urban dwellers. Mexican immigrants who came to Texas in the 1950s were from rural areas, but because many had worked as farm laborers only part of the time, they probably had other skills needed in the city. In Texas in 1950, of the female Spanish-surnamed labor force, clerical workers were 24%, factory operatives were 22%, private household servants were 19%, service workers were 15%, farm laborers were 8%, managers were 4%, professional and technical 4%, farmers were less than 1%, craftsmen were 1 percent, other laborers were 1% and 2% were not reported. Such statistics reveal not only the continuing importance of factory work, but also the growing significance of the service sector. They also indicate that Mexican American women in pink collar clerical work were now the largest sector.

The increasingly large wave of immigration from Mexico in the early 1960s led to changes in the immigration laws. Except for 1925, when a visa tax had been placed on immigrants, immigration restrictions had not applied to Mexicans, but in 1963, new procedures in visa granting called for U.S. Department of Labor endorsement of job offers before a visa was approved. Furthermore, in 1965, immigration from Western hemisphere
countries was limited to 120,000 a year. The new laws and rules, in turn, led to growth in the numbers of illegal aliens coming in. An aspect of the immigration situation that became a topic of interest in the 1960s was the pattern of commuting, in which Mexicans crossed into the U.S. on a daily basis to look for work or to go to their jobs. The bracero contract work program stopped after 1965, but the number of both legal and illegal immigrants grew.

Population figures for the state of Texas indicate extensive growth of the numbers of Mexican heritage people in the 1960s and 1970s. The Spanish surnamed population constituted 15% of the total state population in 1960 and 18% in 1970. The trend of urbanization that had begun in the 1940's continued: 79% of Spanish-surnamed people in 1960 and 84% in 1970 lived in urban areas. The five counties in Texas in which the largest cities are located showed an increase in Spanish-surnamed persons, and the growth of Harris and Dallas counties, in which Houston and Dallas are located, showed that the Mexican population was moving north and east.

Immigrants since the 1960s, including large numbers of illegal immigrants, have come more often from Mexican border states rather than Central Mexico as had earlier immigrants. This sometimes meant that immigrants had skills acquired from working at American-based industries at the border. Thirty-eight percent of illegals in 1970 and 25% in 1973 came from Mexican border states. A 1986 study of undocumented Mexican women in Houston
showed the growing numbers of women coming to cities in the state. Undocumented women generally come with their families, stay permanently, and when they work, do so in non-seasonal jobs.

The continuous and increasing flow of Mexican immigrants into Texas in this century had a great impact on the labor experiences of Mexican American working women. As with other immigrant groups, Mexicans moved into already established Mexican American neighborhoods, sometimes because of pre-existing ties, sometimes because of economic necessity, and sometimes because of discriminatory housing policies. Whatever the reason, this influx posed both advantages and disadvantages for those already here. On the one hand, as we shall see, the reinforcement of Mexican culture and traditions that came with the fresh waves of immigrants provided a basis for solidarity and a foundation for labor protest. On the other hand, the inflow expanded an already large pool of unskilled labor, giving employers a cheap and plentiful labor force to replace striking or dissatisfied workers.

Mexican American Women in Texas Industries

The discovery of oil at Spindletop in East Texas in 1901 fueled the industrial development of Texas in the 20th century. Spindletop also brought in the money and business know-how needed for economic development. Two other important elements for economic growth were already present: a network of railroads had begun in the 1880s, and the population had increased rapidly after
Texas became a part of the U.S. in 1845. The increasing growth of the Mexican immigrant population after 1910 was only one more factor that spurred economic expansion in the state. The favorable business climate included a beneficial tax structure, low expenditures on social services and education, and an unorganized labor force.

The processing of raw materials dominated industrial growth in Texas until the 1950s, when the production of semi-processed goods took over. In addition to the growth of light industry, the expansion of government after WWII provided jobs. Together factories, government agencies, retail stores, and the service sector have employed 70% of the labor force of the state for the past three-quarters of a century.

Geography, cultural factors, and lack of skill have generally kept Mexican-heritage people in Texas in the manufacturing and service sectors. Prior to 1940, most such manufacturing in Texas could be found in the eastern and east-central parts of the state, with particular concentration in the Dallas-Ft. Worth, Houston-Galveston, and Beaumont-Port Arthur areas. The demand for gas, lumber, and food during WWII accelerated manufacturing growth in the state, especially in the largest metropolitan areas which now included San Antonio and El Paso, the former in Central Texas and the latter in West Texas. In the 1950s and 1960s, Dallas and Houston continued to dominate the industrial sector, although El Paso in the west and McAllen in South Texas had begun to grow as major areas of manufacturing.
Six major industries employed 55% of factory workers in the 1970s: machinery production, food products, fabricated metals, clothing, electrical supplies, and chemicals. Close to 2/3 of machinery workers were to be found in Dallas and Houston, while employment in the preserved food industry centered in San Antonio, South Texas, East Texas and to a lesser extent in El Paso. The manufacture of fabric metals is associated with Houston and Dallas, but San Antonio has a sizable labor force in this sector too. The production of clothing required a large cheap workforce and good marketing facilities, and Dallas provided both, while El Paso and San Antonio could supply the former. Because South Texas, too, can supply large numbers of low-paid workers, the clothing industry has begun to develop there. The production of chemicals has been concentrated in the Houston-Gulf Coast area of the state, and the manufacture of electrical products concentrates in the Dallas-Ft. Worth region. Thus, industrial development in Texas, as elsewhere, took place in areas in which a large supply of cheap labor, often Mexican American, was available.

As a result, Mexican American workers concentrated in manufacturing, especially in the clothing and food industries. In a study of the social and economic effects of Mexican migration into Texas in 1929, Charles Hufford showed that of 43 factories he surveyed, 31 had a workforce ranging from 56% to 100% Mexican American; of six laundries, all had between 65 and 85% Mexican American workers; but, of eleven stores examined, only three had
more than 50% Mexican American employees.16

Later studies confirm this general pattern. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, in her study of San Antonio women during the Depression, found that in 1934, only 15% of Mexican-heritage women were in white or pink-collar work, while 48% worked in industry. She concluded that employers in the 1930s in San Antonio were willing to pay higher wages to Anglo women rather than hire Mexican American women or Black women in offices. A study of the Spanish-surnamed population in Texas revealed 22% of Mexican American women working as operatives in 1950 and 20% in 1960.

The Laundry Industry in El Paso

In 1919, when the laundry strike that serves as my first instance of labor protest occurred, manufacturing in the state was in its early stages, and one of the branches of the service sector that offered employment opportunities for Mexican-heritage women in Texas was laundry work. Before 1915, the laundry industry was mainly a shirt and collar business, but commercial and family laundries were slowly growing. The invention of the home electric washer brought competition which led to dramatic changes. Laundries began providing a wet-wash service, rough-dry service, and finished service, for which the industry charged on a per pound basis. The changes led to more business and from 1909 to 1915, the number of laundry establishments in the U.S. increased from 3845 to 5,9962, and the workforce rose from 105,216 to 203,215 employees.
A study of the work of women in laundries by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1915 showed that at that time, both steam or power laundries and hand laundries existed. The steam laundries used machines to do a lot of the work, were large companies employing several hundred workers, and could be found throughout the country. The hand laundries had few employees, the work was done in the individual owner's home, and the employees only did ironing, sending out clothes to the steam laundries for washing. This type of hand laundry was most common in New York and Brooklyn. The six laundries in El Paso in 1919 were all steam laundries.

By 1920, El Paso stood second only to San Antonio in the number of Mexican American residents. The city that year had a population estimated at 80,000 and slightly more than half were of Mexican extraction. El Paso was not only the Ellis Island for Mexican immigrants, through which thousands passed through to other southwestern cities, but with its railroads, mines, international trade centers, and the cattle industry, it became home for thousands of Mexican Americans. The proximity of the U.S. made it easier for immigrants from northern Mexican states to cross into El Paso; a sample of WWI draft registrations of El Pasoans showed that 72% of the Mexican immigrants had come from that region of Mexico, particularly from the state of Chihuahua. Mexican workers found that if they earned 23 cents a day in Central Mexico, or 88 cents a day in the border city of Ciudad
Juarez they could get $1.00 a day in Texas. Individual contractors, city employment offices, corporation agents, and government-run employment agencies competed with each other at the international bridge in El Paso to lure Mexican workers to railroads, farms, mines, or factories.

Mexican immigrants who stayed in El Paso found themselves generally restricted to jobs as laborers. This was due both to the structure of El Paso’s economy and to the ethnic biases of Anglo El Pasoans. Mexican American males in El Paso worked in smelters earning $1.00 to $1.50 a day, while skilled American workers earned $3.50 to $6.00 daily. Railroads were another major source of employment for Mexican American males, who sometimes worked for as little as ten cents an hour. Some Mexican American men worked as laborers in construction; others labored in stores, for the city, at a cigar factory, as waiters, cooks, dishwashers, and janitors.

Mexican American women workers in El Paso were also restricted to low-skill, low-paying, and dead-end jobs. Their two major sources of employment were in domestic service and commercial laundry work. According to a newsreport in 1907, housemaids earned $3 to $6 a week and worked from seven in the morning to five in the afternoon. Laundry workers earned from $4 to $6 a week and were working 54-hour weeks in 1919. Laundries sometimes offered the opportunity to learn other skills, such as operating a sewing machine. Some Mexican American women worked in the cigar plant, garment factories, department stores, and houses.
of ill-repute. Children between the ages of ten and fifteen were working in the laundries and as servants to help their families.

In fact, in 1900, Mexican American women workers in Texas as a whole were mostly young, unmarried girls. Comparing the rates of work participation of Mexican immigrant women and Anglo women in South, Central, and West Texas, one study found that only in West Texas was the rate of participation higher for Mexican American women. Not only did Mexican American women have lower work participation rates than Anglo women, but married Mexican American women were even less likely to be employed outside the home. In the three regions studied, the percentage of married Mexican American women working was 5% in Central Texas, 4% in South Texas, and 3% in West Texas. Unmarried women did work at higher rates—30% in South Texas, 22% in West Texas, and 10% in Central Texas. A census sample from 1919 of 393 El Paso households showed similar patterns: 1/5 of the households sent women out to paid jobs, and married Mexican American women within families did not have paid employment outside the home. According to historian Mario Garcia, Mexican men's attitudes about married women working and having children kept this group of women at home. Such studies suggest that the Mexican cultural tradition that men were the breadwinners and women the caretakers of the home had a powerful influence.

In El Paso in 1919, six steam laundries operated with a workforce of over 500 employees, most of whom were Mexican
heritage women. The El Paso Laundry in 1917, for example, had 134 Mexican American women workers doing collar and flatwork out of a total workforce of 166. Two other large laundry facilities—the Elite and the Acme—had 76 Mexican American workers out of 128 and 75 out of a total of 121, respectively. A small laundry, Post Laundry, had 33 women of Mexican extraction working there out of a total workforce of 49. In 1929, the Elite Laundry's workforce was 24% Mexican American. Ten years after the 1919 strike, El Paso laundries were still hiring large numbers of Mexican American women.

In November 1919, a state industrial commission conducted a study of the wages of production workers, including employees of the laundry plants, for the purpose of deciding on wage legislation. The average weekly wage for laundry workers in the state was $9.39, while the average weekly cost of living was $13.78. For El Paso laundries, the commission found the cost of living as $19.09 and weekly wages of $12.05 a week. The women laundry workers who testified before the commission claimed that they received from $4 to $5.75 a week, but that they believed they needed between $18 and $25 weekly to support themselves adequately. One said that on $4.50 a week, she sometimes went without food. Another, who earned $11 weekly, the highest for a Mexican American woman, said it was still hard to live on that as she helped her family out, too.

Other government studies offered data on wages in laundries in Texas in 1918. In Dallas, female laundry workers earned $12 a
week; in Del Rio, a border town like El Paso, a female laundry worker made 15 cents an hour; and in Houston, she got $1.00 a day. A study, eight months later, showed female laundry workers in El Paso, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi averaging $6.00 a week, $1.75 a day, and $5.00 to $11.00 a week, respectively. Except for Dallas and Houston, where Mexican Americans were not as likely to live in this period, these studies showed that weekly rates probably were less than ten dollars.

Low wages were not the only problem facing women laundry workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1915, found that women worked from ten to twelve and a half hours a day, depending on whether a rush job materialized or not. Hours worked often depended on outside factors; if, for example, a convention arrived, work increased. The worker's position in the laundry also affected hours worked. Washers had heavier workloads at the beginning of the week, when a weekend's load came in, while the iron pressers had more work at the end of the week, after the week's washing piled up.

According to the report, steam laundries included some with the best facilities for employees, but many were badly lighted, had inadequate ventilation, and were unsanitary. An El Paso Herald reporter described conditions as good at the Acme Laundry in 1919. The newsman claimed that he saw a well ventilated, scrupulously clean building, with safety features, and he found the temperature in the work areas comfortable. He noted that the
"girls" had a Victrola in a main room, where, the owner said, they danced at noon almost every day. They also had a stove for cooking hot food at lunchtime. If one accepts the newsreporter's evaluation, the Acme was one of the better places to work in the laundry industry.

In both El Paso and San Antonio, laundries continued to be a source of employment for Mexican American women in the 1920's and 1930's. Six San Antonio laundries employed 65% to 85% Mexican American workers in 1929. A 1927 Women's Bureau report on the industry noted that 35% workers in laundries in western states had been born outside the U.S., in this case in Mexico. In 1936, one-fourth of 2345 women surveyed as working in Texas laundries were Mexican American. The Texas Steam Laundry in San Antonio, for example, employed 103 Mexican American women and 49 Mexican American men out of a total of 221 workers in 1932.

Government studies of the laundry plants in the twenties and thirties did not paint as rosy a picture as the 1915 report. The steamy and hot nature of laundry work required that room temperatures be kept at 66 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit and that natural ventilation be supplemented by artificial air currents. The job also entailed a lot of standing. A 1927 report by the Women's Bureau noted that of the 297 laundries surveyed, 47% had comfortable temperatures, but 30% were warm and 17% were hot, 1/3 lacked artificial ventilation; and only 19 had seats for all of their employees. The laundries did better with first-aid, since only 15 had no health service to offer at all.
Of 52 laundries examined in the 1936 Women's Bureau report on
Texas, at least half were found inadequate in a number of areas. In an industry where standing was necessary for a large part of
the work, 30 plants had cement floors, which was not conducive to
good health, 28 plants had inadequate seating, 4/5 of the
laundries had no lunch facilities, a third of the establishments
lacked enough toilet seats for the number of present employees,
and ventilation was nonexistent in 34 and bad in more than half of
the places visited. Safety was not given priority in 24 of the 52
laundries. The industry in Texas did rate better in the areas of
temperature, cleanliness, washrooms, and first-aid.

By the 1940's, the laundry industry was undergoing changes
that were to solidify in later decades. Laundry establishments
were less often individually owned and more often under corporate
ownership. Incorporated laundries tended to be larger and to
employ the majority of workers in the industry. Further
mechanization in the industry transformed job classifications.
Wringers and washers were now extractor operators and tended to be
male. Sorters, bundlers, iron pressers, and markers had evolved
into catchers, feeders, shakers, bosom-press operators, collar-
cuff press operators, and markers, and these remained female jobs.
Men averaged between 53.5 and 66.5 cents an hour and women between
37 and 42.5 cents.

Changes in the industry continued after the WWII years. The
continuing purchase and use of home washing machines brought a
decrease in the work for power or steam laundries. Other branches of the industry grew, and more and more power laundries were lumped together with the dry cleaning industry which employed more men. Between 1947 and 1955, the power laundry firms lost 10% of their workforce, and the ratio of female to male workers in the power laundries by the mid 1950s was 3 to one. In the 1947-55 period, wages rose at a yearly rate of 4%. Women flatwork finishers earned the least—35 cents an hour—and male washing-machine operators earned the most—47 cents per hour. In Dallas, the average hourly wage for men was $1.12 but 75 cents for women. Increasingly, laundry workers, except in the South, were organized with the Laundry International Union and won paid vacations, 3 to 5 holidays a year, insurance, and retirement plans whose cost was partially paid by employers. The union, however, could not prevent the decline of the power or steam branch of the industry and the resultant decrease in workers.

The loss of employment in the laundry industry after 1958 was in those areas where women were more likely to be found. For the whole industry between 1958 and 1976, the workforce of 688,000 dwindled to 445,000, a decline of 2.3% yearly. The power laundries, drycleaners, and garment pressers were the hardest hit; work hours dropped from 38.7 to 35.9 in 18 years. The number of blue-collar workers—craftspeople, mechanics, machine operatives, and laborers—decreased from 64% to 58% in the four years from 1970 to 1974. Only white-collar jobs increased after 1958.
Laundry work, usually found in metropolitan areas, provided employment for Mexican American women for at least 3/4 of this century. Six laundries in El Paso in 1919 had over 500 workers, of which the majority were of Mexican descent. In the 1930's, laundries in both San Antonio and El Paso continued to have over 65% Mexican American workers. After WWII, the power laundries began to decline and the number of women in the industry declined with them. The new industry was more technologically advanced and Mexican American women did not have the necessary skills to be hired. The only increase in the industry was in white-collar jobs where Mexican women were least likely to be found.

The Garment Industry in San Antonio and El Paso

San Antonio in the 1930's was a light industry town with a Mexican origin population of 36% in 1930 and 41% in 1940. The military bases, oil industry, and cattle industry were the primary employers. Railroad yards, packing plants, cigar factories, and garment shops made up the secondary employers. Like other parts of the country, the San Antonio economy felt the worst of the Depression between 1932 and 1934.

After 1934, the economic situation in the city began to improve for some groups. Military spending, WPA construction projects, and the hotel and convention business most probably helped bring about the better conditions. The city began to repay loans and operate on a cash basis. Local retailers and manufacturers spoke of a "good season" by Christmas of 1935. The
city government, however, was politically astute enough to recognize that such improvement had not trickled down to the working classes. Officials therefore urged business to increase employment by any means possible, including with their plans for the 1936 Texas Centennial celebration, but they themselves made few tangible efforts. Although Mexican Americans in San Antonio did not share substantially in any economic improvement, the per capita income in San Antonio increased from $520 in 1935 to $840 in 1939, and retail sales went up from $73,428 to $112,396 in the same period.

The Mexican immigrants who came to San Antonio just prior to the Depression decade were unskilled laborers and agricultural workers from the rural states of central Mexico. Not surprisingly, they ended up in the service sector and low-skilled factory jobs in San Antonio and during the Depression turned out most likely to be unemployed or on relief.

One of the major employers of Mexican American labor in the 1920's and 1930's in San Antonio was the apparel industry. At first manufacturers chose Dallas as a clothing plant location, but the 1930's saw the growth of garment shops in Houston and San Antonio. By the 1940's, the industry in its continued search for a cheap labor force had taken root in El Paso. Government contracts and the availability of labor during the war offered such favorable conditions that the industry expanded rapidly after 1945 and remained in El Paso as a major employer until the mid 1970's. The dismal unionizing record in deep South Texas made it congenial
for garment plants such as Dickie's, Levi-Strauss, and Haggers in the last two decades.

The garment industry that took off in the 1920's in Texas consisted at first of one-owner, under-capitalized, small-time operations. In 1925, the entire state had only 300 sewing machines in factory operation. By 1931, the state had 35 dress factories with 3600 machines turning out 11,232,000 dresses a year. Dallas had 18 dress plants and 2200 machines; Houston contained seven plants with 750 machines; and San Antonio ranked third with 350 machines in 4 four plants.

A 1936 Women's Bureau study of women in Texas industries found a total of 53 clothing plants employing 3,748 women in men's clothing, women's dresses, and infant's clothes. Unpublished reports from the Women's Bureau files showed 6,469 women, or 13% of employed women, in the clothing industry in Texas. More than 3/10 of the Mexican American women in the survey were clothing workers, with 2/5 of these in children's wear. The four toddlers' clothing plants in the study employed only Mexican American women. In San Antonio in the 1930s garment plants hired between 6000 to 7000 Mexican American workers, including, presumably, homeworkers.

A major demand of the garment strikers in the 1930's in San Antonio, aside from union recognition, was a wage increase. In the spring of 1937, the Women's Bureau conducted a study of wages in the women's and children's apparel industry and learned that
the average hourly earnings for employees was 38.5 cents. Women machine operators sewing dresses made 36.3 cents an hour and 39 cents an hour if they made children's clothes. Handfinishers, who were also mostly women, earned 33.7 an hour for dresses and 34.8 for children's outerwear. The report also found that shops with unionized workers paid more than nonunionized ones; in Texas, union shops paid a difference of 31 cents more per hour in children's apparel.

About 65% of the dressmakers and 68% of children's clothesmakers worked forty hours or less a week. The average weekly pay for all workers, regardless of hours and branch of work, was $14.65, but children's wear workers in Texas averaged only $11.50 a week. During a stop in Texas, David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), commented that garment workers in New York earned between $20 and $25 for a twenty-seven to 31-hour week. The 1937 Women's Bureau report bore this out: the weekly wage for children's wear sewers in New York City was twenty dollars.

Before the full 1936 study of women in Texas industries, the Women's Bureau made a preliminary evaluation in 1932 of the garment industry. The evidence from this earlier report showed 128 Mexican American women workers earning weekly wages of $5.45 for dresses and $5.70 for infant clothes. Homeworkers earnings for 107 women revealed that half made less than $2 to $3 a week and only one made as much as $5 a week. The 1936 study pointed to an improvement in wages for the factory workers, but the data
included Anglo women's as well as Mexican American women's work. Women's cotton garment sewers averaged $12, silk dressmakers made $13.05, and toddler clothesmakers earned $6.80 a week. Those women who worked at home made about $2.75 a week.

Discussion of wages during the 1936 Dorothy Frocks' strike in San Antonio were quite revealing of actual wages of Mexican American garment workers. During the strike, workers told the press that they made $8 or $9 doing piece-work for a 44-hour week. The Shirlee Frocks Manufacturing Company, which witnessed a strike in 1937, employed 100 women in peak season and claimed to pay them an average of $8 to $10 and as high as $14 a week on piece work for 40 hours of work. Both the manager of Texas Infants Dress Company and the president of the company union, Edith Trigos, contended during the 1938 strike that their workers on piece work made $7.50 to $20 weekly and those on straight wages earned between $12 and $22.50 for a forty-hour week. National Recovery Administration (NRA) code provisions, in contrast, called for $18.90 for a thirty-five hour week for the clothing industry.

Propelled by low wages and appalling conditions, homeworkers in the garment industry often served alongside factory workers on the picket line during strikes. The 1936 Women's Bureau study had shown that homeworkers were often older than plant workers: 56 of the 120 reported workers were between 30 and 50 years of age. Homework hours proved hard to gauge, but many women spoke of working continuously for ten or more hours a day. As for wages, of
the 98 whose earnings could be determined, 63 averaged less than 5 cents an hour. Often other family members helped with the sewing. Of the 119 families visited for the homework report, a total of 175 persons admitted to sewing clothing for pay. For example, three sisters working on dresses made 4 dozen a week for a total of $7 to $8 for all three of them. The government researchers noted, at least twice, that dresses for which homeworkers were being paid $5 a dozen were being sold for eight dollars each.

The regular press, in covering garment strikes, often referred to the workers interchangeably as "women" or "girls", and thus gave no clue to age and marital status. The Spanish language paper, however, referred to them as "muchachas," "senoritas," and "jovenes huelquistas", all three terms indicating youth and an unmarried status. Twenty-four questionnaires from the preliminary study by the Women's Bureau showed ages ranging from 16 to 63. Thirteen of the 24 were under age 24; 12 were single, 3 widowed, and one separated; and 16 had been in the United States for ten years or more. Seven out of the 8 reported as married said they had children, with one reporting four children and the others fewer. One of the widowed women, aged 29, had five children, all over the age of six. In the final draft of the 1936 report, the Women's Bureau concluded that 7/10 of Mexican American women in men's work clothing and 2/3 in infants and children's clothing were single and half of the group in the latter job were under twenty.
The Mexican American women garment strikers in the 1930's in San Antonio did not raise the issue of working conditions in their disputes with Dorothy Frocks, Shirlee Frocks or Texas Infants. Yet, according to the 1936 Women's Bureau study, conditions in the garment plants were bad. Working conditions did not figure high on the strikers' list because union recognition and wages rated more attention in a decade of economic depression. Furthermore, because the majority were young, single women, the natural optimism of the young may have resulted in their placing less priority on working conditions.

In the categories for which the Women's Bureau survey rated factories—type of building, ventilation, lighting, cleanliness, drinking and eating facilities, washrooms, and seating arrangements—the ratings of quite a few of the garment plants were not very high. Out of 53 plants inspected, 51 were fireproof brick buildings. The thirty-six wooden floor buildings included seven that needed repairs, but the cement floor buildings rated better, having only one bad floor. Ventilation was not adequate for various reasons, including crowded workrooms, low ceilings, small windows, or too few windows. Although adequate lighting was especially important in the garment industry, lighting was generally insufficient. Such a rating came because of lights situated too far above the workers, unfrosted lights or unshaded bulbs that resulted in a glare, and workrooms on the lower floors. Unadjustable kitchen chairs, unsanitary drinking fountains, makeshift lunchrooms, and limited washing facilities made up the
working environment of garment workers. Although some plants hired a cleaner, others assigned that chore to the workers themselves who often, understandably, did not do a thorough job.

The garment industry's search for cheap labor continued in the 1940s, but the nature of the industry changed in some ways. In El Paso, government contracts during WWII resulted in the expansion of small-time operations begun in the 1920s and 1930's. Companies such as Hicks-Hayward, Hortex, and Farah became big-time employers in El Paso. After WWII, the garment industry dominated the economy of El Paso. Postwar economic expansion in the U.S. extended the El Paso market considerably. Normally, that market included parts of northern Mexico to the south, the rest of Texas to the east, and Arizona and New Mexico to the west. Postwar prosperity made the whole country and much of Mexico a market for El Paso goods. The fifteen plants in El Paso in 1956 produced work clothes, skirts and blouses, infantwear, Western wear, and slacks. They sold to chain stores, wholesalers, mail-order houses, and department stores. In addition, the availability of both Mexican American workers in El Paso, where slightly less than half the total population was Mexican American, and Mexican labor from Ciudad Juarez attracted even more apparel firms to the city. Such expansion still left room for old-style small firms such as Tex-Tops, Top-Notch, and Union Manufacturing.

For Mexican Americans, the economic growth in El Paso was beneficial in providing jobs, though this remained in the low-skill, low-pay levels. Second and third generation Mexican
American females went into clerical occupations and males into services and repair, but white-collar jobs and skilled positions were still Anglo-dominated and nine-tenths of professionals were Anglo. First and second generation Mexican Americans held semi-skilled, unskilled, domestic, and service jobs.

While the garment industry expanded, the labor movement did not fare so well in the postwar years. The ILGWU in Texas lost membership for a number of reasons. The union seemed unable to make the shift from East to South and West as easily as did the industry. Further, it clung to an outdated tendency to place Anglo organizers and international representatives in charge in states where the majority of garment workers were Black or Mexican American. The Texas right-to-work law of 1947 and the 1959 Landrum-Griffin Act, which placed some limits on unions, reflected an anti-union sentiment that the ILGWU could not seem to overcome in Texas. The ILGWU's last gasp in Texas included contract litigation at Bernard Altmann's and the twenty-two month strike at Tex-Son in 1959 in San Antonio.

The post-WWII garment union battles in Texas took place largely in El Paso and involved the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Amalgamated or ACWA). The philosophy of the ACWA parent organization, the Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO), was to organize the unorganizable, and the ACWA's work among the El Paso garment workers reflected that thinking. The ACWA, almost from its inception in El Paso, employed Mexican
American organizers and business managers. Sophie Gonzales, who had led the unsuccessful 22-month strike at Tex-Son in San Antonio, was the organizer for Amalgamated in 1965 at Top-Notch and in 1971 at Levi-Strauss. But the union's recognition of the importance of the ethnicity of the workforce did not extend to gender. In the strikes in El Paso from 1952 on, the ACWA used Mexican American males as business managers, strike activity leaders, and public speakers.

Actual hourly wages of garment workers in El Paso in 1952 have been difficult to determine. Union leaders blamed the comparatively high wages of $32 to $50 per week of El Paso garment workers for low union membership. Government data for 1949, however, showed that for work-clothing sewing machine operators, the average hourly earnings in the country was 75 cents and for the southwest, 73 cents. The report also claimed that 3/5 of workers in work-pants and work-shirts firms made less than 75 cents an hour. El Paso had mostly men's work clothes factories so their workers probably fell in this 75 cent category. The 1949 survey indicated a 40-hour week as most common, but noted that 7% of the work-clothes plants had workweeks of more than 40 hours. Of 466 work-clothes plants studied, the report found 86% had paid vacations of one week after one year of employment and 60% had health and life insurance benefits, but only seven plants had a pension plan. At least half the plants had a union contract.

Four years later, in 1953, the government again examined the work-clothing industry. Women made up 7/8 of the workforce, and
women sewing machine operators constituted 60% of the total. Women machine operators in southwestern overall firms averaged 98 cents per hour, work-pants sewers averaged 94 cents, and work-shirt makers averaged 92 cents an hour. On the national level, the three groups earned 97, 94, and 92 cents, respectively. More than half of workers in southwestern garment plants had a paid five-day vacation, generally in July—the slow period in the industry. A majority of all workers received life and hospital insurance, paid in part by employers. Only 1/8 of employees in the southwest had pension plans. Most garment factories in El Paso produced men's work-clothes and overall so this profile is probably accurate.

Although the center of the garment industry in the state had shifted to the western border town of El Paso around WWII, a small number of plants could still be found in San Antonio. As we have seen, the majority of Mexican-heritage people in Texas lived in border counties, but an urban influx had begun by the 1940s, producing large Mexican American populations in those counties that included large cities. Bexar county, with its county seat at San Antonio, was one of these. Bexar county and Hidalgo county, on the border, together were home to more than 25% of the Spanish-surnamed population in the entire state by 1949. Thus, there were more than enough Mexicans and Mexican Americans available to work in garment firms such as Bernard Altmann's, Texas Tiny, Jay-Ann, Texas Infants, Tex-Son, and the largest, with 500 employees,
Juvenile Manufacturing.

By 1960, approximately 20,226 Spanish-surnamed women were in the workforce in San Antonio. That figure represented 27% of the total of all workers in the city, a figure just slightly below the female share of the labor force for Texas as a whole. A government survey of production workers in 1959 showed that clothing workers in San Antonio averaged $64.40 for a forty-hour week. Tex-Son workers in San Antonio in 1960 claimed that they made $1.05 an hour, or $42 a week for forty hours of work. Sewing machine operators in another plant in San Antonio earned $1.29 an hour or $51.60 a week.

After 1955, the economy of San Antonio began a shift toward capital intensive industrial firms producing for a regional or national market. Food, textiles, and apparel industries were replaced by refrigeration equipment, processed cement, aluminum can and fabricated metals manufacturing. The new industries required a skilled labor force and often had an engineering and research development sector. Despite this change, San Antonio continued to be largely a retail, services, and government employment center, with seventy percent of the labor force in the city working in these three areas. The heyday of the small garment, cigar, and laundry shops was gone.

The Spanish-speaking population of San Antonio outnumbered the rest of the city's groups in 1940. Of a total population of 408,442, some 253,854, or 62%, were Spanish-speaking. As San Antonio grew in the 1950s and 1960s, the Mexican American
population dropped to less than 40%, but by 1975, Mexican Americans again constituted a majority. But the economic situation of Mexican Americans remained bleak. Statistics for 1970 show that the median family income of Mexican Americans was $6438 yearly or 68% that of Anglos. Mexican American high school graduates in 1970 numbered only 25% of the total adult population. Only 28% of white-collar workers were Mexican American. Mexican Americans remained in unskilled and, by 1970, to some extent in the skilled blue-collar jobs. This was the situation ten years after the Tex-Son strike.

The growth of the clothing industry in El Paso drew to a close by the mid-seventies. Some plants shifted to other areas of Texas, especially along the border on the southern tip of the state known as the Rio Grande Valley, where union organizing was virtually unknown. There Hagger slacks has a plant in Edinburg and another in Weslaco, employing mostly Mexican American women. Most El Paso apparel plants went outside the country to places such as Mexico or Korea in search of a cheaper workforce. In the early 1970s, however, when the Farah strike took place, El Paso still had a number of garment firms employing some 20,000 workers or 12% of the total city labor force. Only Hortex and Levi-Strauss had unionized plants, but Farah with its 9500 employees was next on the ACWA's agenda.

Anglos controlled El Paso economically and politically throughout the twentieth century. The only advantage Mexican
Americans had in El Paso in 1971 was numerical dominance, and up to then, they had only once used their numbers to elect a Mexican American mayor. According to George Janzen, Chamber of Commerce president, "The Mexican Americans have traditionally been the lower strata of minimum wage employees." The median income in 1972 was $7792, but Mexican Americans fell below that, at $6496. Unemployment for the group stood at 6%, compared to 5% for El Paso and the nation in general. Likewise, in education, Mexican Americans on average completed only 8.6 years of schooling, below the national and El Paso average of 12.1 years. Politically, their situation was dismal: Mexican Americans, for example, held only three of thirty positions as school officials. With 50,000 Mexican American voters, the eighty thousand Anglo voters repeatedly won city elections. Yet, of the 365,000 residents, at least 57% were Mexican Americans.

Texas was considered an industrialized state by 1972, but El Paso shared in this characteristic only to a certain extent. The military in El Paso was the largest employer, claiming 22% of the workforce compared to 17% in manufacturing. The various clothing firms employed 20,000 workers, making them the largest non-military employer and giving them 69% of the factory labor force and 12% of the total workforce in El Paso. Besides Farah Manufacturing Company, with five plants and 9500 workers, clothing firms included Levi-Strauss with two plants, Hagger Slacks, Mann Manufacturing, Hicks Ponder Incorporated, and Hortex-Billy the Kid Company.
The strike at Farah in 1972 was not over unsuitable material or physical conditions at the plants. Buildings were modern, kept spotlessly clean inside, and had air conditioning for the hot Texas summers. Mexican music was played over a public address system to shut out the loud noise from constantly operating machinery. Low-cost hot meals at plant cafeterias, eyeglasses at cost, free in-house clinic care, free transportation, free prescription drugs, and a huge Christmas party with bonus gifts comprised Farah's material benefits. What the strikers were to complain about went beyond this, to less tangible needs such as job security and respect.

Despite Willie Farah's claim that his workers made higher wages than workers in other El Paso clothing plants and higher than the minimum wage, job pay was part of the 1972 dispute, mostly because workers resented the tensions and subterfuge that accompanied getting a raise. In 1972 workers averaged $69 as weekly take-home wages. Earnings statements from Farah workers showed net pay of $59.23 for 32 hours, $79.54 for 40 hours, $56.13 for 31 1/2 hours, and $48.85 for 24 hours. Individual stories paint a clearer picture of slow increases: Maria del Rio, a cutter, began at $1.60 an hour and 18 months later was earning $1.70 an hour; Cipriana Telles, who cleaned threads off pockets, started at $1.60 an hour and then received a ten-cent increase after 18 months; and Manuela Reyes, who after 6 years at Farah earned $1.90 an hour, had begun at $1.60 an hour. Men earned
slightly more, but their stories are similar: Ben Robles, a machinist, made $2.40 an hour but had gotten only five or ten cents an hour raises over eight months to a year apart; Benigno del Rio, as bundle "boy," made $1.68 an hour in 1968 and $2.00 in 1972; after 10 years as utility bundle "boy," Armando Salas was earning $2.45 an hour in 1972. The company often took credit for raises that were really due to federal minimum wage standards.

In truth, Farah wage scales were slightly below the rates for women workers but more in line with male work rates nationwide. In 1971 the federal minimum wage was $1.66 an hour. The wage situation in separate trousers and in men's and boy's suits illuminates trade characteristics useful for comparison with the Farah rates cited above. Women were the majority in the clothes industry and were mostly sewing machine operators paid on a piece-work basis, while men were either in the highest pay levels as cutters or at the lowest level as bundle carriers and janitors. The men were paid on an hourly basis. Workers in separate trousers manufacturing usually were unorganized, while employees of suit apparel plants generally belonged to the ACWA.

Wage rates differed not only according to task and gender, but also by region of the country, size of a plant, size of the city where it was located, and presence of a union. In 1971-72, women sewing machine operators in trouser production averaged $1.99 an hour as piece workers and $2.70 an hour in suit making. Male cutters in trouserwear made $2.33, while those involved in making suits got $4.19 an hour. Other male workers made much
less: repairmen averaged $1.64, janitors $1.00, and bundle carriers $1.02 an hour in men's and boy's suits. Regionally, the average rates ranged from $1.95 in the southeast to $2.55 an hour in the middle Atlantic states. For the whole country, of 21,231 male workers and 64,614 women workers in men's and boy's suits, their respective hourly earnings were $3.97 and $3.05 in 1973. Those working in metropolitan areas earned, on average, $3.41 an hour and those in smaller towns made $2.81 per hour. Plant size was the least important factor, with plants having 5 to 249 workers offering $3.25 an hour, those with 250 to 499 workers averaging $3.24 hourly, and those in plants with 500 or more workers earning $3.32. The workers in the unionized suit factories had seven paid holidays annually, paid summer and Christmas breaks, medical and life insurance, and retirement plans.

The march south and west by the apparel industry in its search for cheap labor did not entail its elimination in the old areas. Some clothing plants remained in New York City, where a continuous flow of immigrants, many of whom were Hispanic, provided a fairly cheap supply of workers. The south, especially the southeast, with its large number of Black workers, never totally lost its share of garment plants. That was indicated by the practice of the Tex-Son Company of sending work to Mississippi for completion. Los Angeles began to acquire garment plants in the 1930's and is today still a garment center, because, as in New
York, immigrants continue to flock there looking for work. Asian and Latin American women provide vast number of workers for legitimate as well as fly-by-night plants. In Texas, too, the move west to El Paso and south to the Rio Grande Valley did not stop clothing manufacturing in Dallas and Houston. At any rate, apparel shops provided places to work for thousands of immigrant Mexican and Mexican American women in the state for most of this century.

The Cigar Industry in San Antonio

The cigar industry, too, began as a sizeable employer of Mexican-heritage women in San Antonio, but mechanization in cigarmaking diminished its importance after the 1930's. The commercial manufacturing of cigars in the U.S. began in 1800 and underwent little change over the next seventy years. Even the introduction of three new tools in the making of the cigars between 1870 and 1900 resulted only in some increase in efficiency and in the need for capital for equipment. The industry, however, remained essentially one of small, single-owner plants producing cigars made by hand by skilled workers. Attempts by the American Tobacco Company to dominate cigar production as it did other elements of the industry such as cigarette making failed, mostly because it was still so easy and inexpensive to start up small concerns.

The introduction and development of cigarmaking machines in 1917 transformed the cigar industry by 1938. At first, the
expense of installing the new equipment limited its use to large firms that could afford to do so. Smaller concerns continued to produce handmade cigars because many owners believed that customers would not accept machine-made ones. The market for cigars declined in 1920, and the large companies that could produce a cigar more efficiently and at less cost came to dominate, while many of the smaller ones disappeared. From 1921 to 1936, the number of cigar plants decreased from 14,578 to 5,292, while the largest factories increased from 11 to 27. Between 1933 and 1936, cigar production showed a rise of 4.3 billion to 5.2 billion, yet cigar firms went from 6,620 to 5,292. Mechanization had resulted in the demise of the small one-owner shop.

Other noticeable changes in the cigar industry came with mechanization. One of these was the decreased size of the workforce, from 114,3000 in 1919 to 56,000 in 1935. Furthermore, the workers who lost their jobs were largely skilled hand cigarmakers, both men and women, replaced by mostly unskilled women workers. When the number of cigar plants devoted to handmade products decreased, the displaced workers enlarged the labor pool for surviving plants of this type, which then hired the unemployed at lower wages. The ability to hire skilled laborers at cheap prices coupled with the appeal of "handmade" cigars enabled some small plants to stay afloat.
Another effect of mechanization in the cigar industry was the decline of union membership. In 1910, the Cigar Makers International Union had 50,000 members, while by 1930, membership was down to 15,000. The sharp decline in only twenty years was because the very type of worker—the skilled craftsman—who was the backbone of the union was the one being laid off. Work hours in the industry became standardized and fewer, but only the former was due to mechanization.

The character of the cigar industry after 1938 was one of large, mechanized, mass-producing plants with unskilled or semi-skilled workers producing for a national market. By then, cigar-making machinery needed little to improve it, and machine-made cigars had been readily accepted by customers. In fact, more and more plants turned to automated machinery so that by 1973, there were only 11,443 workers in the industry. Machinery and maintenance workers increased in number, another sign of the growing automation. The further decrease in the consumption of cigars in the 1970's led to a number of bankruptcies. In 1983 there were only 100 cigar manufacturers in the country, most in Florida and Pennsylvania.

The development of the Finck Cigar Company of San Antonio parallels the fortunes of the cigar industry in general. Henry William Finck opened the company in 1893 with $1000 in a two-story building that also housed his family. His plant was one among 16 in the city. By the 1920's, Finck had several hundred employees and was one of 1500 cigar factories in the country. In 1934, when
the strike occurred, the firm employed 500 workers, 90% of whom were of Mexican extraction. The company was part of a $6 billion industry for the next forty years. As noted earlier, cigar consumption began to drop in the 1970s, and by 1982, sales were down to $3.6 billion. The Finck Cigar Company shared in the decline, just as it had shared in the success, and today the company has only 80 employees.

The 1932 Women's Bureau study of women in Texas industries confirmed what historian Harold Shapiro concluded of the Finck cigar plant: "Finck's factory rivaled the pecan shelleries for the dubious distinction of being the least sanitary and of paying the lowest wages of any industry in the city." The 1932 preliminary questionnaire showed that time-workers labored 46 1/4 hours for five and a half days, but other workers had a forty-one hour week. The women worked in a two-story brick building with small sash windows; the actual workrooms had wooden floors. A janitor kept the room and toilet facilities clean on a daily basis. The researchers rated ventilation as poor because boxes by the windows obstructed air flow. They also rated the lighting as inadequate, except for the packing room, which had artificial lights. The women in the packing rooms could not sit down, but other workers had non-adjustable kitchen chairs.

Other Finck company facilities rated in the study did as badly. The drinking areas consisted of a bubbler labelled as unsanitary but convenient by the Women's Bureau employee. Twelve
iron troughs, clean and with soap available, but with no hot water and towels, made up the wash room. A damp basement with no ventilation served as the cafeteria. The women used wooden tables and benches, which even Finck admitted were unsanitary, at lunchtime. The company expected particular workclothes and sold fabric at eleven cents a yard for frocks, and caps at five cents each, to their employees.

In response to the 1932 questionnaire, the Finck Cigar Company reported only adult women in its workforce. Two years later, the union newspaper in San Antonio claimed that women, girls, and children constituted the strike force against Finck. Two women employees in their early eighties and still working at the Finck Cigar Company in 1985 when they were interviewed by a San Antonio Express reporter told him that they started work there in 1916 and 1918 as teenagers. The 1936 report on women in Texas industries indicated that more than half of the Mexican American women workers in cigar plants in the state were under age 25, and that women over fifty did not make up much more than 5% of the workforce. Over half of the women were not married. The age, marital status, and gender composition of this workforce resembles those deemed most profitable later by multinational corporations in the 1970s and 1980s which expatriated their factories to Third and Fourth World countries.

The 350 women who went on strike against Finck's in 1933 did so to protest harsh rules newly imposed by the company, but wage rates paid by Finck soon became a factor. In a regional labor
board meeting in New Orleans in 1934, Ed Finck claimed that the rate of pay for one hundred rolled cigars before NRA codes went into effect was 42 and a half cents and 45 cents after the codes were instituted. He stated that the daily quota after the NRA codes was 400 cigars, while 350 cigars in an 8-hour day was a fair average before the NRA codes. He also told the board that his workforce was 90 percent Mexican.

Mrs. W. H. "Refugio" Ernst, who was to lead the 1933 strike, had a somewhat different story to tell the board and reporters. Weekly wages, she told the press, ranged from $2 to $7 a week. She acknowledged to the New Orleans board that rollers made 21 cents for every 100 small cigars and 42 and a half cents for 100 large cigars, but she claimed later to reporters that rollers and bundlers on piece rates made $2 to $7 a week because of Finck's practices in controlling production in order to keep wages low.

In testimony before the Texas Industrial Commission, Mrs. Ernst testified that when workers reached a maximum of 500 cigars, the company would arbitrarily take out 200 in penalties. She went on to say, "When we got through rolling 500, they wouldn't let us go home and they wouldn't let us roll any more cigars. We just had to sit there." If her declarations to the press and board on wages was correct, Mrs. Ernst was charging Finck with undercutting NRA codes, which called for 22 and a half to thirty cents per hour for rollers and 17 1/2 cents an hour for strippers.
Various government studies of the period provide context for the work situation at Finck's Cigar Company. A 1928 Women's Bureau survey of the entire industry in the U.S., with particular attention to Florida, showed that White women hand cigarmakers had a median weekly wage of $16.65 and bunchmakers a $17.25 median wage, while strippers earned a median weekly wage of $16.80, but Black women cigar strippers made a median salary of $10 for a week's work. The study reported work hours for White women as ranging from 48 to 52 hours a week, although 28% worked more than 75 hours. Black women worked between 44 and 56 hours.

The Women's Bureau examined a total of 80 factories and, in general, the findings showed that the newer factories with cigar-making machinery—Finck's was an older handmaking plant—had better working conditions and wages. Of the areas inspected, stairways, floors, lighting, ventilation, and cloak rooms received at least an adequate rating, but seating arrangements, drinking facilities, washrooms and bathrooms, lunch areas, and first-aid stations—the latter two were often not even provided—rated below acceptable standards.

Other government reports on the cigar industry, while not revealing what conditions were like, did give details on wages and hours. A Monthly Labor Review study in 1936 of 15,772 cigarworkers, 76% of them women, reported average hourly amounts of 46.3 cents for the men and 33.8 cents for the women and weekly wages of $18.24 and $11.30, respectively, for males and females. The Monthly Labor Review study of 1938 revealed annual wages for
cigarmakers as $800 between 1921 and 1929, plummeting to $551 in 1933 and rising back to $598 in 1935. By 1938, the oversupply of hand cigar makers had resulted in lowered hourly earnings, ranging from 25 to 35 cents an hour, while machine cigarmakers' averages ranged from 35 to 48 cents per hour. Work hours were not given in this report. A 1973 Monthly Labor Review survey indicated that hand and machine cigarmakers made $1.97 an hour on average, machinists earned an average of $3 an hour, and the miscellaneous workers (floorpeople, janitors, inspectors, packers, strippers) got between $2 to $2.50 an hour.

A comparison of the 1930's data with the information provided by Finck and the striking women to the federal mediators and to the press lends credence to Shapiro's remark on the dismal situation at the San Antonio cigar plant. Finck seemed to have paid wages below the national average and certainly below NRA code stipulations. He made little attempt to provide an agreeable work atmosphere for his employees: even he admitted that the factory kitchen facilities were bad. When the actual questionnaires were gathered in 1932 for the Women's Bureau report of 1936, the researcher noted that Finck "...[was] very much afraid of labor troubles which he expects as soon as times are better." Apparently Finck himself realized the likely consequences of the situation his employees found themselves facing.
The Pecan-Shelling Industry in San Antonio

Much like the cigar industry in Texas prior to the 1930's and mechanization, the pecan shelling industry in San Antonio could be characterized as a loosely associated group of one-owner, small-time, hand-working operations in 1938 when the strike occurred. Before the Depression spread in the early thirties, farmers had been getting about 13 and a half cents a pound for their pecan crop, but the changed economic conditions had lowered prices to five to eleven cents a pound. Prior to 1926, pecan firms had used machinery that graded and cracked the nuts, which were then cleaned by hand. In San Antonio, however, hand labor was cheaper than investing in machinery, and coupled with the contracting system, whereby middle-men hired the workers and provided a place for the shelling, companies found it more profitable to do business with Mexican labor. The only competition to San Antonio shelling companies came from Chicago and St. Louis. Companies there used machines and were rated as better working places, according to a newsstory commenting on the 1936 Women's Bureau study of Texas industries.

San Antonio in the 1930's was the pecan capital of Texas and probably of the country, since half of the annual crop came from Texas. Approximately 20,000 Mexican Americans worked in 110 to 170 different pecan plants. Women had made up the majority of the pecan shelling workforce, but the Depression created a situation whereby whole families worked in the plants, and home shelling became very common in the industry. A plant owner's daughter, in
an interview forty years after the strike, asserted that 70% of the workers at their plant were women and 90% of them were unmarried, and a pecan sheller and striker, who was 15 years old in 1938, agreed, adding that her father had recently begun to work there because no other jobs could be found. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, in her study of women in depression-era San Antonio, found that women on the West side, or Mexican area, worked in neighborhood shelling plants.

Wages and conditions at pecan plants were clearly not good. The Southern Pecan Shelling Company in San Antonio employed some 10,000 persons out of a total pecan sheller force of about 20,000 in the city, but otherwise it was typical of pecan firms. Workplants consisted of shacks where shellers sat on benches before trestle-like tables containing a box for each worker. According to the Women's Bureau report on Texas women workers in 1936, the women worked in dark, dirty, unventilated plants with slippery, oily floors on backless benches and long tables. The air was permeated with dust from the pecan shelling and did nothing to alleviate the health hazards already present in the crowded environment of the pecan plants.

Unregulated homework in the pecan shelling industry resulted in even worse conditions for its participants. In the mid-thirties, an estimated 4000 persons were homeshellers, but by 1937, some 15,000 to 20,000 families in San Antonio relied on homework earnings, although exactly how many in pecan shelling is
not known. A study of Mexican Americans in San Antonio during the 1930s described the conditions of pecan shellers in homework: "Thousands of human beings living in decrepit wooden shacks or in crowded corrals, breathlessly shelled pecans in a race with starvation." It was not until the last years of the decade, when women's organizations, worried about their own consumption of products made in such places, forced action from the state legislature, that some regulation of homework was instituted. It was too late for the pecan shelling industry, since San Antonio pecan companies were reverting to machines by December of 1938.

Low wages were characteristic of the pecan shelling industry in Texas. The work was seasonal, reaching a peak in winter, tapering off into the spring, and virtually closing in the summer. For 477 women sorters questioned in the 1936 Women's Bureau survey of Texas industries, the median weekly wage was $3.55 and hourly earnings were, on average, less than five cents. The hours worked ranged from 40 to 48 a week. In 1935, the rate for shellers was six cents a pound for pieces of pecans shelled and seven cents for pecan halves shelled. Crackers made fifty cents per 100 pounds for breaking open the shells. According to workers, shelling eight pounds in eight hours earned them an estimated $2.25 a week. Julius Seligmann, president of the Southern Pecan Shelling Company, admitted to the Texas Industrial Commission that his employees earned approximately $2.50 a week. One former local union official later claimed to an interviewer that in the early days of the Depression the pecan wage rate had gone down as low as
one cent and one and a half cent for pieces and halves. In 1933-34, under the NRA guidelines, the pecan shellers association had agreed to a 15 cent an hour wage rate for the South, but Seligmann had withdrawn from the association rather than pay those rates. In any case, there was no enforcement of the codes.

During the pecan shellers' strike, the police chief of San Antonio at one point referred to strikers at a rally as being "relief clients;" if this were so, it reflected their earning situation. A family of 4.6 persons with two wage earners made an average yearly wage of $251 in pecan shelling. The cost of living for a family of four in 1938 in a southern town was $1374. It was not surprising, then, that the government study of pecan shelling in San Antonio reported that 450, or 88% of the 512 families interviewed, sought aid from churches, soup kitchens, and the federal surplus commodity center. An informational folder put out by the union and a support committee contained an alleged quote by Seligmann on workers' wages: "The Mexican pecan shellers eat a good many pecans, and five cents a day is enough to support them in addition to what they eat while they work."

A survey sheet from a pecan plant in Dallas, Texas that was later part of the 1936 study of Texas provided another point of comparison of conditions with those in San Antonio. All of the workers in the Dallas plant were Anglo; 23 were women and three were men. The researcher noted that the workers were "young girls and old ladies in the neighborhood..." The workers began at 8:00
in the morning and quit at 5:00 in the afternoon, with a 45 minute lunch period from Monday to Friday. The Saturday workday was from 8:00 a.m. to noon. Hours, however, were often irregular, depending on the work available or if a rush job came in. The government researcher noted that as of January 1, 1932 wages had been lowered from ten cents a pound for halves to seven and a half cents a pound, and that rates for pieces were lower still. If one accepts the former union member's assertion, cited earlier, that in San Antonio in the early 1930's pecan rates had plunged as low as 1 and 1 1/2 cents for pieces and halves, the workers in Dallas were much better off even in the worst days of the Depression.

In October 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed and included a wage-hour standard for many industries in the country. The pecan shelling companies in San Antonio closed down so as not to pay the 25 cents an hour rate set up by the act. In December, the Southern Pecan Shelling Company, with union approval, made an appeal for a temporary exclusion from the rates set up by the Fair Labor Standards Act in order to train employees in the new skills necessitated by the machinery being installed to replace hand labor. The government wage agency denied the company's request. By 1941 the Southern Pecan Shelling Company needed only 600 workers in its mechanized shop. The pecan shelling industry declined as an important means of employment for Mexican Americans in San Antonio after that.
As we have seen, the development of Texas as a manufacturing state proceeded at a fairly rapid pace, so that it was ranked ninth in the nation by mid-century. Manufacturing in Texas was never of the heavy industry kind that dominated in places such as Pittsburgh or Cleveland. Texas, except for oil production, was a light industry region that did not begin to produce, on a large scale, finished products ready for consumption until the 1940's. The government employment and services sectors grew after 1950, and agriculture remained a viable element throughout the century. The Mexican American population in the state, however, was restricted to factories and agriculture and, more recently, to service jobs. Mexican Americans' language, education, lack of skills and their geographic location, coupled with racial and ethnic barriers, served to keep them segmented and stratified in the lowest levels of the economy.

From the 1920's and 1930's, pecan shelling plants, garment shops, and cigar factories provided jobs for the Mexican American people in Texas. While cigar-making and pecan shelling declined after mechanization in the late 1930's, garment factories continued to employ Mexican Americans, especially women, in large numbers. The wages Mexican American workers received and the conditions they worked under in these industries were often worse than for Anglo Texans reflecting the second-class status of the group. As Harold Shapiro and Julia Blackwelder noted, it was not just the large numbers of available Mexican American workers that
led to inferior job placement and earnings, but how Anglo-Texans perceived them as "Mexicans," fit only for certain positions. It is this context that explains the existence of, and the characteristics of, labor protest by Mexican American women in the laundry, garment, cigar, and pecan-shelling industries from 1919 to the 1970s.
Endnotes


8  Browning, Statistical Profile, 18, 41.


11 Bustamante, "Mexican Immigration," 144-46, 151; Arias, "Undocumented Mexicans," 106; Cardenas and Flores, Migration and Settlement, 2, 3.


13 Jordan, et.al., Texas, 241-43, 246-49.

14 Ibid., 246-49, 251. 153.

15 Ibid., 254-58.


21 Ibid., 66-72.


27 DOL, Women in Laundries, 329, 338.

28 Ibid., 327; El Paso Herald, 31 October 1919.


34 Ibid., (February 1978): 40.


36 Ibid., 42-47, 51, 53.

37 Ibid., 88, 93, 156-67.

38 Dorothy D. De Moss, "Looking Better Every Year: Apparel Manufacturing in Texas," in Texas: A Sesquicentennial Celebration edited by Don Whishew, (Austin: 1984), 282-84, 287, 290; Jordon,
et. al., 240.


40 Sullivan and Blair, Women in Texas Industries, 2, 5-6, 53; R. Garcia, "Mexican American Mind," 129; Women's Bureau, "Factory Schedules" [Dorothy Frocks, Shirlee Frocks, Texas Infants], sheet 1.


42 Ibid., 907; The Weekly Dispatch (San Antonio), 3 April 1936.


44 San Antonio Express, 7 and 19 May 1936; 26 May 1937; 19 May 1938; 5 June 1938.

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54 Blackwelder, Women of the Depression, 214, 232, 235-36; San Antonio Express, 24 February 1959; La Prensa (San Antonio), 26 February 1959; Monthly Labor Review, (June 1959): 726; Bernhard Altmann pay sheets, George Lambert Collection, University of Texas Labor Archives [hereafter cited as UTLA], Arlington, Texas, un-numbered sheets.
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Women's Bureau, "Factory Schedules" [Texas Pecan Co.], sheet 1.

Chapter III
The Pre-World War II Strikes

The strikes that Mexican American women participated in prior to World War II illustrate well how the extent of union organization and attention to their interests shaped women's labor activism. Two of the actions—the 1919 laundry strike in El Paso and the three short garment strikes of 1936, 1937, and 1938—took place under the direction of established unions. Two others broke out spontaneously, one—the 1933 cigar strike in San Antonio—in an industry where a local did not exist and one—the 1938 pecan sheller's strike—where the existing unions were too weak to be effective. Not surprisingly, the women reacted differently in the two situations.

Union neglect of women and minorities has been chronicled by historians. Unions have seen the two groups as unorganizable and as low-skill workers, not acceptable to crafts-oriented trade unions. As women and as Mexicans, the Mexican American strikers in Texas were not only ignored by unions, but once in a union, often had their particular needs neglected. For the longest time, trade unions hired male organizers and later Anglo women to organize Mexican American women. Even after unions began using Mexican American officials, the very nature of unions—patriarchal and bureaucratic—limited the Mexican American women's
participation.

The extent of control by unions in the case of Mexican American women, however, must be coupled with the extent of control from other institutions. The women faced overwhelming odds when they went on strike from a society that denied their very existence as Americans. Mexican American women strikers reacted to union and societal controls during strikes by relying on Mexican culture and traditions, but they often turned to violence too. They used Mexican customs and violent means against the immediate opposition--other Mexican-heritage women--to regain some measure of control over strike events. The strikers garnered support, but supporters were frequently as powerless as they was controlling and narrow-visioned about acceptable women's roles. The women, consequently, went outside the system as the only choice open to them.

The Laundry Strike: 1919, El Paso

In late October, 1919, Mexican American laundry workers with the help of the vice-president of the state federation of labor, J.L. Hausewald and other local labor leaders, organized a local of the Laundry Workers International Union in El Paso. A week later, when two Mexican American union members at the Acme Laundry attempted to recruit new members, they were fired. Approximately 200 Acme women walked out in protest, to be followed by numerous others from five other laundries in the city. Within a few days, as laundries tried to help out Acme with its work, close to 500
women left their jobs. The labor leadership in El Paso was faced with a strike for which they had not planned.

Laundry owners at Acme Laundry denied that union activity had led to the strike. The discharge of two women employees, the owners said, was due to improper talk on the part of one and false pay claims from the other. Two unionists, Francisca Saenz, Acme striker, and a Central Labor Union (CLU) spokesman told a different story. Saenz said that when two fellow workers, both of whom were sorters and markers, were fired after six years at Acme, the other workers demanded that the two be reinstated. After this request was denied, 200 women walked out. The CLU spokesman saw the discharge of the two veteran workers as an indirect result of the formation of a laundry union less than a week earlier.

The laundry owners during the strike repeatedly denounced as untrue the labor paper's declaration that even the wages of long-time laundry women averaged $4 to $6 a week. The paper went on to compare these wages with rates in Dallas, Ft. Worth, and Galveston, which it said were $14 a week. In the manner of Progressive reformers of the period, the labor paper asked, "Does the public believe that a woman can live on less than $1 per day and be possessed of a properly nurtured body or mind morally nurtured?" It went on to chastise laundry stockholders, who the paper said, included many who demanded "...morality and clean-up campaigns" and "...on the other hand in their very employment are breeding prostitution and everything that can possibly be vicious
for a generation and more to come with a $4 a week wage scale to women workers." Laundry owners countered that their workers averaged $9 a week for a 54-hour week.

In El Paso in 1919, the labor movement was in the control of a clique of Anglo men who subsequently directed the Mexican American women's laundry strike. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), as a craft union, established the CLU in 1909 in El Paso, encompassing 27 locals of printers, machinists, carpenters, railway clerks, and plumbers. Although the local labor paper called for Mexican American and Anglo unity for the benefit of all workers, the CLU effectively excluded Mexican American workers, who were mainly unskilled laborers. Some Mexican American workers, like the hod-carriers, were members of segregated locals, but no Mexican American unionist held a major position in the CLU.

Men such as labor editor William Moran, the chairmen of various locals, and the vice-president of the state federation of labor, J. L. Hauswald, dominated the CLU. Members of the CLU, along with its parent federation, the AFL, tended to look upon Mexican American workers as foreigners who lowered wage rates and took the jobs of "Americans". At conventions and through the labor press, the CLU and AFL sought to discredit Mexicans and thereby prevent their employment in El Paso. When the CLU did make an effort to include Mexican American workers, it made clear that these were American citizens.
The women's decision to walk out on that first day was one of the few opportunities they were to have of making their own decisions and taking leadership roles during the strike. The first evening of the walkout, the CLU called a meeting of the women and asked if they were willing to go on strike. Several hundred women, ranging in age from 15 to 60, voted unanimously to stay out until their union was recognized and the two fired workers were reinstated. The male leadership at the CLU then sent a committee of their own to present the women's position to the laundry owners.

For the first few days of the strike, women continued to walk out, and the CLU claimed that approximately 500 Mexican laundry workers were on strike. Some laundry owners at first appeared willing to discuss the situation with the CLU, but others rallied and declared to local papers that their shortage of workers was minimal, that strikers were easily being replaced, and that everything was as usual in their plants. From press accounts, the owner of Acme, where the walkout originated, appeared to be the force behind the owners' new stance.

The return of the CLU committee sent to negotiate with the laundry owners signalled the beginning of a more controlled phase of the strike. The CLU leadership asked the women to form a group from each laundry to try to persuade strikebreakers from taking their places in the laundries. Besides naming a five-member committee to assist the strikers, the CLU also put together a finance committee, headed by a member of the Switchmen's union, to
plan fundraising events.

With the CLU leadership directing strike events, the Mexican women, by and large, adhered to traditional roles in the 1919 laundry strike. The women, left dependent on the CLU leadership for strike developments, stayed at the labor hall as contributions came in from other locals. At some point, the women decided to knit items for sale and add to strike funds in that way. A few went to work at a hand laundry bought by several CLU members at this time.

Even with the management of the strike largely in the hands of the CLU, the Mexican American women found ways to assume some measure of control over strike events. The women, not content to convince a few strikebreakers from taking their places, went to the international bridge to demand that Mexican women not cross into El Paso to take their jobs. The women, in addition, tried to intimidate strikebreakers by calling them "scabs" and other "unsavory" terms, including in their denunciations male laundry drivers who had returned to work after having first sided with the women strikers. The women used the term "ronosas" to strikebreakers, meaning a scabrous, leper-like person. The Mexican American women strikers, in at least one instance, threatened one strikebreaker at Acme that they would "pull her hair out," if she continued to go to work.

The Mexican women laundry strikers participated in two very public actions. Twelve women, along with four male strikers and a
CLU member, appeared before one of the Mexican civic groups to ask for the moral support of its members. Laundry strikers later testified before the Industrial Welfare Commission about the low wages paid them, which they said were not enough because most of them had to help out their families.

The CLU clique took over control of the 1919 strike of laundry women as a matter of course but its efforts at supporting the strike were predictable. On the first evening of the walkout, the CLU endorsed the strike by calling a meeting for the women at the Labor Temple and getting a strike vote from them. They also set up a committee to oversee the various aspects of the dispute, quickly deciding, too, to hold a dance as a fund-raising event. CLU members seemed to believe it was their right to carry out strike duties without reference to the women strikers. The parent AFL was more sensitive to the occasion, sending in a Mexican American organizer to aid with strike activities. The AFL agent presented the women's story to civic and social groups, including a ministers' organization, where he urged their support of the women so the latter could live "decent and respectable lives as American citizens".

A union member from the Switchmen's local took over the financing of the strike on a full-time basis. Money came in from plumbers ($50), car-men ($20), packing-house employees ($40), bricklayers ($10), carpenters ($100), machinists ($400), electrical workers ($30), sheet metal workers ($50), musicians ($25), and plasterers ($25). The drivers from a number of auto
stands (taxis) gave amounts ranging from $4.50 to $17.50. According to CLIU statements, their affiliates contributed between $1000 to $3000 altogether. The labor paper tried to help with their denunciations of laundry owners and stockholders.

Mexican American civic organizations and the local Spanish-language paper offered moral support to the Mexican American women strikers. The paper called the women "our working compatriots" and praised the women's peaceful efforts. It emphasized the cause of the women as an admirable one because they were attempting to dignify their work and included a discussion of the strikers' use of the word 'scab' as applied to those who sided with management. The paper in another article addressed the problems the women faced as strikers, including in the discussion the issues of strikebreakers from Mexico, the oversupply of unemployed women in El Paso, and the lack of unity among the Mexican American women workers.

In its support for the women, the local Mexican American newspaper sometimes spoke as patronizingly as the CLIU behaved. While it admiringly called the women "our working compatriots," the paper also urged them to work together more fully in the future in view of all the help they had received from organized labor. Its continual references to the women's lack of violence and its defense of the women's proper behavior when the mayor ordered police to prevent destruction of property at all cost, smacked of middle-class values imposed on working-class women.
Solicited and unsolicited support, mostly moral, came from local Mexican American groups. On November 1st, a dozen women strikers requested support from the Circulo de Amigos, or Friends Circle, a mutualist society, asking also for the club's help in getting the backing of other organizations. Two days later, the Circulo group sent representatives to a labor meeting where the men gave fervent speeches of support. The Circulo also notified the Spanish paper that they were calling all the Mexican American organizations in El Paso to a meeting to discuss the issue.

The club also let the Spanish-language press know their own position on the strike. They proposed to rally behind the women, they said, because the strikers were exhibiting character, strength, and racial solidarity in their actions. The members of the Circulo saw themselves and the members of fellow societies as representing the Mexican American neighborhoods of El Paso and as such, duty-bound to decide on giving aid to the strikers. The Circulo may have been responding to a call, two days before, by the Asociacion de Unionistas Mexicana or Mexican Association of Unionists, for all member unions to meet and discuss what actions to take regarding the laundry strike.

The prevailing post-World War I climate of the red scare and the middle-class and upper-class status of members of most Mexican American civic organizations affected the response of at least one club. Following a rumor that the Mexican Liberal Alliance approved a general strike of all Mexican American workers in El Paso in support of the women laundry strikers, the Alliance
vehemently denied such thinking. It declared that its members
"sympathized" with the women's efforts and would take up a
collection for them at their next meeting, but in no way did they
back a general strike. Their quick denial of the rumor revealed
not only their middle-class mind-set but their understanding of
their own powerlessness.

Newspaper coverage, or rather lack thereof, by December 1919
indicated that by then the Mexican American women's laundry strike
had ended. Early claims by laundry owners that they had few
workers out and that their plants were operating soon became a
reality. One owner boasted that he had replaced the strikers with
Americans, while other owners kept on reiterating they had no
trouble finding new workers. The oversupply of unskilled labor in
both El Paso and its sister city on the Mexican side, Ciudad
Juarez, accounted for the easy replacement of the women strikers.
Ever aware of this, the union demanded that city officials
prohibit the laundry owners from hiring aliens, only to be
rebuffed. The Spanish-language paper's characterization of the
situation as one liable to defeat because of the overabundance of
women workers from the two cities proved only too true.

The laundry strike in El Paso in 1919 illustrated perfectly
what was to happen when Mexican American women struck and an
established union or union leadership existed. In this case, the
Central Labor Union had a clearly established leading clique of
Anglo men who controlled the Labor Temple and the labor paper.
This clique took over strike events, allotting very limited
participation to the women. The Mexican American women, nevertheless, succeeded in expanding their given duties to some extent, in one case very traditionally, by knitting items for sale for strike funds, and in another, less conventionally, by going beyond plant entrances to the bridge to threaten strikebreakers.

The nature of the support during the strike was also very representative of what was to occur for the rest of the century. The women were faced with union and Mexican supporters who expected them to behave peacefully and to be grateful for the help given them. The women were being asked to conform to accepted notions of their roles in American and Mexican society, but the women found ways, if limited, to take matters into their own hands. In this case, they initiated the strike and sought, without success, to keep other Mexican-heritage women from replacing them at low wages in the laundries of El Paso.

The Cigar Strike: 1933, San Antonio

The cigar strike in San Antonio that began in August, 1933 was to last on and off for two years, pitting the Mexican American women strikers and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against the owner of the Finck Cigar Company, Ed Finck. The first phase of the strike was fairly peaceful, with the women strikers busy establishing themselves into a local and attempting to negotiate a settlement. The women brought an end to the first phase by getting the mayor of San Antonio involved in arranging
an arbitration agreement with Finck. When Finck reneged on the agreement, the Mexican American women sought help from the NLRB and spent 1934 and part of 1935 testifying before the board and a state commission about conditions in the plant. Frustrated with the lack of positive results from their reliance on government agencies, the Mexican American women assumed confrontational picketing of the plant, bringing upon themselves retaliation from the police and Finck employees. The women's actions were to no avail as Finck's defiance outlasted them. The strike was over by December, 1935.

The Mexican American women cigar rollers who went on strike against the Finck Cigar Company had ample opportunity to make decisions about strategy and tactics because no local existed and when one was formed, the women controlled it. In fact, the labor paper in reporting strike events, emphasized that the San Antonio Trades Council knew nothing until the local papers printed the story. After the women listed their demands to Finck and made the decision to picket the plant, as well as selected their leaders, they considered forming a local to affiliate with the International Cigar Workers Union. It was only after several meetings with two area labor union men and with their own families present, that the women decided to unionize. The four Mexican American women who had taken the lead on the first day of the strike became the officers of the new local.

There is no direct evidence of any previous union or strike experience on the part of these Mexican American women; their
hesitation in forming a local of the ICWU seemed to indicate a lack of such experience. Nevertheless, the women displayed a lot of savvy in performing the responsibilities associated with being on strike. In public the women claimed that they were on strike because of harsh new rules and bad conditions at the plant. While these did play an important role, later events showed that wages and a sense of justice were at the core of the dispute.

Almost from the moment of declaring a strike, the Mexican American women turned leadership of strike activities over to Mrs. W. H. "Refugio" Ernst and three advisors, Adela Hernandez, Modesta Herrera, and Mrs. E. J. Padilla. Mrs. Ernst, as spokesperson, detailed to the local paper that the women had gone on strike because the company was increasing the penalty for one bad cigar from two cigars to three, was prohibiting them from changing into street clothes at lunchtime, and was permitting them only ten minutes to wash their work instruments. Other evidence, including the incident that touched off the strike, indicated that more was involved.

According to testimony at a meeting of the regional labor relations board in New Orleans and in a later letter from Mrs. Ernst to Ed Finck, management treatment of the women workers played an important role in occasioning the strike. In the discussion of strike events at a regional board meeting, the male representative speaking for the Mexican American women union members described the incident of August 3, which set off the
I am told that on August 3 about noontime that some lady who was passing through change of life was ill. Mrs. Ernst was rendering first aid to this lady. I am told that she was ordered out regardless of her ill condition. I am told this lady left the rest room partly dressed. This, I believe, is the primary reason for the ladies not going back to work the following morning.22

Obviously, the women had a sense of what was due them as women and as workers and so chose to walk out in protest.

After various unfruitful attempts to communicate with Ed Finck, Mrs. Ernst wrote him a letter outlining the women's demands and thereby revealing that sense of their due apparent in their decision to walk out. In the letter, Mrs. Ernst reiterated the women's position on penalties and added, "...we refuse to go to lunch in our work clothes; we do not want to be on the job when there is no work to be done; we refuse to sweep up the place—somebody else should be hired to do it; and we want another supervisor—someone who will treat us with respect and consideration that employees deserve; we don't want to be treated like slaves." To the Spanish-language paper, the women said that they wanted justice, improvement of their work situation, and appreciation for their work.

Even after their affiliation with a cigarmakers' union, the Mexican American women relied on themselves and their four leaders to direct the course of the strike. Before the formation of the local, the women organized into crews of four, and wearing badges and holding signs describing conditions at Finck's, they picketed
the plant daily. Mrs. Ernst, as spokeswoman for the strikers, presented the women's story to the press frequently, letting the public know the causes of their action and their plans to raise money. One conventional means of raising funds was to hold a carnival at a local school; but another, less customary, way was to march across the city in groups, asking for help from the populace of San Antonio. Mrs. Ernst and a committee of five also presented a demand to city officials that the Finck plant be inspected for health violations. In that first month-long phase, the Mexican cigar strikers and their leaders used every available avenue to advance the strike, from picketing, to seeking funding, to keeping the press abreast of their side of the story, to making demands on city hall, and, finally, to forming a local, which they controlled.

The first phase of the strike lasted one month and ended with a petition for arbitration presented by the strikers to the mayor of San Antonio. In the meantime, only one scuffle occurred as pickets tried to keep workers out of the plant; the Spanish press emphasized that a strike supporter, not a striker, had started the confrontation. After approaching a lawyer and the Mexican consul in an attempt to deal directly with Finck and failing to reach him, the women turned to the mayor for resolution. In telephone consultation with the mayor, Finck agreed to rehire the strikers by a seniority system, to implement NRA codes, and to improve the unsanitary conditions at the plant. In testimony before a state industrial commission in 1935, one of the strikers charged the
mayor with deceiving them, claiming that on their return "...things were just the same."

Conditions in the plant after the return of the strikers soon led to a resumption of the dispute, particularly since the four prominent leaders had not been rehired. The women brought charges against Finck before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and their testimony to the NLRB, as well as to a federal conciliator, the mayor, and a state industrial commission, was an indictment of Finck himself. Officers of the newly-organized local told the NLRB that Finck fired suspected union members and told the state commission that he would not fix the ventilation system at the plant, even though they had complained numerous times. To the state industrial commission, Catalina Compean, a new striker, added that union members were taken to the plant doctor and nurse who would pronounce them medically unable to carry on with their jobs. Before the commission, the women charged Finck with arbitrarily dismissing their complaints that cigars labelled imperfect, for which they were therefore penalized, were later sold as good cigars.

Former workers and strikers offered other evidence on conditions at the Finck cigar plant. To the federal mediator and the mayor of San Antonio, the Mexican American women complained that the company charged for the loan of towels, ordered unwarranted physical exams by the company doctor at $3 each, and loaned money to employees at 8% interest a week. Mrs. Ernst was
one of the most articulate of the witnesses, telling the state commission that Finck "...had a habit of coming into the dressing room while the girls were dressing..." The women related to the various boards and commissions numerous complaints that made Finck, as one witness said, "...one of the baddest bosses in San Antonio."

In the spring of 1934, the NLRB decided in favor of the strikers, but Finck had already begun his course of defiance. The board demanded that the Finck Cigar Company rehire workers with proven work records, reinstate long-time employees even if these could not fill quota requirements, and set up a workers' group as a sort of grievance committee. Finck chose not to comply and returned the NRA Blue Eagle sign, saying, "We will close the plant down before we put those four people back to work." The four workers referred to were Mrs. Ernst and her three officers.

Unable to get far even with the state industrial commission findings against Finck and the NLRB behind them, the Mexican American women cigar strikers recommenced picketing of Finck's plant in 1935. Confrontations earlier in the strike had basically consisted of the use of foul language on both sides, but the situation worsened in 1935. Strikebreaker San Juana Castillo emphasized in an interview that she preferred to leave San Antonio, rather than face the threats and insults from pickets. In mid-April the strikers launched an attack on strikebreakers, tearing their dresses and pulling their hair. The strikers were arrested, and more police were brought in to guard Finck
employees. With additional police on the plant premises, the strikers followed workers home, attacking them and tearing off their clothes on the way. The strikers stoned strikebreakers during this period, too.

The workers at the Finck Cigar Company, themselves frustrated by pickets' actions and perhaps emboldened by Finck's stance, retaliated against pickets. In a surprise attack, Finck Company employees rushed pickets, ripping their signs, kicking one who fell, and tearing the clothes off two others. In the melee, the sheriff's hair was pulled and two deputies were shoved aside by the crowd intent on reaching ten women pickets. Onlookers joined in the hairpulling, scratching, and fist-fights. No one was arrested in the incident.

News accounts of strike events indicated that the Mexican women cigar strikers had the support of some Anglo groups and of unionists in San Antonio. In her testimony to the state industrial commission in 1935, Mrs. Ernst revealed that the Methodist Church and the YWCA had helped them with their early meetings. The press mentioned several men, not identified, as being run off during picketing for stopping cigar workers on their way to their job. Early on in the strike, the Spanish paper had noted that Anglo women helped lead the picketing of the plant, probably referring to the Methodist and YWCA women later brought up in Mrs. Ernst's testimony.
After the Mexican American women formed a local of the Cigarmakers International Union, San Antonio unionists provided various forms of support. Joe Armstead, international representative of the cigar union, W.B. Arnold, president of the Texas Federation of Labor, H. M. Haffner, president of the San Antonio Trades Council, and William L. Hoefgen, editor of the labor paper, attended meetings to try to arrange a settlement of the strike. Some of these same men testified at the state commission hearings about Finck's intransigence. Five men, presumably unionists, displayed a huge sign during the 1935 picketing, asserting that union labor stood behind the cigar strike. A committee for the support of the strikers had printed, with union labor, flyers denouncing the Finck Cigar Company and the sheriff's activities on its behalf.

It was in the labor paper that union leaders most strongly expressed support of the strike. The paper attempted to depict the women strikers, not as Mexican Americans, but as workers caught up in a struggle between the privileged classes and workers' rights. It accused the Chamber of Commerce of advertising San Antonio "as a cheap-wage city with plenty of docile (illiterate) labor available." It castigated the sheriff for expecting that "workers must bow in allegiance to the employer for the opportunity that he provides..." The labor paper derided Finck for blaming outside agitators and not admitting his part in causing the strike. When the women pickets attacked workers, the labor paper likened scabs to traitors and pronounced the strikers'
Correspondence between Roger Busfield, the secretary of the regional NLRB in New Orleans, and the national offices of the NLRB revealed support for the strike from the Mexican American community in San Antonio. Busfield noted in one letter that speakers at a cigar meeting exhorted workers against owners, urging a strike and the use of force. It was clear from his comments that these speakers were not workers and were most probably the "long haired Mexican soap box orators" he talked about in an earlier letter. Busfield also complained that he was hampered in his work of restoring the strikers to their old jobs with Finck by communistic writings in a Mexican American weekly paper of a "cracked-brained Mexican fire-brand" who was supporting the women.

The Spanish-language paper in San Antonio provided examples of support from the Mexican American community, too. The Spanish press reported on the intervention by the Mexican consul's office in securing a meeting with Finck when the women were unable to do so on their own. The paper described how local artistic talent had performed for free at a strikers' fund raising function and how at another event, the band and dance hall were offered at no cost to the strikers. Through the paper, the Mexican American women thanked Mexican American owned businesses who had helped by donating supplies and appealed to them for more aid. The paper,
however, took every opportunity to praise the women's peaceful conduct of the strike, as if such conduct was what made their efforts worthy, and like the Mexican American paper in the 1919 laundry strike, the San Antonio Spanish-language press referred to the women as deserving compatriots.

The outcome of the cigar strike can be classified as ambiguous. Technically, the resolution was a victory for the women. At their instigation the mayor arbitrated an agreement whereby Finck promised to abide by NRA codes, improve conditions, and rehire the strikers. In reality, the dispute dragged out for two more years, during which Finck forfeited the NRA's Blue Eagle rather than comply with NLRB directives, four of the leaders were never given their jobs back; picketing had to be resumed; and the strikers engaged in and underwent more violence than they had previously.

The women had effected some changes in the plant during the first short phase of the strike. The charge of three penalty cigars for one bad one was not instituted after all. The old practice of two penalty cigars was enforced only sporadically and later eliminated. A nurse was hired after August 1933 and put in charge of a clinic for the women. Several hundred of the women strikers were rehired. Too, the women's actions had forced Finck to accept NRA codes, although he received dispensations on wage rates and later forfeited the Blue Eagle rather than comply with the NLRB. These improvements, however, paled in comparison to the remaining problems revealed at hearings by the strikers.
Facing overwhelming odds, the women were unable to bring Finck to terms. With the support of the local police, Finck ignored unenforceable NLRB decisions and outlasted the strikers. Before the NLRB in 1934, Finck contended that he could not rehire Mrs. Ernst because she was not an American citizen. He also noted that she had "caused them harmful publicity and had spread talk that was derogatory to their factory." Refusing to adhere to NLRB directives to rehire the four leaders, Mr. Finck said, "...before we'll put them back to work, we'll close up." Despite the strikers' failure to win their demands, the 1933 cigar strike reveals how assertive Mexican American women workers could be and how they struggled to keep control of the events that they themselves precipitated.

The Pecan Shellers Strike: 1938, San Antonio

In February, 1938 when the pecan shellers strike broke out in San Antonio, there were three unions for pecan shellers, none with a very stable membership, partly because pecan shelling was seasonal and partly because shellers could not afford union dues. One of the unions, the Pecan Shelling Workers Union, led by Magdaleno Rodriguez, was, for all intents and purposes, a company union, financed by Julius Seligmann, owner of the largest pecan shelling company in the state. In 1934 and 1935, Rodriguez's union, for which he claimed 10,000 to 12,000 members, led strikes against wage reductions and, with the help of the NRA, forced
employers to accept industry codes that called for rates of 15 cents an hour. Rather than pay those rates, Seligmann withdrew from the pecan shellers association and formed his own group, which resumed piece rate wages. When Rodriguez succumbed to Seligmann's offer and became a company man is not known.

The NRA solution and the subsequent events offended many people, and several small unions appeared in opposition, only two of which survived into 1938. One of these was El Nogal, an independent union with a reported membership of 4000, of whom only half could afford the monthly dues of five cents. Although the identity of its presiding officers is not now known, Mrs. Lilia Caballero served as secretary during the 1930's. The fate of El Nogal after 1938 is a mystery, but with the mechanization of the industry, it may have simply disappeared as the shelling workforce was cut.

The other pecan shellers union of any appreciable size in 1938 was the Texas Pecan Shelling Workers Union, soon to be taken over by the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), which had only recently taken an interest in organizing the shellers. The fortunes of the Texas Pecan Shelling Workers Union, led by Albert Gonzen, had ebbed and flowed and at the time of its takeover by the CIO the union was barely surviving. The CIO affiliate, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), renamed the union the Pecan Workers Local #172, but the union's renewal was a slow process, and UCAPAWA was not prepared for the walkout on February first.
A reduction in rates from six to five cents for shelling pieces and from seven to six cents a pound for halves on January 31, 1938, sent thousands of pecan shellers into the streets of San Antonio in protest the next day. The strike lasted almost six weeks and brought national attention to San Antonio as city officials and police used legal and extra-legal tactics to defeat the Mexican American shellers, fearing that the strike experience might awaken their political consciousness. The strikers remained peaceful despite the forces arrayed against them, and with the help of local leaders and UCAPAWA, they negotiated a settlement ostensibly achieving their goals but, in reality, favorable to the owners. In any case, workers by the thousands were laid off by the end of 1938 as owners mechanized rather than accept minimum wages of 25 cents an hour set by the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The inability of the CIO to coalesce the various groups of shellers into one cohesive union gave Mexican American women in the industry an opportunity to act in leadership roles in the first days of the strike. Reflecting this inability of the CIO, but also the local flavor of the strike, the pecan shellers chose Emma Tenayuca, a 23-year-old Mexican American woman, as strike chairperson. Negative police reaction to Tenayuca's leadership of the strike was as evident as the strikers' support of her; she and two other pecan shellers were arrested on the first day of the strike. In response, pecan strikers Mela Solis, Catarina Diaz, and Amelia de la Rosa, with four male strikers, approached the
Spanish-language newspaper denying that Tenayuca had imposed her leadership on the strikers and affirming that they had indeed picked her to head the strike committee. The group also led a crowd of strikers to police headquarters to protest her arrest.

Born in San Antonio in 1916, Tenayuca grew up in a family proud of their Indian heritage and interested in the political situation in Texas. Her memories of her childhood included hearing family members arguing about Miriam "Ma" Ferguson's election as governor and attending rallies in the plaza where she listened to speakers ranging from anarchists to Mexican revolutionaries to labor contractors. During her high-school years, Tenayuca belonged to a student group devoted to reading, discussing, and writing about issues of the day, particularly about the economy because of the onset of the Depression at that time. If the discussions of the group had raised questions in her mind about the system, her involvement as a strike sympathizer in the 1934 and 1935 cigar strike opened her eyes to abuses by the establishment. Her strike experience led her to conclude that organizing workers might be the way to effect changes in a situation where it seemed that the American idea of freedom and fairness was not being practised.

At cigar workers' meetings, Tenayuca had frequently run into members of a Communist organization known as the Workers Alliance and, by 1938, when the shellers' strike occurred, she was deeply involved with the group. The Workers Alliance in the 1930's in San Antonio provided a forum for intellectual discussions about
the labor question, but the realities of thousands of unemployed flocking to its doors soon turned it into what Tenayuca called a "training ground" for activist workers. The participation of the Workers Alliance in a protest against the Works Project Administration (WPA) layoffs of 1937 made it a beacon for penniless Mexican American migratory laborers returning to San Antonio to work for less than $2.50 a week in the pecan sheds. The Alliance held meetings, heard and attempted to resolve grievances, and protested WPA policies for the unemployed masses, and Tenayuca, as state secretary of the Texas Communist Party, stood at the center of it all. It would have been strange for the pecan shelling strikers in 1938 not to have chosen her as their leader.

Tenayuca was not the only Mexican American woman arrested and branded as Communist by local officials for her role in the strike. Minnie Rendon, in her capacity as secretary of the pecan shellers local, attempted to organize picketing at one plant on the first day of the strike and was arrested along with Leonard Avila, president of Pecan Workers Local #172. Rendon was included in Chief of Police Owen Kilday's denunciation of the strike leadership as Communist and was named in an inquiry by the Bexar County grand jury in a probe of the strike situation.

The absence of a well-structured established union when the strike broke out on February first made it difficult to develop a cohesive leadership group at the start of the dispute. Only the
police chief of San Antonio was certain he knew who the Communist leaders were and whom they were duping. The workers themselves had to rely on proven local people such as Tenayuca and on the local's elected officers such as Rendon and Avila, all of them people willing to pitch in and keep things going. As Tenayuca later put it,

I remember some members of the Workers Alliance coming by, saying 'We're not going into the shops.' So I went out with them [strikers]. The workers just started marching out. The only thing I did was organize these committees and send them down.46

Of the people that the police chief at various times designated as Communist leaders of the strike, only Tenayuca joined the party in 1937. Donald Henderson admitted only to being a member of the executive committee of the Friends of the Soviet Union, but he was tainted by his presidency of UCAPAWA, which had a reputation as a Communist Party union, acquired because some of its officials were Marxists. Other men involved in the strike as leaders, who supposedly had ties to the Workers Alliance, were asked to remove themselves by UCAPAWA's Henderson at the same time Tenayuca renounced her position as strike chairperson.

The assumption of leadership of the strike on February 6 by Donald Henderson, national president of UCAPAWA, reduced the opportunities for public strike actions by the Mexican American women; but their numbers in the industry ensured their continued participation to some extent. Tenayuca, persuaded to remove herself from chairing the strike committee on the grounds that it
would benefit the workers not to be associated with Communists, continued to work behind the scenes, writing circulars and conferring with picket captains. Minnie Rendon took part in and was spokesperson for a delegation sent to call on Governor James Allred to help end police harassment of strikers. Even with Tenayuca removed as chairperson, the five member strike committee included Minnie Rendon, Mela Solis, and Juana Sanchez. Mexican American women, individually or in groups, at various times offered their version of strike events to the Spanish-language newspapers and inspired others to do the same.

There is evidence that the women participated fully as pickets and at times extended their interpretation of that role after UCAPAWA took over the direction of the strike. Forty-two year old Maria Garcia was fined five dollars, for example, for using abusive language to a strikebreaker crossing the picket line. The large numbers of women continually found in jail indicated that they re-formed picket lines after being gassed, dispersed, and jailed by police. In one instance, Police Chief Kilday released twenty-five women from jail after being advised that the women had small children to care for at home. In another instance, a group of Anglo women investigating conditions at the jail reported hearing from the matron and the Mexican American women prisoners that as many as thirty-three women strikers shared one cell at times. Photographs of strikers picketing and at rallies and the evidence they gave at hearings indicated that Mexican American women made up a significant number of public
participants in the strike.

A suit against police harassment provided a public forum for the women strikers to air their concerns. A number of witnesses, including a fourteen and a fifteen-year old, testified about police attempts to get strikers to quit the union through both verbal abuse and physical force. Emelia [sic] Garcia, twenty-three years old, said in court that Police Chief Kilday demanded that she get out of the strike and taunted her by asking why Henderson, president of UCAPAWA, was not there carrying a picket sign too. In her testimony, Refugia Garcia, 45, stated, "He [the police chief] told me that the CIO was good for nothing." These public appearances indicated the women's willingness to take on public roles in the cause of their strike.

Numerous organizations and individuals offered material and verbal support to the strikers. Sometimes the support was for the workers and not necessarily for the strike. A minister, one of a group of church officials investigating the strike situation, expressed regret over the conditions of workers on the West side, or Mexican American side, of the city. Others were directly supportive of the strike. Cassie Jean Winifree, of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, petitioned city officials for permission to obtain funds from business to feed the strikers and took pictures of police actions against pickets for later court evidence. A Citizens Labor Aid Committee had a group of local women, including Mrs. Winifree, investigate and report on
jail conditions for the strikers. In a letter signed by Mrs. Charles Britton, the Pecan Workers Emergency Relief Committee requested an investigation of the strike situation by Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins during her visit to San Antonio. These groups publicly deplored the treatment of the strikers.

Support for the pecan shellers strike came from other sources as well. When sixty-three Mexican-heritage pecan strikers were arrested, the Mexican consul protested on their behalf and arranged their release for the weekend, an accomplishment in a situation that had seen strikers jailed for days without being charged. He was also conspicuously present at their trial. The Mexican ambassador to the U.S. wrote a letter of protest over the treatment of Mexican-heritage strikers at the hands of San Antonio authorities, prompting the governor's call for an investigation of police actions. The well-known head of the national workers union in Mexico, Vicente Toledano, allegedly visited the strikers several times.

State officials spoke on behalf of the strikers, but the depth of their sincerity is open to question. Although Governor James Allred refused to send in Texas Rangers to take over from police after being petitioned by the strikers to do so, he did ask the State Industrial Commission, headed by Everett Looney, to investigate the strikers' complaints. Looney was viewed as pro-strike because of his earlier defense of Tenayuca on charges of unlawful gathering and disturbing the peace. The findings of the commission against the police support allegations of Looney's
liberal views. Maury Maverick, U.S. congressman from Texas, at various times called for an investigation by federal agencies of strike conditions. The fact that the strike became newsworthy on a national level through the efforts of the Texas Civil Liberties Union probably played a role in state officials' pronouncements on the strike.

Less official, but presumably more significant, public support for the strikers came from the Mexican American community in San Antonio. By 1938, the owner of the Spanish-language paper had accepted his permanent residency in the United States, and the paper reflected this attitude in its favorable representation of the strikers as peaceful activists. The paper provided news stories that the regular press neglected, covering workers' actions in defense of Tenayuca and allegations by Henderson that officials' treatment of the pecan shellers was rooted in racism.

Others from the middle-class showed support in both word and deed. At a workers' rally, the archbishop, Reverend John Lopez of the National Catholic Welfare Council, a University of Mexico student, a member of the Mexican civic group, the League of Loyal Americans, and a local attorney, offered to help the strikers, although all the speakers cautioned the strikers against Communism. On a more practical level, a Mexican American woman, Mrs. Consuelo Gonsen, from the relief office, and Mrs. Claire Green, the county social work supervisor, were supportive, according to Tenayuca.
Some indication of the support from ordinary members of the Mexican American community can be gauged by letters written to national officials requesting intervention in the strike. One woman wrote to the labor department asking that an official be sent to work out a solution and offered her services toward that goal. One man sent his letter to President Roosevelt asking him to look into the injustices being committed against the shellers. Another letter to the president, from Ernesto Galarza, who was later to become well-known as a scholar on Mexican American workers, commented on the Good Neighbor policy and its application to the happenings in San Antonio. All three letters contained references to the oppression of the strikers by city officials and police.

The take-over of strike activity by UCAPAWA officials after February 6 had limited the Mexican women's activism, although their numbers made their elimination impossible. At rallies and at meetings with city and company officials, UCAPAWA officers and local union male officers took the initiative. Still, aside from the actions mentioned above by Tenayuca and Rendon and individual women, three Mexican American women, Amelia de la Rosa, Natalie Camarena, and Velia Quinones, took part in a conference with city government and company officials that resulted in an agreement to settle the dispute through an arbitration board. The board was made up of three Anglo males who decided that wages would be raised back to the levels before the strike and then would be renegotiated at the beginning of the new season in November. By
then, the industry had started the switch to machines rather than pay minimum wages set by the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The Mexican American women who took part in the pecan shellers strike had opportunities to take leadership roles and public positions during the dispute because of their large numbers in the industry and because no union had clear control over a majority of the pecan shellers. If any group had the workers' respect, it was the Workers Alliance, a Communist organization but not a union. UCAPAWA was able to give some sense of order to the situation, but its own recent formation—it was created in 1937—made it inexperienced to deal with 15,000 to 20,000 pecan shellers with loyalties to a myriad of locals. The inexperience of UCAPAWA, combined with its alleged Communist connections, and the resultant virulent opposition from the local establishment, did little to make it a stabilizing force during the strike. The women, then, took leadership roles to the extent that they could, considering the forces of officialdom arrayed against them. That three Mexican women were part of the negotiating team that arranged for an arbitration board settlement attested to the measure of their participation and effectiveness.


Speaking of the garment strikes in San Antonio in the 1930's, Emma Tenayuca years later told an interviewer that the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) would organize
50 or so workers and strike, organize fifty or so workers and strike. Her description was not far off. The ILGWU conducted one strike each at three different plants in 1936, 1937, and 1938. The strike at Dorothy Frocks lasted several months; the one at Shirlee Frocks occurred over four months in 1937; while the strike at Texas Infants Dress Company began in 1937 and continued into 1938. The garment strikes were generally fought for union recognition and better wages, and the union was successful with two of them. These strikes were characterized by much violence from strikers against nonstrikers and by the continuous charges against and jailings of Mexican American women.

The longer history and deeper roots of the ILGWU offered structured and more common forms of participation for Mexican American women in the 1930's garment strikes in San Antonio. In her official position as president of Local 123, Anita de Hoyos, along with Merle Zappone, ILGWU organizer, provided information to the press on the strike at Dorothy Frocks. When city officials gave their usual argument that no strike existed because the plant was still open and pickets were not plant employees—many were in fact home workers—Natalie Maldonado, sometime president of Local 180, and Anita Fierro, accompanied by ILGWU educational director Rebecca Taylor, went to city hall to offer picketers' Social Security cards and company pay envelopes as proof of employment in the 1937 Shirlee Frocks strike. In the 1937-38 Texas Infants Dress strike, Helen Rivas, as suborganizer for the ILGWU, was repeatedly arrested for her zealous participation on the picket
lines. Thus, picketing, petitioning, and giving out press releases were normal and union directed activities for the garment strikers.

One tactic used by the Mexican American women garment strikers in the Dorothy Frocks case that relied on Mexican culture was the singing of *corridos* to their opponents. After a disturbing incident between strikers and strikebreakers, pickets settled on singing their opinion of the scabs as a way to express their opposition. The strikers sang their *corridos*, songs that tell the singers' opinion of an event or person, in front of a strikebreaker's house, when the strikers were arrested, and, later, in jail. Singing was not just a tactic against their adversaries. It was also a means of expressing solidarity and encouragement among strikers themselves. Thirty strikers and fifty sympathizers paraded in front of Shirlee Frocks during the Dorothy Frocks strike, singing union songs, to express their opinion of the discharge of two union members by Shirlee's management. Like the pecan shellers were to do two years later, the strikers used singing as an outlet while at the same time staying within the boundary of union respectability.

The animosities between strikers and workers was especially bitter in the garment strikes, and this was reflected in the violent activity that became a part of almost every garment strike in which Mexican American women participated. Acts of violence ranged from simple assault or pushing and shoving to beatings.
favorite tactic was taking off the clothes of scabs in public. In the 1936 Dorothy Frocks and the 1938 Texas Infants strikes, violent incidents occurred frequently, while in the 1937 Shirlee Frocks strike, strikers were arrested so frequently that it cut down on such confrontations. The large numbers of women in the industry left the major portion of strike work to them, but the more organized structure of garment unions limited the Mexican American women's decision making opportunities and, since they had few other means of realizing their goals, they frequently turned to violence.

Confrontations between the strikers and strikebreakers at times took the form of simply using abusive language and making threats against each other and often included those seen as sympathetic to the opposition. In both the Dorothy Frocks (1936) and the Shirlee Frocks strikes (1937), Mexican American women strikers were jailed and fined for verbal assaults on police officials and strikebreakers. The earliest confrontation in the Shirlee Frocks strike concerned a threatening gesture by Antonia Longoria to Martha Zapata, for which Longoria was arrested. Constant arrests in this strike cut down on incidents of a violent nature.

The women acted similarly in the Texas Infants Dress strike of 1938. In a suit by the Texas Infants Dress Company against the strikers, workers testified that strikers used "obscene and denigrating" language to them. This language included such epithets as "rats" and "donkeys" or "mules." The latter term was
particularly loaded as in Spanish a mule connotes someone too stupid to understand the reality before him or her. The president of the company union at Texas Infants, Edith Trigos, declared on several occasions that pickets threatened workers while passing out circulars, some of which were insulting in themselves, and often followed workers home to continue the threats and foul language. In his decision in the injunction suit, a local judge decided that strikers could picket but were prohibited from saying "loud or insulting" words.

What the local papers referred to as disturbances were common in the Dorothy Frocks strike. Garment strikers clearly detested seeing strikebreakers escorted into plants by company officials and police. Disturbances resulted as strikers attempted to break through cordons to prevent workers from entering the factories. In such an incident at Dorothy Frocks, police sergeant Fred Fest sustained a fall and bruises after strikers began shoving and pushing non-strikers being led into the plant. Told by a court to carry peaceful signs only, strikers had resumed their disturbances by June 9 in an incident typical of the garment strikers: three women and one man were arrested for struggling with workers being escorted home by policemen.

A favorite tactic by strikers against strikebreakers was to undress them in public, although attempts frequently ended in the tearing of opponents' clothes. The fact that the workers produced clothing probably stimulated the decision to unclothe scabs, but
the Mexican cultural tradition that women of all ages should be virtuous and clothed in public made the practice ideal as a means of humiliating their opposition and bringing shame to the whole family. Interestingly, Mexican American women practiced undressing against Anglo women, too. Several incidents of unclothing occurred during the Dorothy Frocks strike; fortunately for the strikebreakers, police were able to prevent total undressings in this and the two other garment strikes.

Attempts at undressing the opposition became an almost common experience during the Dorothy Frocks strike. In the words of Mrs. Ella Mynier, a finisher at the plant, she was afraid to go to her job after she saw "the dress torn off a girl by the strikers." In order to prevent Esser Manufacturing Company from doing work for the Dorothy Frocks plant, strikers picketed the company and tore the dress off Mrs. Mabel Phipps, a seamstress, to prevent her from entering the factory. Two days later, according to the testimony of a witness, four women strikers attacked Mrs. John Bonacci and a friend and tore off the top half of her dress. On June 9, workers Rosa Gaona and Beatriz Rosales found themselves almost totally nude as they tried to reach the plant.

The most attention-getting incident took place when strikers undressed strikebreakers during a parade honoring President Franklin D. Roosevelt in downtown San Antonio. According to Rebecca Taylor's interview with historian George Green, the police guarding Dorothy Frocks stayed at the plant, but workers were given time off to attend the president's appearance. The strikers
took advantage of this open invitation by publicly undressing their opponents at the parade route.

Such incidents took place less often in the other two garment strikes. But Margarita Marciate testified in June, 1937, in the Shirlee Frocks strike, that five women strikers approached her and accused her of being a sell-out at 25 cents an hour, although she told them she earned more. The strikers, she said, proceeded to abuse her and tore her new dress. Marciate declared that she had quit Shirlee three weeks before. By 1937-38, strikers' behavior towards scabs had escalated into more violent confrontations but still included attempts to tear off clothes. Antonia Longoria and Amelia Pezo tore a worker's outfit in an incident in the Texas Infants Dress strike and had assault charges filed against them.

By 1937-38, strikers had become more aggressive towards their opponents and had commenced beating them. Still, there had been indications of the new trend in the Dorothy Frocks strike. In the above cited Gaona and Rosales incident, strikers had also pulled a male striker's hair and hit several policemen hard enough to leave bruises. In the Marciate incident, also cited above, her accusation that strikers abused her actually meant that they had hit her on the head. Four women pickets at Shirlee Frocks in 1937 attacked four workers as they left a bus to enter the plant. One of the workers, Mary Elizabeth Hurtado, testified in court six days later that a picket "grabbed my throat and started scratching me." The other three workers managed to escape. As a result of
the incident, Merle Zappone, ILGWU organizer, Elena (Helen) Rivas, Antonia Longoria, and Antonia Buena were brought before a local court on charges that they met on June 8 to conspire to commit violence against the strikebreakers.

Similar instances of strikers assaulting non-strikers occurred in the Texas Infants Dress Company dispute. In an incident in late March, 1938, Antonia Ledezma and Lupe Peyro were beaten by three pickets with an unknown instrument as the two women arrived at work. Ledezma received bruises from a fall sustained when she was hit. Peyro was bruised on the face, arms, and right hand. Edith Trigos, president of the company union, complained that passing police refused to help.

Three days later, the company filed a petition in local district court demanding that the ILGWU members be prevented from acts of violence. The company union pointed to the incident of Antonia Ledezma and Lupe Peyro as evidence of such practices, and other workers testified that their homes were "rocked," that is, stoned, because they would not join the ILGWU. In an incident a month later, Nieves Carrillo and Josefina Alvarez received a beating in which one of them chipped a tooth. The company followed up by demanding the arrest of Rebecca Taylor and Amelia Peso for inciting disorder and named Amelia Peso, Antonia Longoria, and Amelia Cardenas as the attackers of Carrillo and Alvarez.

Mexican American women in the garment strikes responded to company tactics, not just by hitting out at their immediate opponents, company workers, but by attempting to use the court
system to their advantage. Helen V. Rivas, the very active suborganizer, went to court during the Dorothy Frocks strike to ask for $10,000 actual and $20,000 exemplary damages against an employee acting as agent for the company. Mrs. Rivas accused the company employee of throwing her onto the hood of a car and then throwing her off, resulting in head lacerations and a concussion. Margarita Reygados also filed suit for a total of $15,000 because, she said, a special officer at Dorothy Frocks had "arrested" her for an hour without a warrant after she began picketing the plant. Likewise, in the Texas Infants Dress strike of 1938, Raquel Villanueva, claiming that plant officials forced her to resign by coercion after she would not agree to leave the union, filed suit for $11,000. The basis for the three suits was alleged personal and civil injuries. Help from the union must be assumed in these cases as most Mexican American women in the 1930's did not have the education or knowledge of the system to initiate such suits.

Evidence of support for the Mexican American garment strikers came from the same sort of groups that had supported the cigar and pecan shellers. Striking workers in the Dorothy Frocks dispute claimed that local clubs and other workers' groups stood behind their efforts. They also claimed to have received a letter of sympathy with their cause from a women workers syndicate in the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon. Proof of support from other workers came a week later when the heads of all the unions in the city
approached the San Antonio mayor and police commissioner requesting that the number of police guarding the Dorothy Frocks plants be reduced. Strikers had complained that police at the plant had not acted impartially.

The union paper provided support for the Mexican American strikers in its articles on strike events, but such coverage was tinged with gender biases. In presenting an appeal for financial support in the form of attendance at a fund-raising dance being held by the Dorothy Frocks unionists, for example, the writer remarked, "Among the membership are included some of the most comely of the female sex to be found anywhere. They are good seamstresses besides."

The Spanish media referred to strike supporters at strike scenes as "sympathizers," without any other explanation as to who these could have been. Company and city officials' claims that many picketers were not workers at a particular plant, as well as the police chief's contention that certain women were to be found at all of the garment strike sites, indicated that union members supported each other's strikes, whether an individual member was an employee of a plant or not. Rebecca Taylor admitted in the Texas Infants Dress strike of 1938 that, at first, picketers at the plant included only one company employee. Historian Harold Shapiro has maintained that picketers were often home workers, who, with their abominably low wages, had nothing to lose by participating in the strikes.
United States Senator Morris Sheppard and Representative Maury Maverick publicly expressed support of the women strikers by demanding investigations of police actions after wholesale arrests in the Shirlee Frocks strike. According to press accounts, Maverick, in a telegram to Rebecca Taylor, called police arrests "illegal actions" and reminded police that the Constitution gave everyone equal rights. Sheppard, in a letter to Warren Madden, chairman of the NLRB, asked for Madden's consideration of allegations of police interference in the Shirlee Frocks case. How much both men's statements meant actual support rather than political posturing can only be surmised. It is probable that the rank and file garment strikers were not aware of these declarations but that these were used by the ILGWU for propaganda purposes.

In some ways, the three garment strikes of the 1930's in San Antonio ended successfully for the Mexican American women. In the case of the 1936 Dorothy Frocks dispute, the owner of the plant decided to move the operation to Dallas, where city officials boasted of their anti-unionism. The manager at Dorothy Frocks advised the local press that the move was a result of lack of police protection in San Antonio, although police had not shown any reluctance in arresting strikers. The incident the manager referred to, however, was the vandalizing of the plant by unknown persons, who used tar and acid to destroy material, frocks, and machinery worth about $3000. Union officials denied knowledge of the crime and promised to continue picketing the plant until it
The removal of the plant to Dallas must have seemed a defeat to the Mexican American women. The union, in fact, sent the now unemployed members to Los Angeles and Dallas to work in the plants there. Two months later, however, local union officials received word that the owner of Dorothy Frocks, Mrs. Charles Schwartz, had agreed to sign a contract with the union and was contemplating a return to San Antonio.

The owners of Shirlee Frocks, who at one point had closed the plant in what they called an attempt to prevent a riot, signed a contract with the ILGWU after less than four months of picketing by striking members of the union. The agreement between the company and union officials was instituted through the offices of the regional director of the NLRB. The contract called for a 48 hour week at wages of at least $8 a week, the reinstatement of eighteen women fired for union membership, and recognition of the ILGWU as bargaining agent for the workers.

Officials at Texas Infants Dress Company also signed a contract with the ILGWU rather than continue fighting the sporadic strike efforts of 1937 and 1938. Earlier in the strike, union organizer Merle Zappone had conceded that pay at Texas Infants was higher than at other San Antonio plants, so hours and wages remained the same under the newly-negotiated contract. The company, therefore, had only to agree that workers in the plant would have to join the union within sixty days or lose their jobs.
The plant manager at Texas Infants was unable at the contract signing to resist exhibiting the patron, or benevolent boss, attitude of owners, often evident in the garment strikes, by declaring that he had long since been ready to sign but had not done so in consideration of his employees.

The 1930's garment strikes in San Antonio were the precursors of the garment strikes that occurred after World War II in Texas. An established union, seeking union recognition and material improvement for their members, conducted a well planned strike often involving only a small percentage of the workforce. Organizers accompanied the Mexican American women in their strike assignments and themselves handled all the necessary public relations work. The Mexican American garment strikers in the thirties, like those after WWII, expressed their solidarity with violent behavior against those in their immediate range, the Mexican strikebreakers, and the union bureaucracy seemed unable to deal effectively with such behavior.

Summary and Conclusions

In the laundry strike of 1919, the CLU leadership had clearly established guidelines and goals for the Mexican American women workers. The CLU took over every aspect of the strike, leaving the women in the union hall, knitting items to raise funds. The Anglo men who dominated the union movement in El Paso had not encouraged Mexican workers' inclusion in the CLU's upper echelons, and they expected to direct happenings during the strike along
established trade union lines. The CLU leadership called the women's meetings; they met with laundry owners on the women's behalf; they assigned the women strikers' their particular strike duty; and they assumed all fund-raising functions. The Mexican women were left with very little room to affect the course of the strike in the face of such established union procedure. Nevertheless, they did initiate the protest and take control when they had the opportunity.

The women in the cigar strike in San Antonio in 1933, on the other hand, had every opportunity to make the decisions involving their cause since no union existed. The women showed no reluctance in taking the lead, hesitating only in forming a local to be affiliated with the Cigarmakers International Union. The cigar strikers immediately addressed their concerns to the owner and backed these up with picketing. They engineered their own fund-raising activities, demanded an investigation of cigar plant conditions, and set the NLRB on the company. The women employed every available resource to further their strike, and it was only when these were exhausted, and they had to face up to the greater power of a male Anglo owner with establishment forces at his command, that the women resorted to violent tactics.

The Mexican American women associated with the pecan shellers strike of 1938 in San Antonio, too, had ample chances to affect the course of events, in this case, because UCAPAWA was not strong enough to be very effective and because of their own large numbers
in the industry. Known local leaders, such as Emma Tenayuca, and the local's elected officers, such as Minnie Rendon, brought order to the chaotic first days by creating committees with particular assignments. Other women acted as spokespersons to the press, petitioned the governor for redress against the police, and demonstrated against the jailing of their leaders. Mexican American women were in on the decision to place the dispute before an arbitration board. The violence in this strike was definitely from city police against strike participants and their sympathizers.

Because of the longer history and deeper roots of the ILGWU, the garment strikes of the 1930's in San Antonio, like the laundry strike of 1919, offer a good example of what occurred when established leadership and direction existed. Although the garment strikers showed that they knew that owners and management had contempt for them as Mexican Americans, they did not give their strikes that atmosphere of a larger cause that the pecan shellers and the cigar strikers had. The tactics they used and the demands they made were highly influenced by the union and appear more direct and narrowly defined than the cigarmakers' and pecan shellers'. The garment strikers did not ask for respect as had the cigar strikers or for justice as the shellers had; instead, they asked for higher wages and union recognition. They did not hold huge rallies with Spanish-speaking orators or go to the Mexican consul for help. They did not seek out Mexican American women to head strike committees; both the cigarmakers and
pecan shellers started out with Mexican American women as strike chairpersons. The union placed Rebecca Taylor, who often consulted local city officials before acting, and Merle Zappone, who was very union-minded, in charge of the Mexican American women. In short, the ILGWU's structure, long history, and greater experience resulted in clearly defined boundaries of participation.

The garment strikes, however, were different in an important way. Two of the strikes saw lots of violent behavior on the part of the strikers toward strikebreakers, setting Mexican American women against other Mexican-heritage women. Much of the reason for this behavior lies in their exclusion from real participation in the direction of strike events by a union that appeared more concerned with acquiring recognition than with commitment to the Mexican American women. The ILGWU's emphasis on the bread and butter issue of wages was clearly important in an era of wage cuts, but it was certainly not enough if their members were out engaging in violent extra-curricular activities.

The union's lack of commitment to the Mexican American women was most forcefully evident in the choice of organizers, only one of whom spoke Spanish. Zappone was quite union-oriented but spoke no Spanish and relied on people such as Emma Tenayuca for initial contacts with the Mexican American women. Taylor, having grown up in a religious colony in Mexico that was dispossessed of lands and goods during the 1910 Mexican revolution, spoke Spanish but never
had the anti-establishment attitude often necessary to labor organizing. Her opposition to the leadership of the pecan shellers, and, much later, to the Chicano movement of the 1960's, indicated strongly that she would not have been amenable to recognizing or acknowledging, much less meeting, the needs of the Mexican American unionists and including them in any decision-making process during the strikes. The garment strikes revealed a pattern of controlled unionism and violent confrontations that post World War II strikes of Mexican American women were to exhibit.
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Chapter IV

The Post WWII Strikes

The major arena for strike activity among Mexican American women in Texas in the post World War II period was the garment industry. Beginning with the government contracts during the war, garment plants in El Paso making men's clothing experienced great growth up to the mid 1970s. Farah Manufacturing Company became one of the largest in the industry with five plants and 9500 employees. Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), the union in men's clothing, had the job of trying to organize in a town where unions were anathema. In San Antonio, the industry had been reduced to a few plants, such as Jay-Ann, Bernard Altmann, Tex-Son, and Juvenile, the largest with 500 workers. The ILGWU in 1959 had recently lost contracts at three plants and was experiencing a disputed contract at Bernard Altmann's. Both unions faced an uphill battle in the struggle to organize or to stave off decertification in unionized plants since Texas after the war was a right-to-work state.

Nevertheless, in El Paso and San Antonio, five strikes involving Mexican American women broke out between 1952 and 1972. Three of these in El Paso were typically short contractual disputes: Hortex in 1952, Top-Notch in 1965, and Levi-Strauss in
1971. The other two lasted approximately two years each: in 1959 at Tex-Son in San Antonio and in 1972 at Farah in both El Paso and San Antonio. The Tex-Son strikers instituted a fairly successful regional boycott, but it was not enough to overcome the availability of so many replacements, and by early 1961 only a handful of pickets continued their vigil at the plant. At Farah, Amalgamated’s call for a nationwide boycott of Farah slacks garnered immense support for the strikers in the wake of the ethnic movements of the period, and Willie Farah conceded in February, 1974.

The post-war garment strikes in which Mexican American women participated were characterized by violent confrontations between strikers and strikebreakers, also Mexican American women. The women strikers at Farah denied participating in the violence that occurred, referring to it as a male phenomenon. In the short strikes of 1953, 1965, and 1971 in El Paso and the two-year strike at Tex-Son in San Antonio, animosities ran so deep that some workers felt terrorized and refused to go to work. The unions, publicly disapproving of such behavior, proved unable or unwilling to curtail it.


Hortex: El Paso

The Hortex strike in 1952 was the ACWA’s first major attempt to organize workers in the garment plants of El Paso. The company at the time produced denim jeans and play clothes with
approximately 650 employees at two plant sites. In the late summer of 1952, the ACWA won a collective bargaining election with a vote of 421 to 127. About three hundred of the workers struck the plant on October 23, 1952, at the behest of the union.

The two sides, company and union, gave different versions of how the situation had developed. The union organizer, Bernard O'Keefe, told reporters that after the union won an election to represent the workers at Hortex and had agreed on a date to negotiate a contract, the company began to engage in "unfair labor practices," the major one of which was to fire new workers who did not meet quota specifications. The company attorney, on the other hand, told the press that after agreeing to confer on contract discussions, the union called a strike without any effort to meet with company officials.

The three-week strike at Hortex was the scene of constant confrontations and arrests. On the first full day of picketing, October 24, 1952, two men and two women strikers, all from Ciudad Juarez, were arrested, the men for deflating car tires and the women for "struggling" with non-strikers entering the plant. The union attorney, Jose Rey, explained to the press that the strikers had not known that their actions were against the law and that they had now been told that "they must be orderly." A police patrol captain noted the next day "...I believe the union officials are trying to conduct an orderly strike." The next two weeks showed that despite Rey's talk, the strikers preferred to be
But the effects of Rey's lecture lasted only four days. The confrontations between strikers and non-strikers resumed, ranging from jeering and name-calling to throwing eggs and rocks to beatings. On October 29, two women pickets from Juarez were arrested for throwing eggs at workers entering the plant. The next day, a slapping and scratching incident, in which a striker was stabbed in the nose with scissors, occurred. Strikers gathered across the street jeering as police stopped the fight and arrested five women, including the worker who had used the scissors. The union attorney filed assault charges against the worker and protested to the El Paso police chief that workers were arming themselves "with scissors and tools of the trade." Meanwhile, a federal mediator's attempts to settle the dispute were not meeting with success.

As confrontations and arrests continued, the union assumed a low-profile. For one thing, union officials did not want strikers tried while the strike was going on, and in view of that, twelve strikers who had been arrested, five of them El Pasoans, forfeited bail rather than appear in court on charges of disturbing the peace. The union also attempted to cut down on incidents by pulling pickets out at one point during the strike. In another instance, the union prohibited a striker's presence on the picket site after she was arrested for the second time for disorderly conduct, that is, grabbing workers entering the plant.
Although jeering at workers crossing the picket line played a large part in confrontations, beating non-strikers also became part of strikers' tactics. Such incidents were described by the local papers as beatings, and the ferocity of these may be deduced from workers' refusals to report to work and their declarations that they were being "terrorized" by strikers. Hortex employees, in fact, claimed that strikers, "threatened to disfigure for life" those workers who continued to come into the city to replace them.

The incidents that gave rise to workers' fears included beatings by strikers in Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. In one incident, two women from Juarez accused a carload of men and women strikers of severely abusing them and named a striker's husband as the driver of the car. In another incident on the same day, police arrived too late to prevent a fight between workers and strikers at the international bridge, where the latter threw rocks to prevent the former from coming into El Paso. The strikers also pulled workers' hair in that confrontation. Yet the company, also trying to keep the situation low-key, refused to file charges against the strikers.

Even as a federal mediation official resumed attempts at reconciliation, charges of assault continued. Three women strikers were charged with beating a worker as she tried to go into the factory. It was at this point that some workers were refusing to go to work and others were protesting what they called terrorism on the part of strikers. Amid charges of verbal
harassment and assault against two more strikers, more than 300 picketing members of the ACWA gave up the strike to return to work. No explanations were given by the ACWA, although the paper noted that federal mediation efforts had collapsed.

The 1952 drive at Hortex was the ACWA's first major attempt to flex its union muscle in El Paso's garment industry, it was not very successful. Not only did the union members agree to return to work without forcing concessions from the company, but records show that the union was experiencing trouble retaining recognition as bargaining agent for Hortex employees eleven years later.

During union elections in 1963, the company had been charged by the ACWA with firing three employees for union activity. On May 4, two days after employees had rejected the ACWA, albeit under intimidating company tactics, at a softball game between Hortex and another garment plant, Hortex workers and union members confronted each other, verbally if not physically. The report of the NLEB examiner in 1964 pointed to continued animosities between the two groups. According to the federal official, five Hortex union members took the opposing company players' side at the game, while at the same time shouting vulgar words in Spanish to Hortex players. Hortex non-union workers, who included a supervisor, the personnel manager, and two floor ladies, responded by threatening to fire the five, calling one a magpie, commenting on the bleached hair of another, and making remarks about the mother of yet another. While the NLRB agent refused to settle the dispute at the softball game, he did decide
that Hortex was guilty of unfair labor practices. The company denied the charges and promised to appeal, but the incident revealed, once again, the depth of anger between non-union and union members.

Top-Notch: El Paso

Eleven years after the strike at Hortex in 1952, after losing a union election that the NLRB later overturned, the ACWA made a vigorous attempt at unionizing garment workers in El Paso and commuters from Ciudad Juarez. Believing that workers from Juarez would not come to El Paso at night, ACWA representatives worked with Mexican officials and labor leaders to hold a dance and floor show in the Mexican town. The ACWA planned to expound on the benefits that a union would bring, such as high wages, paid vacations, and retirement pensions. As was typical of the ACWA, two men, although Mexican American this time, were given credit for arranging the events in Ciudad Juarez.

In what was to become a three-year drama that culminated in a violent ten-week strike at Top-Notch, the United Garment Workers of America (UGW) sent an international representative to El Paso to prevent the raid of its members at Top-Notch. The UGW's accusation of intended raiding by Amalgamated was based on the ACWA's takeover of Hortex, which the UGW had first organized. Now, the representative said, he was there to see that the ACWA did not try to take over the 440 UGW members at the Top-Notch
plant. The ACWA denied attempting to raid, declaring that it was only organizing those who did not belong to a union. Whether union members at Top-Notch were already unhappy with the UGW leadership or the ACWA had truly been agitating among them is not totally clear. It was probably a combination of the two. Whatever the case, in 1964, workers at Top-Notch formed an independent union, a step necessary before they could be allowed to vote to join the ACWA the following year.

Events at Top-Notch the first week in February, 1963, indicated that plant workers wanted a change of some kind. The UGW had been the union for 450 members at the plant for sixteen years. And for years, Mrs. Marina de la Rosa had been president. But in the fall of 1962, a newly-elected male president was disqualified on grounds that he was not an American citizen. The next election results were again invalidated because Mrs. Bertha Madrid, the elected president, and the male vice-president were allegedly not American citizens. A group of twenty-five female union members then complained to Top-Notch grievance chairman Guillermo Aguirre, telling him that they planned to stop paying union dues since the UGW would not allow them to elect their own officers.

The women's complaint led to the firing of Aguirre and presented an opportunity for him to voice the workers' unhappiness with the UGW. The owner of Top-Notch, Ruben Cohen, reacted angrily to the grievance chairman's presentation of the women's complaint, calling him an "agitator" and demanding his credentials
as a union representative. Aguirre was fired at the end of the workday and told that the AFL-CIO representative, Emily Jordan, had disqualified his position as grievance steward. Aguirre, in turn, advised Cohen that he would be hiring a lawyer about the matter.

Aguirre then took the opportunity to express union members' dissatisfaction with the UGW leadership. He denied that elected union local officers were not American citizens and disputed contentions by the UGW international representative that workers in their union at Top-Notch made $1.50 to $3.00 an hour. He declared that union members were unhappy with Emily Jordan and wanted to quit the union but feared losing their jobs if they spoke out about it. Aguirre claimed that union and management at Top-Notch were "in cahoots" and that the union was not representing the workers adequately. Thus, in 1964, Top-Notch employees found themselves in an independent union waiting the required year before being allowed to join the ACWA.

How much truth was there to Aguirre's claim that the UGW and Top-Notch management were "in cahoots?" The UGW had been organized in 1891 by radical members of the umbrella labor group, United Hebrew Trades, unhappy with the neglect of garment workers in the men's clothing industry by the Knights of Labor and the AFL. Believing that American-born board members might find it easier to negotiate labor disputes, the United Hebrew Trades helped elect unwittingly a conservative board to direct the union.
This conservative executive board turned the union into a label selling monopoly, neglecting further organizing and opposing strikes because these interfered with the profits from selling union labels to garment firms in the South and Midwest. The infusion of new blood into the union after 1905, from Russian Jews escaping pogroms in their homeland, brought a resumption of organizing and a strike of New York tailors in 1916, which the UGW president sabotaged with an unacceptable behind-the-scenes agreement. This action and the formation of the ACWA in 1914 sealed the fate of the UGW, which lost members by the thousands. The UGW managed to remain in existence, despite its neglect of its members, through the continuing practice of selling labels indiscriminately.

The plant at Top-Notch had been unionized since 1947 and was the only union plant in 1963 in the whole of El Paso, although the NLRB was soon to restore the ACWA at Hortex. According to Maury Cohen, the owner's son and the manager of operations in 1965, when his father opened Top-Notch as a franchise of Levi-Strauss, he signed with a union because nationally Levi had a union contract. His father, Cohen said, could take unions or leave them. When Amalgamated won union elections in the fall of 1964, negotiations for a contract began but soon stalled. Top-Notch officials refused the ACWA's proposals in April, 1965, and the union called for a walkout. The company may have believed, as Maury Cohen said 29 years later, that they were caught in a raid by the ACWA.
Increased wages were only a part of the union proposal that Top-Notch officials would not accept from the ACWA in early 1965. After two months of stalled negotiations, the ACWA called for a walkout and on April 22, pickets were placed around the plant. The company claimed its employees were making $1.48 an hour, although the union grievance steward had denied this two years earlier, stating that workers made $1.15 an hour. What was probably as galling to the company as the demand for increased wages was having to "check-off" union dues and having to give shop access to an international union representative to investigate grievances. Of a total 550 workers at Top-Notch, between 300 and 400 members of Local 885 walked out in April.

The strike lasted ten weeks, the culmination of a union drive begun by the ACWA in 1963. Typical of the garment strikes involving Mexican American women in Texas, charges of violence by both sides characterized the strike. Mexican women from Ciudad Juarez complained to Mexican police of assaults by strikers on Mexican territory. Strikers sought an injunction to prevent their own arrest by Mexican police. News accounts gave evidence of violence on the part of both groups.

Many of the actions of strikers and non-strikers revealed frustrations felt by the two sides. Josephine Hernandez was fined five dollars and court costs for splattering eggs on Cecilia Bermudez as she sat in a car with her husband and child. Often the exchanges were only verbal, including obscenities in Spanish. A young strikebreaker recalled, "Well, at 18, I was very
They did not come one by one and tell you things. It was the whole bunch. So, I was afraid." The strike provided opportunities for those who did not like each other to vent their anger with words. Nonstrikers jeered that the strikers "se van a morir de hambre," or you're going to die from hunger, a very real possibility to many Mexican Americans. About verbal exchanges from strikers, Maury Cohen said, "...they would stand out there and holler disparaging remarks at them in Spanish....So they were screaming and hollering. It was very, very unseemly."

The Mexican American women strikers at Top-Notch soon responded to jeering from workers with rock-throwing. Margarita Reza faced a felony charge of malicious destruction of private property for throwing a rock at the windshield of a car belonging to a worker's sister. A day later, police ejected strikers from the area because of reports that they were throwing rocks at workers' cars. Of eight women strikers accused of throwing eggs, bottles, and a window crank at women applying for jobs at Top-Notch, three, Elvira Medina, Maria Elena San Roman, and Angela Holguin, all from El Paso, were charged but acquitted of assault by a judge who chastised both accusers and accused for their behavior and promised to "throw the book at them" if they were ever brought before him again.

In 1965 at Top-Notch, Mexican women non-strikers protested alleged beatings from strikers more publicly than in earlier garment strikes. A group of five women approached the police
chief of Ciudad Juarez asking for protection against strikers, who, they said, waited for them on the Mexican side at quitting time to beat them. They named Maria de Jesus Vargas and Margarita Reza as leading the attackers. Top-Notch strikers responded by applying for an injunction to prevent their own arrest by Mexican police, claiming that the Mexican women's charges were unjustified.

Mexican women workers defended themselves in the press by making further accusations against strikers. Mexican American strikers had accused the non-strikers of attacking them, for no other reason, they said, than to get them arrested. In a letter to a Mexican paper that had published the strikers' charges, two Mexican women Top-Notch employees blamed two male strikers for forming a gang of women strikers for the sole purpose of beating strikebreakers. The two Mexican women claimed that Maria de Jesus Vargas, Maria de Jesus Vasquez, Elvira Montes, and Margarita Reza headed a group of Top-Notch and Hortex workers organized just to go out and beat workers, even waiting for them outside their homes to insult them and try to tear their clothes off. The strikers, charged the two Mexican strikebreakers, also tried to get workers' family members to convince them to leave their jobs at Top-Notch. Manuela Olivos and Guillermina Estrada further claimed that some strikers wanted to return to work but had been threatened with being beaten or having relatives turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). They could only name one such person.
The Mexican American strikers at Top-Notch denied participating in violence against strikebreakers. In an interview, Maria de Jesus Vargas answered questions on the subject by saying, "I was never in that [violent incidents at Hortex]. Here [at Top-Notch] I participated very actively [in union activities] but not in those." Striker Tomasa Quinones said of violence during the strike, "Things happened to them [scabs]. We don't know why....[laughs]." But Vargas also acknowledged that rocks and bricks were often their response to seeing strikebreakers going in to work.

The violence did not always arise from the strikers' side. During the second week of picketing, worker Eva Gallardo was charged with aggravated assault for allegedly running down a picket with her car. A 44-year old male worker was jailed for throwing rocks at strikers on the sidewalk. Worker Manuel Moreno was enjoined by a district judge from further violence in a countersuit by the union. ACWA spokesman during the strike, Henry de la Garza, accused Ruben de la Rosa, Marina de la Rosa, the local's former president under the UGW, and Manuel Moreno of beating him with chains and sticks. He claimed to have spent two weeks in the hospital as a result and showed pictures of his condition to a Mexican newspaper. The accused three charged that de la Garza had started the fight by following them home.

A letter from 100 Top-Notch workers to police requesting protection from strikers sheds some light on the animosities
between the two groups. In the letter, the group asked the police chief of El Paso to intervene before the situation became worse and someone ended up badly hurt. They detailed abuses by strikers and sympathizers, listing threats, slashed tires, and damage to property, and accused police of doing nothing about idle strikers—those not on picket duty—who took part in the violence. The letter signers asserted their right to work.

According to the ACWA's national representative, the strike ended after ten weeks when Top-Notch officials agreed to accept four major issues in dispute. These included seniority, the "check-off" system of paying union dues whereby the company automatically withholds the amount from an employee's paycheck, the company's acceptance of the union, and shop grievance procedures for the union representative. Under the new contract, piece workers received increases of five, four, and two cents an hour, respectively, for the first, second, and third year, while time workers received a five cent an hour raise each year. Other benefits included a two week vacation after three years, rather than the previous five year wait, and an additional paid holiday after three years, hospitalization insurance to be paid entirely, instead of partially, by the company, and death benefits of one hundred dollars. To strikers like Tomasa and Alfrdo Quinones, it seemed a very good contract.
Characteristic of the garment strikes in the post-war period, the strike at Levi-Strauss in 1971 was called by the union when negotiations for a contract with the company stalled. The strike lasted a few weeks and originated when the company balked at renewing the gains that had been won in 1965. Tomasa and Alfredo Quinones believed that they as strikers had achieved significant improvements in their contract in 1965 at Levi's franchise, Top-Notch. Now known as Levi-Strauss, the company refused to recognize the old contract terms and to increase benefits that the ACWA was demanding in 1971, as the Quinones explained it.

In reality, the union in 1971 was attempting to increase or expand on benefits won in 1965. According to the union business manager and spokesman, the six hundred workers on strike in 1971 wanted increased wages, insurance coverage for their families, and an improved vacation package. In actual terms, the union was asking for an increase of 60 cents an hour to be paid over the next three years, in effect, a twenty cent per year increase. Considering that Levi-Strauss and Hortex were the only garment firms in El Paso that the ACWA had been able to unionize, the union was being very daring in pushing for increased benefits.

The 1971 strike at Levi-Strauss may have been of short duration simply because company officials witnessed a determined and very violent effort by strikers in the first few days of the strike. The anger and frustration that strikers felt when strikebreakers entered or left the plant manifested itself in
rock-throwing and bottle-throwing. Levi-Strauss followed the common policy of using company vehicles during a labor dispute to transport workers to the job and back. On July 19, a number of strikers, including eight women, attempted to open the doors of a van carrying workers home and to pull out those within reach. One woman worker was stabbed on the thigh with an ice pick by a woman striker, while other women workers complained that they had been injured when rocks, bottles, and broken glass hit them during the melee. Four units of police were sent to stop the disturbance, remaining to patrol the area after order was restored.

Although police presence at the plant was meant to keep things under control, the next day was a repeat of July 19th. Sixty police, including cadets from the police academy, guarded the plant and escorted workers home. In an attempt to prevent the repetition of the disturbing events of the previous day, the company loaded workers in a closed truck, which was then led out behind police cars. Other police dispersed a "hootling, rock-throwing mob of strikers and onlookers..." Police arrested three persons whom they claimed stood behind a fence calling them names and jeeringly claiming that police could not come behind the fence to arrest them. Two people, one of them a television newsman, had a car windshield broken in the rock-throwing, and a striker, Carmen Romero, was arrested for carrying a blackjack in her car. At least 300 people were involved in the incident.

As in 1965, the short strike of 1971 ended with a signed contract granting union demands, according to the Quinones. The
ACWA was well ahead in this instance. Since eighteen other garment plants in El Paso were not unionized, Amalgamated stood in a very precarious position overall. The union was determined to continue the attempt to unionize other plants and had begun months earlier to agitate for a union among workers at Farah plants.

El Paso had been anti-union for most of the twentieth century, as had most of Texas. Not that townspeople had not witnessed numerous labor strikes: railroad workers, electric carmen, smelter workers, laundry women, and meatpackers, as well as garment workers, had done their utmost to start labor movements in the area. The people of El Paso preferred to ignore them, choosing to see the strikes as resulting from the greed of unions wanting membership dues. The press had tended to downplay the importance of strikes, while at the same time focusing on the negative aspects, fueling anti-union sentiment in the process. The fact that many strikers were of Mexican heritage had done nothing to alter the negative perceptions of El Pasoans. Not surprisingly, support for the Mexican American strikers in the garment disputes of 1952, 1965, and 1971 was slight.

There were, nevertheless, occasional glimmers of pro-union elements during the three short strikes. In 1952, Local 509 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers voiced moral support for the strikers at Hortex and gave notice of its willingness to listen to the strikers' story and to do whatever it took to get for them their rights as workers. The ouster of Mine,
Mill from the CIO a few months earlier, for alleged Communists in its ranks, accounted for the assessment by the press that its involvement in the Hortex strikes meant "rough times" in El Paso. It may also account for the swiftness of the ACWA's organizer's declaration that other AFL unions had offered their support, as had the Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM), or Confederation of Mexican Workers.

The only clear expression of support for the Top-Notch strikers in 1965 came at a banquet honoring the bishop of El Paso when the visiting archbishop denounced the low wages paid in the city, claiming that all Americans deserved a living wage and that such a wage would result in more spending and thus benefit businesses too. He quoted Pope Leo XII on workers organizing to defeat greed. Support also came from other garment plant workers, if the Mexican women's charges that those beating them included Maria Elena Vargas and others from Hortex is correct. Similarly, support from outside the plant is suggested by the workers' letter to El Paso's police chief, in which they noted that strikers and their sympathizers had threatened them. Tomasa and Alfredo Quinones claimed that other unionists, including some from Mexican sindicatos or syndicates, showed support.

One Ciudad Juarez newspaper expressed definite support for the Top-Notch strikers. This paper reported sympathetically on de la Garza's beating, taking his version of the incident seriously, although it was one-sided. The paper also lauded the efforts of
the ACWA on behalf of the strikers, referring to the union's economic support of picketers during the strike. The Mexican paper noted that Mexican Americans in Texas were paid less than other workers in other states, concluding that that was why the strikers were asking for better wages. Despite all the disturbances during the strike, the paper alluded to the dignity with which the strikers were fighting for their cause. Other Mexican papers provided straightforward accounts of strike events.

In the Levi-Strauss strike, the shortness of the dispute made less discernible any support that might have existed. News accounts of the July twentieth incident noted that workers rode out amid jeers and rocks from a "mob of strikers and onlookers." The description implied that onlookers might have been union sympathizers if they joined in the taunting. Furthermore, when it required no financial expenditure on their part, county commissioners in 1971 were willing to accommodate the union in requesting additional helpers from the state to process welfare applications of several hundred families affected by the strike.

The Mexican American women strikers at Hortex, Top-Notch, and Levi-Strauss behaved very like the Mexican American women garment strikers had done in the 1930's and as they were to do at Tex-Son and Farah later. The women rejected the structured direction of events as put forth by the male-dominated ACWA. Oftentimes, they did so by using force on their immediate opponents, other Mexican-heritage women. Relying less on Mexican customs and traditions than women in the earlier strikes, they tended to choose, instead,
to vent their frustration with the situation by attacking strikebreakers.

Tex-Son: 1959, San Antonio

The change in the economy of San Antonio after the mid-fifties from labor intensive to capital intensive meant that the era of the small, individually-owned garment firm was long gone. The largest company had 500 employees, and the few other companies included Bernard Altmann, Jay-Ann, Texas Infants, Texas Tiny, and Juvenile. Because these companies made dresses, their employees still relied on the ILGWU for unionizing and contract representation. But unions, too, were seeing bad times. The post-war period was one of growing anti-union sentiment in both Texas and the nation, with newly-enacted right-to-work laws on the state level and the passage of Taft-Hartley Act and the Landrum-Griffin Act on the national level, restricting union activity.

Beginning in February, 1959, the labor dispute between the ILGWU members and Tex-Son in San Antonio continued until the fall of 1961 when the union, no longer able to afford the strike, discontinued weekly strike benefits. Marred by only a few violent incidents, the strike was dominated by a regional boycott of Tex-Son products and the union's attempts to "sell" the strikers to the public as hardworking mothers unjustly treated by the company. Given the chance by a ILGWU that was finally acknowledging their importance in the garment industry, the Mexican American women
exhibited unprecedented levels of leadership talent and union fervor. The ILGWU strictly directed strikers in traditional union practices, knowing that the outcome of the strike might well decide its own fate in Texas. But the efforts of neither the ILGWU nor the Mexican American women could overcome the resources available to Tex-Son, and that, in connection with the oversupply of unskilled labor, resulted in defeat for the strikers.

The strike at Tex-Son in 1959 began as did most garment strikes after WWII: the company refused to re-negotiate a contract at the expiration of the old one. After the strike began on February 23rd, the union charged that Tex-Son owner, Harold Franzel, had refused to renegotiate in order to break the union. As proof, the union cited memos by Franzel to workers in late January and early February, in English and Spanish, urging them to reconsider their union membership. The union also cited the hiring of former San Antonio Chamber of Commerce president, Theo Weiss, as the company lawyer. He was, the union local contended, a known union-buster.

Not denying other union charges that the company sent work outside Texas, Franzel presented a different version of the stalled contract negotiations. Tex-Son's owner repeatedly claimed that the company refused to agree to the "check off" system of deducting union dues. But a registered letter from the union representative to Tex-Son, sent two months before the strike and listing the changes desired in the new contract, mentioned nothing about a "check-off" system. Apparently, union dues
check-off was an established practice when Franzel was claiming that it was the issue in the 1959 strike.

Led by local union president Gregoria Montalbo, members of the negotiating committee quickly responded to the Tex-Son president's attempts to turn workers against the ILGWU's Local 180. Tongue-in-cheek, the committee members listed, in a letter to Franzel, what it would take for them to consider leaving the union. Besides the same pay as garment workers in the East and an end to sending out work to Mississippi, the committee told him:

And another paragraph you could put in that letter, Mr. Franzel, would say that from now on you will give us all the "fringe benefits" our Union gets for any other garment workers anywhere in America. That includes, Mr. Franzel, keeping the older workers on the job even though they may slow down a little bit (you know, the "fringe benefit" called "seniority") and paying us pensions when we retire (our Union's Retirement Fund "fringe benefit").43

The fourteen-member committee included ten Mexican American women and four Anglo women signing the letter.

The letter to Franzel showed not only quick responses and creative leadership skills by the Mexican American women, but also their awareness of their rights as workers. Part of the women's consciousness of their rights may have come from the ILGWU's head office. But, at least in the case of Montalbo, the knowledge was from personal experience, too. Montalbo had spent a short stint in 1955 at a highly organized plant in Chicago where she saw how solidarity among the workers created an atmosphere in which employees were treated better. With that experience under her
belt, Montalbo was more informed on what they could demand from Tex-Son.

Many of the events related to the 1959 strike at Tex-Son were union-directed. The ILGWU was well aware that the outcome of the strike could mean their own survival in the area. After the 1930's, the union movement in the city had been fairly quiet. The only other dispute prior to 1959 was with Bernard Altmann's, which the union won. But that contract had been in litigation for two years. The pro-business climate in Texas made it imperative for the ILGWU to direct strike events closely to try to ensure success.

The union, whether consciously or otherwise, made the theme of motherhood, so pervasive in the 1950's, the guiding ideology during the strike, and the major tactic became a regional boycott of Tex-Son and Tex-Sis products. The ideology underlay all the other tactics the union used, too. ILGWU members handed out leaflets in the form of a letter by a striker's child in which he implored other children to get their parents not to buy Tex-Son clothing. The union local prominently displayed an enlarged photo of a $9.12 check made out to Helen Martinez, particularly during parades, asking onlookers if they could feed their families on that kind of salary. Neither the company nor the union would admit to the period of work the check covered. The ILGWU also pictured Martinez and her children in the local union paper and in handouts with similar inquiries addressed to the mothers and fathers of San Antonio. The union went so far as to make a movie
entitled "Mother is on Strike" for distribution to other areas as a way to gain financial support for the strikers.

In at least one instance, the union paper seemed to lose sight of the women's role as workers in favor of their role as mothers. In an article on the strike kitchen committee, the paper extolled the committee chair, Dolores Herrera, known as Dona Lola, calling her work on the three-burner gas stove in a cramped, windowless room a "labor of love". The writer went on to describe Dona Lola's day as she provided breakfast and lunch for strikers in the long, hot summers of San Antonio. The paper claimed that strikers considered Dona Lola's meals to be better than the offerings of most restaurants in San Antonio. As an afterthought, the paper threw in at the end that the sixty-five year old woman had worked at Tex-Son for fourteen years and been in the ILGWU local since 1953, actively serving as vice-president of the San Antonio joint board, on the shop committee, and on negotiating committees.

Other activities which the union directed were aimed at enhancing the state and regional boycott against Tex-Son. Strikers handed out flyers asking shoppers not to buy company goods until the strike was settled. In one campaign, the union used a horse and buggy to demonstrate that "Tex-Son Wants to Take its Workers Back to the Horse and Buggy Days." One tactic that the union considered very successful was to release gaily colored balloons, with "do not buy Tex-Son" messages, in stores selling
Tex-Son clothing in San Antonio. The passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act, which San Antonio city officials interpreted to mean that picket signs at stores were illegal, left the union wary even about handbilling boycott messages, although the women continued to do it. The union representative later charged that handbilling was not as effective and that the prohibition of picket signs at stores cost them the strike.

Another successful tactic by the union which involved the strikers in orderly protest was the sponsoring of parades. Small parades which included members from other unions—in particular, one during the brewery workers' convention in San Antonio—were used by the union to show the support from labor. The largest parade was attended by 1000 union members from 60 locals, with music provided by the musicians' union. The AFL-CIO chose to end the parade at the Alamo, presumably for its historic significance. Speakers at the parade included a priest representing the archbishop, who advised the strikers to act peacefully, an AFL-CIO official; and a Mexican American city councilman. The union members carried placards and exhibited on a truck, a bigger than life-size reproduction of Helen Martinez' $9.12 paycheck. The response from Tex-Son's owner was to allude to "Communist parades".

Much as the union tried to keep strike events under control, it is apparent that the Mexican American women made some decisions on their own. A month into the strike, the strike committee urged the workers in a taunting letter to ask the company for a raise.
In a postscript, the committee mockingly said:

We also think you might get Tex-Son to give you a paid Holiday on Good Friday if most of you signed a petition like the one enclosed and give it to Paul (or Harold or Froggie [management]). We just don't see how they could turn you down after you've been so good to them, coming to work while we're on strike and everything.49

Attached was a prepared petition for the workers.

In another letter signed by the local's president, Montalbo, Tex-Son employees, jeeringly called "loyal workers," were given information on the company's continuing policy of sending work outside the area. In effect, the letter said, that while workers had been loyal, the company had not acted accordingly; it had kept sending work out to other parts of Texas and to Mississippi and Alabama, while at the same time laying off some workers. In the letter, the strike committee offered to provide addresses where the non-strikers could ascertain that work for Tex-Son was being done. The letter concluded, "Don't you think there's a chance that the Franzels are doubledealing you and the others they like to call 'loyal employees'?"

In a third letter sent by the strike committee and signed by Montalbo, the union members openly charged that one of their own co-strikers had been offered money to abandon the strike. Most of the letter was in the form of questions, two of which plainly challenged the non-strikers: "Don't you think they [company] can do as much for you [pay the rent, bills, babysitter]? Don't you think they owe you more for staying in the factory than they owe
someone who has been on strike two months?" The committee went on to question whether the workers could trust the company not to be "slipping her [Lilly Perez, the allegedly bribed striker] money on the side?" Because the strikers seemed to be skirting close to libel with such talk, it must be assumed that the letters were sent with the union's knowledge, if not its approval.

The union was able to control the behavior of union members by involving them in everyday strike duties. In the anti-union atmosphere of the 1950's, the ILGWU could not afford the national headlines that told of the violence in the early days of the strike. On the other hand, by 1959, the union was astutely using the media to garner support, even to the point of offering pictures of police actions during the disturbances in a pamphlet entitled, "Outrage in San Antonio."

The photographs of female unionists in police hands turned out to be a plus in the long run. Calling police actions "union busting", the San Antonio AFL-CIO council distributed 100,000 copies throughout the country, stressing the manhandling of women strikers by police. The pamphlet generally went to other labor groups, but its effectiveness can be judged by the large numbers of unionists willing to picket stores selling Tex-Son products.

The events that gave rise to "Outrage in San Antonio" took place in a two-day period during the first week of picketing. On February 25th, the non-striking workers at Tex-Son jeered at 180 strikers as two city policemen hired by the company stood guard. The next day, strikers responded with physical force against
workers guarded by police sent to reinforce the two company-hired officers. As patrolman Manuel Garza put it, the women "swung purses, threw eggs, cursed, kicked, pulled hair, kicked and clawed." One San Antonio paper called the confrontation a riot and noted that a patrolman had been knocked to the ground and Tex-Son president, Franzel, hit with an egg. The story and the arrest of six women for inciting a riot made national headlines.

The headlines brought 1000 onlookers to the events of February 27th. As fourteen policemen tried to keep order at the end of the workday, someone crashed a bottle against a departing car and the melee began. Of the police, a local paper said, "Nobody was on their side." Amid the struggles and catcalls, police managed to get workers to waiting cabs and off the plant premises. Several people were arrested, including Ofelia Bowers and her sister, Lucy Trevino, booked for drunkenness and disturbing the peace, and Emma Rodriguez, for throwing rocks. It was photos of Bowers and Trevino in awkward positions in police hands that made up a large part of the pictorial display in "Outrage in San Antonio."

There were other incidents of violence during the strike, but to a lesser extent than in the 1930's because the ILGWU sought to involve the women in other activities, such as leafletting, speaking publicly, and in parades, the movie, and committee work. Several women allegedly struck another woman applying for work at the plant, resulting in minor chest injuries. During a cursing
and screaming incident, Felipa Gonzales was arrested when Amparo Gutierrez accused her of using an umbrella to hit her. Workers often returned the favor: Alicia Suarez was fined five dollars and court costs for using abusive language to a picket. More seriously, Janie Lozano was severely beaten with an iron bar by a worker. The most touching photo from the Tex-Son strike of 1959 is that of Lozano with a bleeding, bandaged head.

Workers' responses to strikers' tactics towards them and vice-versa resulted in two quite interesting episodes in the Tex-Son dispute. As we have seen, in other garment strikes, Mexican American women had attempted to humiliate the opposition by undressing them in public. In 1959, at Tex-Son, when three workers charged three pickets, hitting them with little bags filled with an unidentified substance, the strikers retaliated by sending one of the attackers back in only her underwear. According to Sophie Gonzales, the ILGWU organizer, the workers had meant to beat her up but ended up being humiliated. As Gonzales related it, one policeman added to the woman's shame by waving her bra about afterwards.

The most interesting incident between the two sides was initiated by the workers and involved voodooism. Earlier confrontations and the hot summer of 1959 began to have its effect on workers who were no longer content to boo or egg on strikers from plant windows. Instead, in the middle of July, non-strikers hexed pickets by sending down dolls with pins stuck in them. One doll was dressed like Gonzales, with a black skirt, white blouse,
and sunglasses. It also had a noose around the neck. The next day, newsphotos showed Gonzales, holding one of the dolls and saying, "Voodoo is for the birds!" Nevertheless, for the Mexican American women, the incident could not be taken lightly. The cultural tradition of turning to a curandero or faith-healer in times of crises or to solve a problem prompted the women strikers to visit one for their own protection.

Activities initiated by Mexican American women did not always lead to violence. In early December, 1960, after some twenty months of strike, the ILGWU was forced to acknowledge defeat and stop weekly benefits of $20.00 to each picket. About eighty women of the 150 to 200 who had originally gone out on strike, led by the local's president Montalbo, chose to continue picketing the plant in close to freezing temperatures. The union paper eloquently described the actions of the women:

If they fainted from hunger on the picket line, that would be one thing. But, if they quit, they couldn't face themselves. That was why these mothers of San Antonio were walking a picket line before Christmas on St. Mary's, the street named for the Mother of Jesus...

The way the women saw it, they just could not give in to Theo Weiss, Tex-Son's union-busting attorney.

The women had not made the final decision to continue picketing without taking other action first. In September of that year, after the International began urging strikers to seek other jobs and cutting down on the payment of strikers' bills, a number of women signed a letter requesting David Dubinsky, president of
the ILGWU, to outline the regulations covering strike benefits. The women also asked for clarification of the entire strike situation, because, they said, they were receiving conflicting replies to their questions from local union officials. In a similar letter in 1962 to the international representative George Lambert, thirteen Tex-Son strikers, all women and only one Anglo, continued to demand the ILGWU’s position on the strike in writing. They also advised him of their decision to continue picketing and proudly declared that theirs had been a struggle for "every working person in Texas," because if the companies belonging to the Chamber of Commerce and the Texas Manufacturing Association were allowed to destroy their union, then they could do the same to others.

The close watch over strike events by the ILGWU limited the opportunities for decision-making of the Mexican American women but their large numbers in the industry had finally made an impact on the national organization, and it had chosen a Mexican American organizer, Sophie Gonzales. Gonzales grew up in a small town southwest of San Antonio, attending local schools where she enjoyed playing team sports. At eighteen she made the decision to move to San Antonio and look for work while living with a brother. The brother’s involvement in the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butchers of America Union influenced her decision to accept an organizer’s position with the ILGWU in 1949. Her work in a sweater factory in San Antonio had made her aware of the problems
facing garment workers in Texas.61

Gonzales had what it took, both mentally and physically, to be an organizer in a state with a history of racism, sexism, and anti-unionism. Cool and sharp-witted, Gonzales stood calm and alert during numerous trying incidents in the strike. In one instance, George Lambert, the ILGWU's representative, blunderingly confirmed company assertions that twenty union members had refused to strike. When presented with a company foreman's charge, Gonzales, retorted, "That's a lie [meaning the company's story]. There are only two union members still working." Thus, she refuted the company's statement while making it appear that Lambert's confirmation was just a misreading of a number. Her response to the voodoo incident was just as quick-witted, airily dismissing the importance of it to the press. Having grown up with the Mexican cultural tradition of curanderismo, she was concerned enough to seek out a faithhealer in response. She was astute enough, too, to present an unconcerned attitude to an Anglo readership all too ready to look down on Mexican American workers as an ignorant, superstitious lot.

Gonzales' talents and skills as an organizer were evident in other instances. In the tumultuous events of February 26 and 27, which the newspapers called riots, she continued parading with a protest sign, chewing gum, smiling, and talking to reporters. There was no doubt of her support for the strikers when she told news reporters, "That trouble yesterday was started by the 'scabs.' My strikers acted only in self-defense. Sure we're mad
today. Wouldn't you be if those people were screaming and cursing at you?" After a non-striker reported that she had been threatened over the phone with violence, Gonzales said, "I don't know why they want to act that way. We're fighting for them too." She blamed the events of the two days of "rioting" on workers: "It's them and their husbands." The strikers, in turn, looked up to her, recognizing her for picketing with them, for standing up for them, and for being there on the line from six in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Gonzales had a talent for getting along with varied personalities and groups, one that was surely very important for a union organizer in a pro-business city and state. The policemen assigned to the Tex-Son plant respected her, believing her to be fair-minded and ready to apologize if necessary. In return, police escorted her out of the plant if need be and restored strikers' parking places when she protested their removal. Likewise, she got along with reporters by responding readily to their questions, especially about the violence on which newsmen often focused. Once asked to justify the "screaming and carrying on" of strikers, she said, "We want to scare the 'scabs' and let them know how we feel about their working." In a few words, Gonzales succinctly summed up strikers' motives without alienating a press that had so much influence over people's perceptions.

Although there can be no doubt that Gonzales had the mental capabilities to be the successful organizer that she, in fact,
was, realistically one must consider that her physical appearance played a role in her acceptance by police and the press. In an article, a reporter described her as "a large but well-proportioned woman with light black hair and high-school girl eyes." He went on to say, "At 37, she has a son, 13, and looks like she just broke her 30th birthday." Gonzales' picture appeared several times in the newspapers during the 22-month strike. The emphasis in the 1950's on "womanly" women must have made her, with her high heels, black skirts, and white blouses, and her sunglasses and parasol, an appealing sight to male reporters and police assigned to the case at Tex-Son.

The large numbers of Mexican American women in the industry and the acknowledgment of that fact by the ILGWU resulted in most of the strike committees being headed and staffed by Mexican American women. In the Tex-Son strike, for the first time, Anglo women joined Mexican American women on the same side. At Tex-Son in 1959, in fact, women led all but the finance committee. Furthermore, as noted earlier, Gregoria Montalbo was the president of Local 180. Helen Martinez took control as picket captain, Dolores Herrera [Dona Lola] as head of the kitchen committee, Eunice Burkett as Community Relations chair, Irene Zimmerle as chair of the House Visiting Committee, and Agnes Guerrero as head of the committee on baby sitting. Montalbo also served as overall picketline committee chair.

Many of the public duties during the strike fell to Montalbo as the local's president. She often shared spokesperson chores
with Gonzales. She related her experience in a unionized shop in Chicago to explain to a reporter why the workers at Tex-Son had to stand up to the union-busting tactics of the company attorney. Montalbo responded to Franzel's declarations that sales were up at Tex-Son during the boycott by saying, "If he wasn't losin' he wouldn't be braggin'." In discussing the strike with a magazine reporter, she attributed the difficulty of organizing in San Antonio to the oversupply of Mexican workers and added, "I don't blame 'em, but it's hurting us."

One of the most important duties that Montalbo carried out as president was to seek financial help from other sources to complement what the ILGWU was putting into the strike as well as to get moral support from other organizations. As president of the local, she led the strike committee in approaching other local presidents to request an opportunity to speak to each union about aid for the strikers. After the ILGWU stopped weekly benefits to strikers in the fall of 1960, Montalbo presented the women's decision to continue picketing to the AFL-CIO council and asked for help in spreading the word about the plight of those who had decided to hold out.

As president of the local and head of the strike committee, Montalbo also wrote to other locals for aid with maintaining the struggle. In one letter she appealed to other unionists for help in keeping the boycott alive. In it, she stressed the almost hopeless situation at which the strikers had arrived, but also
conveyed their determination to continue. The strike committee chair sent a special message to workers at Juvenile Manufacturing Company, the largest garment plant, asking them to join the union and support the strike. In her capacity as president, Montalbo wrote to the clergy of San Antonio, requesting that they study the situation at Tex-Son, offering them information on the strike, and asking for copies of any comments on the strike that the ministers might decide to make.

The regional boycott instituted by the ILGWU against Tex-Son and Tex-Sis clothes and everyday strike duties created numerous opportunities for the Mexican American women unionists to participate publicly in the strike cause. Women wearing banners announcing the strike passed out informational bulletins at manufacturing concerns. Others carried placards at local stores requesting shoppers not to purchase Tex-Son products. The strikers distributed handbills with the same message at other sites, and while the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 put a damper on placard carrying, leafletting by the women continued, as did balloon distribution. It can be assumed that when the labor paper mentioned union representatives who "have circulated the labor movement throughout Texas and aligning states asking union members and the general public not to buy Tex-Son...," the paper was including the Tex-Son strikers.

Normal strike duties involving the Mexican American women in public actions ranged from picketing, parading, taking part in the movie "Mother is on Strike," to a bucket brigade of women strikers
asking for donations, and public speaking. Strikers and their families, along with union staff, were the actors in the film. The movie showed actions from the strike, accompanied by music from a recording of religious songs. The women collecting money in their buckets raised almost ten thousand dollars before the national leadership of the ILGWU became embarrassed by what some considered begging and stopped it. Some women spoke to other locals, asking for financial support, and at least one of them spoke to the press about the bad effects the open-shop law in Texas had on unionizing.

Support for the Tex-Son strikers in 1959 was more open than it had been in El Paso in the three short strikes. City councilman Albert Pena, whose brother, Richard, was the union attorney, spoke at the large union parade at the Alamo. As noted earlier, the archbishop of San Antonio sent Father Sherrill Smith on various occasions to encourage the strikers in their struggle. The biggest expression of support came from organized labor across Texas and the western U.S., as well as from the CTM in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. The union paper and one Mexican paper wrote favorably about the strike and were sympathetic about police mistreatment of strikers.

Support of the strike from the labor movement in Texas and the country was expressed in varied but meaningful ways. Brewery workers, meeting in convention in San Antonio, also took part in parading the plant. Union members from locals in the Central
States Region—the Midwest, Great Plains, and Texas—"adopted" Tex-Son strikers' children and provided them with Christmas presents as well as a union Santa. Unions in Texas and elsewhere contributed financially. A list of those contributions from Texas, but outside of San Antonio, during April, 1959, ranged from $6.20 from a carpenters local in Longview, Texas, to $542.31 from a steelworkers union in Houston, Texas.

The biggest show of support from other unionists came in the form of leafletting and picketing of stores carrying Tex-Son goods throughout Texas and the western U.S. Locals in major cities in the Midwest, West, and Southwest carried out what the ILGWU called "informational picketing" of stores to ask customers not to purchase Tex-Son and Tex-Sis garments made by strikebreakers. Union members also picketed buyers' showings with similar messages. Those who participated in such demonstrations often wrote to the San Antonio ILGWU members to let them know how successful they felt they had been with their "don't buy" campaigns. ILGWU reports indicated a very good success rate with the boycott.

The publication by the AFL-CIO council in San Antonio of the pamphlet entitled "Outrage in San Antonio" seemed to have played a large part in arousing unionists to help with the boycott. The AFL-CIO produced 10,000 copies and distributed them all over the country but particularly to laboring groups. The pamphlet contained pictures of police arresting strikers, especially photos of events on February 26 and 27, with captions which read
"Throwback to Terrible Thirties" and "Defenseless Women Manhandled on Garment Workers Picket Line at Tex-Son Factory." A picture of a smiling Harold Franzel was captioned with "This Boss Laughs out Loud" and placed next to a picture of a woman striker on the ground, with the words, "as this girl writhes in pain" written over it. Helen Martinez's now well-known paycheck for $9.12 was reproduced in the pamphlet. Stories about support from other labor groups and from the Church were included. In a period of anti-unionism, as the 1950's was, such an emotional appeal was likely to have a big impact among union members throughout the country.

The AFL-CIO council aided the Tex-Son strikers in other ways. The assistant director was a featured speaker at the huge downtown parade, where he told strikers that theirs was a struggle for self-respect. The secretary treasurer of the council led local unions in picketing and leafletting downtown stores as part of the boycott. The council sent out letters to locals urging them to contribute to the cause of "Help the Tex-Son Strikers Month" during March. Several months later, the council was still asking unions to help out Tex-Son strikers. This help from the council is representative of the type of support that the women were getting from labor groups.

Support for the strikers came from the Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) in Nuevo Laredo and from a Mexican newspaper which applauded the CTM's actions. The Nuevo Laredo
CTM's position was criticized by another Mexican paper which claimed that in placing a banner across the international bridge asking Mexican shoppers going into Laredo, Texas, not to buy Tex-Son products, the Nuevo Laredo CTM was contravening a long-held principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of another country. The paper went on to suggest that CTM leader, Pedro Perez Ibarra, had taken the action to embarrass Mexican officials precisely when the theme of non-intervention was under discussion at a conference of nations in Santiago, Chile. The paper claimed, too, that Perez Ibarra's banner had not succeeded in getting Mexicans to boycott the three Laredo stores carrying Tex-Son goods and called him a troublemaker.

The Mexican paper reporting favorably on the incident at the bridge included its opinion of events at Tex-Son. The now famous photos of police arresting Mexican American women strikers at Tex-Son were reproduced by the paper with the declaration that such pictures needed no comment. The paper, then, went on to describe the incidents of February 26 and 27 as "savagery against women" and concluded that armed, brute force by police had been used to trample on the women's right to demand a collective agreement from the company. In its article, the paper quoted Perez Ibarra on placing the banner at the bridge as "an act of solidarity and in compliance with resolutions adopted by the convention of the Rio Bravo International Pact..." The paper openly called the banner incident a humane act in the face of attacks on the dignity of working people.
Both the local labor paper and the national ILGWU paper, *Justice*, wrote positively about the Tex-Son strikers. The local labor press stressed the role of the strikers as mothers, often at the expense of their status as workers. The actions of the strikers were always painted in favorable terms, and support from the labor movement was described in eulogistic terms, perhaps deservedly so, since it was extensive. Opponents were pictured in a very negative light. Strikebreakers were described as being "coddled" by the establishment. Theo Weis, the Tex-Son attorney, was never discussed without the description 'union-buster' attached. The ILGWU paper, *Justice* was also published in Spanish, with positive news of the strike.

By the fall of 1961, the union knew that defeat was inevitable and near. It began to let strikers know that strike benefits would be terminated by the end of the year, and, although 80 women refused to give up and continued to picket until early 1962, the strike, in effect, had been lost. The strikers had faced up to Tex-Son for 22 months, some for more, but anti-unionism and the over-supply of low-skilled workers in the area gave the edge to Tex-Son's Franzel and he was able to outlast the determination of the Mexican American women.

The strike at Tex-Son followed a familiar pattern set by the earlier garment strikes, but at the same time contained some unique elements. The ILGWU, as a long-established, well-structured union, sought to contain the situation through planned
activities, including a regional boycott of company products. In this last-ditch effort by the ILGWU to keep the labor movement alive in Texas, however, the garment union made some changes from the 1930's strikes in San Antonio. For one, the ILGWU for the first time had a Mexican American organizer in charge. For another, the Mexican American women dominated the chair positions of the strike committees. The presence of Sophie Gonzales as organizer combined with the large number of Mexican-heritage women in the industry led to more public participation of the women even while the ILGWU tried to keep the situation under control through a male union representative.

Farah: 1972-74, El Paso and San Antonio

The 1972 strike at Farah Manufacturing Company by Mexican American women members of the ACWA lasted twenty-two long months. Under the strict direction of the national union, the strike was characterized, not by violence, although this element was not absent, but by a nation-wide boycott, propagandized by the union as a Mexican American struggle for honor and dignity. The behavior of the Mexican American strikers, sometimes reflected in the actions of a rank and file committee, indicated that for many of them, the conditions of work at Farah called for more than traditional union responses: they truly saw the labor dispute as part of the Mexican American movement for social justice. The unprecedented support generated for the strikers from many elements in American society brought victory against Farah in
February, 1974.

Even as the ACWA went on strike against Levi-Strauss in El Paso, the union began organizing efforts among the shipping and cutting department workers at Farah in both the El Paso and San Antonio plants. Although Mexican American women constituted 85% of Farah's workforce, the men in the shipping, cutting, and machine shops, who had undergone experiences outside El Paso, particularly through army service and tours in Vietnam, began to raise concerns about their work situation. This, coupled with opportunities to talk freely at male social events, ultimately resulted in contact with the ACWA, which then began handing out union materials at Farah in El Paso in 1969 and soon thereafter in the San Antonio plants.

Lebanese immigrants Mansour and Hana Farah's shirt factory in 1920 originally had four workers and three sewing machines in a rented room in downtown El Paso. From the start, the Farahs regarded their employees as family, and Hana expressed this sentiment by placing radios around the work areas. Defense contracts during World War II brought enough profits to expand the concern, so that by 1971, the company had 9500 workers, a $40 million payroll, and net profits of $6 million. By that time son, Willie, had taken charge of the whole operation, which included five plants in El Paso, two in San Antonio, two in other U.S. sites, and two elsewhere in the world.
The growth of the company from a small-time operation to the largest civilian employer in bordertown El Paso created a paternalistic and super-patriotic Willie Farah. Stories about Farah’s patriotism were legendary. When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission forced him to hire Mexican workers with labor permits, he commented, “It's the worst form of treason for the American businessman to use foreign labor to the detriment of American labor. Our responsibility is to the American worker. This country gives us everything and we're gratified to live here.” Farah, the superpatriot, refused to use anything made in a foreign country: he would not play tennis with a friend using English balls and he had the framework of a new house redone after learning that it had been made with Swedish-made nails. He considered unions as Communist-inspired and thus un-American. In contrast to his own management style, he saw, “Unions aren't benevolent and never have been.” Farah's superpatriotism combined with his patronismo to make him determined never to accept a union.

Farah’s paternalism, engendered by the success of the family business that now included five plants employing thousands of workers, was expressed as openly as his patriotism. Following the tradition set by Hana, Willie in 1971 saw himself as a benevolent employer presiding over a family concern, even though his plants were so big that management had to bicycle from one part to another. A personal handshake at Christmas, free coffee and rolls at breaktime, and free transportation to and from work were some
of the perks Farah offered to workers. Other extras included free medical care on the premises, free life insurance, paid holidays, medical benefits, a pension, and supposedly higher wages than other garment plants and higher than the minimum wage. But the Farah plants in El Paso in 1971 had close to 10,000 employees, and many of them wanted job security and respect rather than the perks offered by el patron Farah.

Although wage increases were an element of the dispute between Farah and the strikers, the issue went beyond actual money, just as the strike went beyond tangible conditions of work to include respect, dignity, and basic human rights. Wage complaints included arbitrary quota standards that created stress, tensions, and extreme competition among workers. One worker had a ready response to supervisors' questions about his absence from his workplace: "I could always say I was ahead of my quota..." He understood, however, the stress he placed on others when he surpassed quota levels:

But, the bad thing was, what I was doing was trouble for the people around me. See, on the zipper stop machine, the quota was 180 a day in 1960 and the supervisor said, 'If you do more, I'll give you a raise.' And so I did more, first 190 and then 200 and so on until 220. But that was way high, see. But they always made the quota more because I could do that because I was young and wanted the raise. It put more pressure on the others.

Another instructive example of how the quota system worked and how it affected many of the women employees is that of Consuelo Munoz, a belt setter. After 8 years at the Paisano Drive
Munoz asked for an increase, only to be told that she could have it if she would raise her daily output. When Munoz had begun as a belt setter, she was expected to complete 18 bundles a day at five dozen pairs of pants in a bundle, or 1080 garments. By the time of the strike, she had to make 25 bundles or 1500 pairs of pants a day. In the meantime, the company had switched to making doubleknit slacks, which slowed the workers down because they had to make sure the material did not "bubble up." According to Munoz, many who had previously made 20 bundles a day fell to 13 and 15, and "The supervisors were 'really giving it to us' until we could get back up to 22 or so bundles a day." Thus, the quota system was not just a production goal, but used to heighten competition among workers.

The case of Munoz was instructive in another way; it showed why the strikers considered their walkout as much a matter of self-respect as a desire for material gain. As she told it, after four years at Farah, she left the job for a short period, only to return and be expected to do the same bundle quota although she was out of practice. She reached the quota of 24 to 25 bundles daily after she was given three days to do so or be fired. The old attitudes and practices resumed. If a worker was unable to do more than twenty bundles a day, supervisors were there to push them. In Munoz's case, her pay remained the same after her absence, but other women who left on maternity leave returned as beginners at less pay. Numerous workers at Farah, including an
office worker, recounted similar stories.

Workplace conditions involved much more than clean toilets and shining floors; for many Farah employees, conditions were so unbearable that free coffee and rolls, Christmas parties and presents, and personal handshakes from Willie Farah could not make up for the resulting loss of self-respect. Charges by strikers about plant conditions ranged from intimidation by supervisors in front of co-workers, to favoritism, to indifferent medical attention at the plant clinic, to sexual discrimination and harassment by shop floor higher-ups. These coupled with lack of job security, a savings system that earned interest for the company only, inadequate health insurance coverage, and lack of union representation, led to the resentment that fueled a two-year-long strike. As one women striker put it:

And we could be laid off at the will of the company.
...Plus they were always changing our quotas. We had to do something. It was mostly pride. They tried to step all over us.91

Intimidating treatment at the hands of supervisors, often for not achieving quota levels, was a daily possibility. Floor supervisors continually raised quota rates, demanding more production through threats or innuendo. Workers were told they would be fired if they could not meet quota levels. When a worker did not meet a quota, she was questioned by supervisors about the reason, at times until that person ended by blaming herself for not meeting a quota standard set by a company intent only on increasing production. No activity that would interfere with
production quotas was permitted, and anyone who dared to talk during worktime or go to the women's room had to explain herself to supervisors, who were men. Verbal tongue-lashings sometimes accompanied questionings by management. Many women ended up in tears. Because women saw even long-time workers fired after such incidents, they took seriously a supervisor's demands.

In a plant where a seniority system was absent, favoritism was likely to occur, and the situation at Farah was no different. Raises were few, far between, and small, and went to those not considered to be troublemakers. Virginia Delgado, a striker, saw raises going to people she felt were "chumming up with their supervisors..." Another striker believed that supervisors gave better hours and better shifts to those they favored. One striker concluded that workers given prizes at the annual Christmas parties were pre-selected, going to "people they like..." A cook at one plant attributed her lack of pay increases to the same cause, "I asked but...there's lots of favorites." The issue of favoritism was compounded by differences between supervisors and workers: Anglo male supervisors managed an 86% female and 95% Mexican American workforce; when Farah began hiring Mexican American supervisors, they were young men from the workline, now being put in charge of women older than themselves and with more experience.

Some workers perceived gender discrimination and sexual harassment at Farah as well. One striker gave her reason for
joining the walkout as anger that after working at three of Farah's plants and teaching newcomers sewing techniques, she could not look for advancement to a supervisory post because Willie Farah had only males in those positions. Although other workers did not voice their concerns in such clear terms, some mentioned having to return to starting pay after leaving for a pregnancy. Others talked of how they were forced to quit at seven months of pregnancy, no matter their physical or financial condition. One woman recalled lying about how much time she had left before delivery, with her own doctor acquiescing in the lie, in order to remain on the job as long as she could and not lose bonuses. The dissatisfaction with this type of discrimination manifested itself during the strike in the demand for maternity benefits.

When workers spoke of sexual harassment, they most often defined it in terms of favoritism. Many workers felt that the prettier female workers or those who went out with supervisors got raises even if they did not meet quota levels. One striker told of a worker being demoted in favor of a "new girlfriend." Another striker who agreed that the supervisor's favorites had the better shifts and did less work declared: "There was a lot of favoritism from the first day I worked at Farah. If you were prettier and sexier, that was one of the favorites. If you were ugly, well, like me, and everything, well, big deal, here's your badge." According to one striker, things were so bad that the company had a reputation as an unacceptable place for a wife, daughter, or sister to work, and single women lied about their place of
employment to single men so as not to be labelled loose. To a local priest, to whom women workers confided their experiences, it was a moral problem of poor women offered economic improvement in return for sexual favors.

Strikers and some non-strikers often mentioned the indifferent and unprofessional care from the plant doctors and nurses when asked about conditions at Farah prior to the walkout. The main concern of plant health care personnel was to get workers back on the job. One woman spoke of having a sister with kidney pain faint at work and be taken to the hospital after the company doctor sent her back with assurances that she was not sick. Another was told by the plant doctor that she had an inflammation that could be cured with medicine and douches after she complained of severe stomach pain. It turned out that she was pregnant and had a hernia. One rumor held that a woman had died from an allergic reaction to medicine given by the plant doctor, but that the incident had been hushed up. Although the story may not have been true, another striker claimed she developed an allergy to penicillin from all the shots she got at the clinic for her muscle spasms. The doctors prescribed the same pill for any complaint, from a stuck needle to a headache. A striker called them "good pills to make you feel happy enough to return to work."

Nurses behaved unprofessionally at the Farah clinics as well. Lillian Sanchez never forgot the laughter from the nurse and doctor when she refused a pelvic exam because she was a virgin.
Workers complained that the nurses would get angry with them if they thought a worker was going to the clinic too often. Women workers told their parish priest that nurses betrayed to others their personal physical ailments. Like the doctors, nurses were patronizing towards workers and placed the company's interests ahead of the workers' health.

The walkout in May, 1972 was a surprise to Amalgamated. The union had been attempting to organize workers at Farah in El Paso since 1969, when male workers from the shipping department had asked for help in unionizing the plant. No women had been involved in the pre-1969 efforts because informal union talk took place at ball games that women did not attend. Furthermore, as one early male organizer put it, the women at work were segregated from male workers and even had different lunch and break times. After the male shipping, cutting, and mechanic departments stepped up their campaign of recruitment, women workers participated as much as they could, under the watchful eye of plant supervisors, ready to stop any unionizing effort before it could spread.

Because of Farah's rabid anti-unionism, much of the organizing that followed the women's entrance into the effort was necessarily of a clandestine nature. The women persisted by talking to co-workers in the bathroom or at hurried meetings in the halls. The most frequent means of communicating with each other about the union was in lunchtime conversations. Some women went to peoples' homes to further unionizing efforts. Harsh responses by the company served to frighten many but reinforced
the shame and anger of others, and thus prepared them for the events of early May, 1972.

By then, the unionizing activities at Farah had begun to come out into the open. Union members from some of the El Paso plants planned a rally that Farah workers in San Antonio wanted badly to attend to meet their fellow unionists. According to Janie Naranjo from San Antonio the mechanics there had played a large role in organizing efforts, and when the company learned about the proposed trip to El Paso for the first weekend in May, management ordered them to work on Saturday. The union members resolved the problem by deciding that sewing operators would attend the rally and with them went a bundle handler who chose to skip work for the trip. The publicity in El Paso on the rally produced some photographs of the bundle handler in front of a parade of union members, and he was promptly dismissed by the company on Monday.

The firing of Paul Garza by Farah's management in San Antonio became the spark for a walkout of 2000 to 3000 workers at plants in El Paso, hundreds in San Antonio, and numerous others at the Victoria, Texas and Las Cruces, New Mexico plants. Six unionist mechanics approached Farah managers in San Antonio demanding an explanation of the dismissal of Garza and were, in turn, fired themselves. Operators, learning from other mechanics of the firing, began to turn on the yellow lights above their machines indicating a breakdown and the need for a mechanic. The women
and mechanics made a decision that at three o'clock a group would try again for an explanation of the situation, but supervisors' attempts to keep people out of the office turned the tide, and the workers walked out. Seven days later, on May 9, 1972, workers in El Paso joined them in protest.

The walkout in San Antonio on May 2, 1972, posed problems for the ACWA. The union had been in the process of beginning legal action against the company with a petition for a vote to the NLRB. The women at Farah in El Paso played a key role in the decision of the ACWA to back the strike with all of its resources. When Farah workers in El Paso learned of events in San Antonio, they, too, went out without consulting union officials. In the intimidating atmosphere at Farah, workers who saw seemingly satisfied veteran women employees walk out, felt encouraged to do the same, and over several days, hundreds left their workplaces to join the strike. For the ACWA, with several thousand workers out, the situation took on greater importance as a test of its survival in the Southwest, and the union gave local organizers and representatives in El Paso and San Antonio the go-ahead.

Although there would be events that stood out during the next two years of the strike and subsequent boycott, the situation soon settled into a struggle for the minds of the U.S. public and into a continuous round of suit and countersuit between Farah and the union. As had happened in other labor disputes, the company and union offered differing versions of the cause for the dispute. The ACWA told reporters that Farah had engaged in unfair labor
practices, the most recent being the discharge of three employees who were members of the organizing committee in San Antonio. Once the walkout became a full-fledged strike, the ACWA listed low wages, job security, favoritism, quotas, increased benefits, and union recognition as the reasons for the workers' protest.

The company version differed totally. Company officials in San Antonio lost no opportunity in painting the union as the ogre by calling the walkout "a desperate attempt on the part of a union to disrupt operations at Farah," even though the walkout had been spontaneous on the part of union members. An estimated 3000 workers, out of a total of about 12,000 in El Paso and San Antonio, joined the walkout, but the company insisted that only 12% of the workers wanted a union. Management called national union officials "professional organizers" who wanted fewer jobs available in El Paso. The company's version became an article of faith to pro-Farah El Pasoans, who saw the strike as the ACWA's way of enriching itself through the check-off system of collecting union dues.

For the striking Farah employees, the dispute soon took on the aspect of a struggle for dignity and respect; they came to believe that they could have both if their union were recognized. The ACWA itself was quick to take up a vision of the contest as a Mexican American fight for human dignity and basic rights. The impact of ethnic movements from the 1960's played an important role, and the ACWA could not fail to see how such propaganda would
increase support from many Americans. For the next two years, ACWA flyers, leaflets, news programs, and public speeches focused on that theme.

For many strikers, the transformation of the strike into a struggle for Mexican American rights was more than a propagandatool; they saw their protest as part of the larger ethnic movement. At a rally five days after the first group walked out, strikers shouted "Viva la Raza," among other slogans. Picket signs at plant sites alluded to discrimination against Mexican Americans by Farah. Some strikers voiced ethnic concerns about dignidad in personal terms: the woman who was not allowed to stay with her hospitalized child called the strike a matter of pride; a woman striker considered it embarrassing to have to explain to supervisors every visit to the ladies room; a male striker expressed bitterness at seeing a worker of 18 years fired for touching a foreman's sleeve. The bishop of El Paso summed up their feelings well when he referred to the strike as a demand for social justice.

The ACWA made good use of the strikers' ethnicity to garner nationwide support through its flyers. In a call for food, clothing, and children's toys, the union echoed the bishop's words on social justice and termed its request as being for "...3000 Mexican-American Farah workers on strike for justice and dignity." Another flyer with a similar appeal was simply entitled "Mission: Justice." This particular flyer went on to state: "3000 Mexican-American workers are....Striking for a measure of decency and
security on the job. The right to human dignity..." An appeal for Christmas card orders to benefit the strikers embraced the union's tactic by picturing the strike as a courageous act of 3000 Mexican-Americans "...Struggling to attain the simple human rights that are enjoyed as a matter of course by millions of other workers...justice, dignity and freedom...."

After the ACWA instituted a boycott of Farah pants, it stepped up propaganda presenting the strike as part of the Mexican American movement, expressing in the process its own ethnic and gender biases. Flyers seemed to imply that Mexican American workers had never before resisted their oppression, although the ACWA itself had led strikes of Mexican American women in El Paso in 1953, 1965, and 1971. The 1973 Christmas card by a committee for Farah strikers showed a female child clinging to the hand of an adult male, and the explanation on it emphasized that her father was a striker, but in fact the majority of strikers were women. Nevertheless, the union's strategy was quite effective.

A large part of the reason that the two year strike at Farah settled into a routine of company versus union propaganda and legal battles was that the ACWA, after more than fifty years of existence, was the quintessential bureaucracy and kept careful control of events through local union officials. In El Paso, the ACWA placed Antonio "Tony" Sanchez in charge, while Jose and Joan Suarez, along with Jose Perales, managed events in San Antonio. The success of these four at keeping control, and their frequent
inclusion of male strikers in public appearances to retain their loyalty, left the impression in the public mind that men were the leaders of the strike.

In actuality, many rank and file union members believed that the union did not fully represent or understand them. Women did not seem to feel the need to have leaders; when asked about leadership during the walkout, one woman responded that no one person was a leader, "...Cause we weren't led out, we led other people out." After a contract was signed in 1974, ending the strike, some workers complained that the union had not expanded the boycott to more militant tactics and to include social issues. Indeed, a number of women and a few male strikers formed a group they later called Unidad Para Siempre, or Unity Forever, in an attempt to make the union more democratic and affect the direction of the strike.

The implementation of a nationwide boycott against Farah pants expanded the strikers' regular picketing duties and their exposure to the public. Local union officials relied on male strikers and on union members from Hortex for public activities. But, because Mexican American women made up 85% of Farah's workforce and, as a result, the majority of strikers, women had to take on a heavy load of the picketing of plants and stores. The union was able to maintain control through male picket captains, who closely associated themselves with union officials, and through directives on picketing behavior. In El Paso, none of the picket captains were women and in San Antonio, only Margie Quesada
While some of the women strikers may have enjoyed the public exposure that store picketing gave them, others hated it, and many recounted negative memories of their experiences. A woman picket considered it the worst period for her, as older Anglo women "pinched or knuckled" them outside department stores. Another woman striker remembered "so many humiliations we went through and lots of ugly things they said to us..." in telling how a woman threw a leaflet back in her daughter's face and how a nonstriker demanded she take back a flyer put inside her car. Virginia Delgado, whom other women considered a leader and whom California supporters wrote a song to and about, echoed similar sentiments of humiliation and distaste for store picketing. She eventually gave it up, believing that if she ever again experienced an Anglo spitting in her face, she would not be able to answer for the consequences.

Despite union directives to pickets and leafletters to refrain from responding in kind to verbal and physical attacks, there were accusations from the company of violence against workers by strikers. Incidents of violence were few and far between, however. Janie Naranjo, from the San Antonio plant, related an episode of picketers' frustration at the beating of a male co-striker:

They [workers] just, they were, they started cussing us out and stuff and it was just a verbal fight at the beginning and then when we started swinging our picket signs they started seeing that we were
The women at Farah in El Paso denied that they took part in such violence; one woman claimed that if there were any such thing, it was the men who participated and would know about it.

As the strike settled into a routine of propaganda and NLRB suits, the ACWA used parades to involve strikers who in other times had often resorted to unsanctioned activities. In their first march in El Paso, strikers carrying signs alleging company abuses and chanting in English and Spanish, heard state representative Paul Moreno offer his support. One thousand marchers participated in the rally which had four male speakers to encourage the protesters. A week later, three hundred attended a similar type march and rally in San Antonio, where the Reverend Sherrill Smith called the strike a "do it yourself thing" in which the participants would not be getting help from major institutions such as the church and state. At another San Antonio rally and march in July, the strikers listened to male speakers, including Catholic Bishop Patrick Flores and a state senator, affirming their support and counseling them against violence. Only in one rally in El Paso was a woman, Termutiz Gonzales, given the opportunity to speak on her reasons for going on a hunger strike. But at that same rally, Cesar Chavez spoke to the crowd and any leadership qualities exhibited by Gonzales were overshadowed by Chavez' presence. Parades and rallies served to channel the strikers' enthusiasm in approved ways, but, as in earlier strikes, male speakers dominated.
The boycott against Farah offered one of the few means for the Mexican American women strikers to affect the character of the strike. The decision to allow women to make public speeches did not arise out of a sudden open-mindedness by the ACWA but because of public requests for women strikers to speak about conditions at Farah. Of six strikers speaking to a University of Texas-El Paso student interviewer, four were women who articulated clearly their anger at the treatment of workers at Farah. The women who went on public speaking tours found the experience a positive one from which they learned about themselves and people in general. One striker marvelled at how her experience at Farah was one she shared with hundreds of other workers of other ethnic groups, something she learned from speaking before Mexican Americans and Anglos in California and Blacks in New York. Some strikers noted that they went on speaking engagements arranged by the rank and file and not by the union.

Many of the Mexican American women strikers at Farah ended up doing the day-to-day chores associated with being on strike. Though they were not given the chance to show that they could be picket captains, they had to picket their allotted hours a week or forego their weekly benefits. As picketers, they often resorted to verbal spats with strikebreakers and non-strikers as they scrupulously attempted to follow ACWA directives against physical violence. Others handled office duties, such as check writing, typing, and making telephone calls. A woman striker recalled
finding out that she was not "dumb" since she could organize strikers' cards in preparation for their weekly strike benefits. Another woman discussed not only learning office skills that later netted her a job with the phone company but also realizing that she was not "stupid."

The refusal of Mexican American women strikers in earlier strikes to submit totally to union notions on women's roles by engaging in "extra curricular" activities resurfaced but took on a different aspect in this strike. Whereas in the past, women unhappy with union control had participated in sporadic, unsanctioned, and unorganized activities, such as following non-strikers home and beating them, in this strike, strikers dissatisfied with the union's emphasis on the national boycott and on bread and butter issues created their own committee to promote the strike in other ways. The feeling among this group was that as workers, they had a right to a union that allowed them to think for themselves and was democratic enough to give them the chance to act on their own behalf.

The forty women and men who made up the independent group had two major principles that guided their actions during the strike: one was to "raise the political consciousness of the strikers by linking up our struggle with the struggle of the workers, oppressed Nationalities [sic], and students." For that reason the group took part in a march to protest the death of Ruben Salazar, a former reporter from El Paso, at the hands of Los Angeles police as well as the killing of eleven year-old Santos Rodrigues by
Dallas police. The group members also joined in a protest against housing conditions among Mexican American El Pasoans who lived in some of the worst barrios in the Southwest. The members of the group filmed other groups in El Paso "that were struggling for social justice..." as part of their attempt to keep a connection with other movements.

The desire of the committee to raise the political consciousness of the strikers led them into cooperation with an arm of the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Revolutionary Union (RU), in making a film about the strike despite warnings from the ACWA that the RU would take advantage of the strikers to push its own agenda. The Farah strikers' independent committee provided housing, interview appointments with reluctant strikers, and personal film footage of the walkout to the RU. The cooperation between the RU and the group lasted until the RU began to pressure strikers into meetings that committee leaders had not called and with materials that they had not seen. The final break came when the RU reneged on an earlier promise that the Farah strikers would be given a copy of the strike film. After a number of failed attempts by the committee to secure a copy, the group appealed to others in the Mexican American, student, and class movements to help them persuade the RU, but the RU never came through with a copy.

The other major principle that guided the actions of the committee was that "the chicano striker especially the women
should participate and take the leadership of the union, because of course almost 85% of the strikers were women." The committee provided information and speakers to any organization, regardless of its politics, that asked. The group made available to others interested in the workers' movement their own home movies and photographs of the walkout. But the group went beyond informational activities. Members created their own strikers' relief fund to help with utilities, rent, and emergency medical bills. Committee members were encouraged to speak in public; one woman remembered being really nervous when she was urged by the group to give a speech on television. The committee met, according to a member, to provide support to each other.

The group took on the name of Unidad Para Siempre or Unity Forever after the strike was over and tried to continue working together apart from the ACWA. Its members were among those that believed that the union should have extended its mission to include social justice. The desire of Unidad members to extend the life of the committee hardened after Farah started layoffs of workers, particularly those considered most active, such as Unidad people. The layoffs and divisions among the workers, however, prevented the group from continuing its work. The layoffs hurt their cause, as Unidad members, no longer in the garment industry, by necessity turned their attention to searching for a job. The divisions among strikers separated those who blamed the union for the layoffs from those who felt that the union needed time to work things out, and from others who thought that the union had sold
out. According to one active Unidad member, Virginia Delgado, after about a year and a half she and a couple of others were the only ones going to meetings.

Unidad Para Siempre members have charged that the ACWA greatly resented their rank and file group. The union failed to see that its policies of control contributed to the organization of such a group and, instead, saw it as a threat to the local. The union allegedly spied on Unidad meetings and told other strikers that Unidad members had been fired and were bitter and that their actions were detrimental to both the union and the company. One woman striker and Unidad member recalled that "....the union turned a lot of people against us. That's when they started, 'no they're [Unidad] just a bunch of Communists, troublemakers. They're just trying to get rid of the union.' But we weren't trying to get rid of the union, just make it work."

The national boycott, with its message of the struggle of the Mexican American strikers for justice, garnered nationwide support for the workers. What the Tex-Son strike in 1959 had achieved on a regional basis, the Farah strikers and the ACWA did on a national and even international level. Other Mexican Americans in El Paso offered moral support, ranging from muted murmurs of approval at picket sites to committees openly formed in aid of the strikers. Members of Mexican American organizations attended rallies and marches and provided a platform for strikers' speeches. There was even a Committee for Fairness at Farah,
composed of Anglo and Mexican American supporters. Politicians and other prominent persons, from Cesar Chavez to Edward Kennedy, from the El Paso area to the world arena, found time to make public statements of support. Religious groups publicly endorsed the workers and their cause. If the local press bound their interests with those of Willie Farah and ignored the strikers, the national press seemed only too happy to provide the Mexican American strikers an opportunity to give their side of the story. The success of the national boycott attests to the scope of this outpouring of affirmation of the strikers' cause.

A look at the support from the Catholic Church and from other unions will serve to illuminate the character and extent of the phenomenon. Church support for the strikers began at the parish level, with the parish priest, Father Jesse Munoz. A parish of 25,000, of whom 97% were Mexican American workers and many from the Farah company system, Our Lady of Light Parish soon became a center of strike activity. With a sister, friends, and parishioners working at Farah, Father Munoz had for years been privy to stories of the harassment, humiliations, fear, and pettiness suffered at work. During the strike, Father Munoz repeatedly made known in public the complaints he had listened to through the years. At the same time, he made clear that the situation was one of a need for a living wage and dignidad for the Mexican American worker.

The local parish provided more than a parish priest willing to speak publicly on behalf of the strikers. The strikers held a
rally once a week at the parish hall and listened to Father Munoz tell stories to help lighten the seriousness of the situation. Strike benefits and relief materials were distributed from the church once a week. On at least one occasion, the priest held "some kind of sale to help us." Although the local priest believed that it was the role of the Church to provide moral and spiritual leadership, the local parish tried to help with food, shelter, and legal services as well. The moral and spiritual leadership played a significant role, as one striker remembered: when Father Munoz gave the ceniza on Ash Wednesday, everybody felt good afterward. Many strikers felt better when the priest assured them that joining the union did not mean they were Communists.

Bishop Sidney Metzger's involvement in the strike situation expanded the Church's support from the local level to the national. Bishop Metzger maintained that his letter of support was intended only to answer the questions of a fellow bishop, but surprising to him, it was published by the National Catholic Reporter, forcing him to acknowledge his stance to a wider audience. Bishop Metzger then sent to all U.S. Catholic bishops a letter of explanation of his views on the strike that was circulated widely by the press and, presumably, the union. Endorsement of the strikers followed, by numerous church groups, from the Texas Conference of Churches to the Dean of the Episcopalian Washington's Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

In his letter to the bishops, Bishop Metzger presented the
strike of Farah workers in terms similar to those used by the ACWA. He told them that the workers needed a living wage, that they had a basic right to collective bargaining, and that the struggle was one for social justice. From complaints to parish priests over the past five years, Bishop Metzger said he concluded that workers at Farah had no input in an arbitrarily-set production quota, were paid on an unfair and capriciously-arrived at wage scale, and endured job insecurity based on a supervisor's whim. Such social injustice could only be overcome with a collective bargaining agreement. A follow-up letter reiterated the message and outlined Farah's responses to inquiries about change. Willie Farah's own response to the Church's support was to denounce the Bishop as "lolling in wealth."

Unionists' support of the boycott of Farah products took on a much more direct and practical aspect. Endorsement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council set off similar pronouncements from numerous and diverse union organizations, including the National Football League Players Association. Such endorsements entailed more than public speeches, however; sometimes it meant giving financial aid and providing bodies for picketing. In El Paso, the meat cutters local provided 1000 dollars a month during the strike. The United Auto Workers (UAW) contributed ten thousand dollars to the strikers' fund. The autoworkers union also agreed to have its Community Action Program councils picket stores selling Farah goods. Similarly, in Nashville, Tennessee, members of the UAW, Communication Workers, United Steelworkers, Teamsters, and others
picked up the most prominent department stores in the city to protest the selling of Farah slacks. Members of the International Association of Machinists did likewise at the Boston Store in Pennsylvania. ACWA unionists picketed retail stores in the New York metropolitan area to show their support for the strikers. The same support action was duplicated all over the country by fellow unionists.

Support for the strikers extended to the international level. The International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation resolved at a world congress in Amsterdam in October, 1972, to ask its members in 46 countries to join the boycott movement. The organization reaffirmed its support six months later, agreeing to increase its actions to aid the boycott. Interestingly, support from Mexican unions was not apparent in the Farah strike as it had been in the Tex-Son strike of 1959. One reason may have been that Willie Farah, forgetting his stand against foreigners, hired Mexican workers by the busload as strikebreakers. Mexican unions may have felt caught between the need of Mexican workers and support for the strikers.

In February, 1974, Farah Manufacturing Company and the ACWA reached an agreement to end the 22 month-old strike. The company and union dropped all legal suits against each other. The ACWA ended the boycott after the mayor of El Paso certified that a majority of Farah employees, including strikers, had signed with the union. The company, in return, agreed to re-employ all
strikers fired for walking out and to pay them the $30 weekly benefits they had been getting from the union until the rehiring was completed. NLRB decisions against the company, but especially the boycott, which cost the company $8 million in 1972 and $2.5 million in the last quarter of 1973 in profits and which had brought the price of Farah stock from $39.50 in 1972 to $3.50 at one point and to $8 in February, 1974, had led Willie Farah to the negotiating table after almost two years of opposition.

Women participated in the 55 member committee formed to negotiate the settlement, but ACWA regional and national officials made the final decisions on the contract. The inclusion of non-strikers on the committee made it harder for the rank and file to agree on input and, thus, made it easier for ACWA officials to have the last word. The final contract terms contained most of the demands initially outlined by the union: job security, seniority, pay raises of 55 cents an hour spread over a three year period, a grievance system, arbitrable quota guidelines, and a company-paid sickness plan. Union procedure on final negotiations and ratification of the contract, however, did little to achieve the desire for dignidad, respect, and social justice that many strikers considered part of their goals.

The unhappiness of many strikers with the contract, and with the way the union handled the end of the entire situation, reflected Unidad Para Siempre's reaction to the ACWA's top-down method of unionism. Strikers were angered that they learned about the end of the strike when they met to picket. Others resented
not being given time to study the contract or ample opportunity to vote on it. Some felt that the union had identified more with Willie Farah's recent financial woes than with their desire for expansion of strike objectives. The union had promised much and delivered little in the eyes of numerous strikers. In their own way, the complainers were echoing the rank and file committee's belief that the ACWA was not democratic in its policies and practices.

Summary and Conclusions

The participation of Mexican American women strikers in the short strikes of 1952, 1965, and 1971 in El Paso followed the pattern of garment strikes both before and after World War II. The disputes exhibited the ACWA's attempts to keep the situation under control but also the women's violent responses in the face of their feelings of powerlessness. The ACWA's male managers and lawyers expected proper behavior from the Mexican American strikers and sought to achieve this by explaining the consequences to them or by "benching" the overly active ones. The union may have preferred a different kind of activism on the part of the women but to the Mexican American strikers, their actions appeared to work as the ACWA gained a foothold with contracts at Top-Notch and Levi-Strauss. Certainly, the almost daily violence by the Mexican American women may have influenced the duration of the strike since all three lasted less than ten weeks.
The 1959 strike at Tex-Son in San Antonio proved to be typically union-directed, with violent actions by the strikers largely limited to the first week. The ILGWU had its own survival in Texas at stake and kept the Mexican American strikers heavily involved in boycott activities, limiting any attempts by them to affect strike developments with physical confrontations against Tex-Son workers. The union depended on selling the boycott by representing the women as mothers seeking to improve their family situation and by all accounts, their regional boycott was fairly successful. But neither the success of the boycott nor the union's ability to contain strikers' untoward behavior proved enough to overcome Franzel's position in which he counted on an overabundance of unemployed workers to replace the striking women.

In a similar manner, the ACWA in 1972 at Farah retained good control of the course of the strike and boycott for two years, with accusations of violence limited to just that. The suits by both union and company before the NLRB, the boycott, and especially the nationwide propaganda presenting the strike as a fight for justice by Mexican Americans served to keep the women strikers busy under male union management's direction. The ACWA's strategy succeeded widely, bringing down Farah stock prices and profits to record levels and leading to Willie Farah's willingness to sign a contract. The financial precariousness of the company, however, led to a concentration on bread and butter issues in a contract perceived by many strikers as inadequate.
Despite the channeling of the Mexican American women's activism by the ILGWU and ACWA into traditional union practices and programs, the women found ways to affect strike developments. After WWII, both the ILGWU and ACWA offered local officer positions to the Mexican American women to some extent, but the real power positions of manager and international representative and sometimes of organizer and picket captain remained in male hands. The women at Hortex in 1952, at Top-Notch in 1965, and at Levi-Strauss in 1971 responded to the resulting powerlessness by beating workers.

Union attempts at control in the two longer strikes at Tex-Son and Farah fared better. The Mexican American women strikers at Tex-Son wrote taunting letters to nonstrikers and refused to concede when the ILGWU quit in late 1961, but these were the extent of their "extra-curricular" activities. The ACWA at Farah did just as well, having only to discredit the small oppositional group of members known as Unidad Para Siempre. Unidad, however, reflected strikers' unhappiness with the ACWA's focus on bread and butter issues. For those strikers who truly believed that their dispute was part of a larger struggle for social justice, the contract of 1974 appeared as the union's sell-out of their cause. Attempts to expand Unidad after the strike are representative of this dissatisfaction. Throughout the twentieth century, the Mexican American women strikers had expressed in various ways their conviction that they deserved a decent life and just treatment. With or without unions, they initiated strikes,
carried the burden of picketing, and made use of Mexican cultural traditions and even violence in pursuit of these goals.
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Chapter V
The Opposition

The Mexican American women strikers' actions were shaped by the extent of union organization and attention to their specific needs, but their behavior cannot totally be understood unless it is placed in the context of the great odds they faced when they went on strike. Their supporters and their immediate opponents—the nonstriking Mexican American women—were often as powerless as the strikers but their major opponents, the companies, had almost unlimited resources at their disposal.

From the employment of scare tactics at the first hint of organizing efforts to the use of company resources to the hiring of union-busting attorneys or public relations firms, the companies faced with a strike went all-out to stop the union and Mexican American women strikers. Companies used the court system, existing laws, and city policemen to protect their property and employees as well as to hinder the union and the strikers. A major tactic of the companies was to use newspapers as their mouthpiece. Just as importantly, the companies relied on various forms of propaganda to discredit the union and strikers, knowing that pro-business sentiments in Texas and after 1950, the growing anti-unionism in the country at large, as well as the
disadvantaged position of the Mexican American women strikers, would work to their advantage.

Company Use of the Legal System

Local establishment forces were readily available to companies in Texas for use against strikers. Throughout the century, strikers were arrested on the basis of existing local ordinances, sometimes interpreted in peculiar ways to suit the occasion. Strikers during the 1938 pecan shellers' dispute in San Antonio were arrested on ever-changing charges of blocking the sidewalk—sometimes where there was no sidewalk—unlawful assembly, disturbing the peace, vagrancy, and unlawful display of signs for advertising. The last was based on an old ordinance that required that all advertising signs in public have the approval of the city marshal, an office that no longer existed.

In the 1959 Tex-Son strike in San Antonio, the city government interpreted the Landrum-Griffin Act to mean that strikers could not carry picket signs outside stores. The ILGWU representative was later to claim that this cost them the strike. Police arrested scores of Tex-Son strikers for distributing handbills bearing boycott messages, but this local ordinance was found unconstitutional. The union representative considered leafletting to be less effective than carrying picket signs at stores, but the strikers had to go with what was permitted, so only the leafletting continued.
Numerous Farah strikers landed in jail in 1972 before a state law and city ordinance prohibiting mass picketing were struck down by the state supreme court. The use of the mass picketing law, which had been struck down in 1959 in San Antonio, against the strikers rebounded badly when the union publicized that a local justice of the peace was pocketing fourteen dollars from the $400 bonds set for each striker. The report by the press that police were not following up on arrests did not help, either.

The anti-union attitude of city government officials predetermined them to oppose requests from the union or strikers. In the laundry strike of 1919 in El Paso, strike leaders asked local officials to use their influence to prevent laundries from hiring alien strikebreakers, but the city lawyer retorted that no law existed for such a procedure. A city council committee in the 1938 pecan shellers strike denied permission to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to solicit funds for the strikers on the basis that the women had insufficient credentials, and one official revealed the outcome of the committee's vote before the committee even met.

One popular tactic of city officials in the thirties to help companies during strike activity was to deny that a strike existed. This denial was based on the premise that if some workers remained on the job, there could be no strike. Official reactions to the Shirlee Frocks strike presented a good example of how the practice worked. Throughout the dispute, the city continually reiterated that no strike existed because the company
continued to operate. Then, they agreed to allow picketing by employees of the plant, but since the strikers were no longer working for the plant, they could not picket! The mayor of San Antonio refused to allow picketing when strikers offered Social Security cards as proof of employment, because, he said, these were still not proof that a strike existed.

During the pecan strike, the police chief was adamant that no strike existed. He conducted a survey of the number of workers still in the plants in order to lend credence to his position, but he refused to reveal how many workers he actually found still on the job. He tried to bolster his position by telling the press that the strike was unauthorized because it had been called by undesirable elements "intent on duping the workers." The hundreds of arrests of pecan shellers were based on city officials' contentions that no strike existed, but when the strike was arbitrated, the jailed strikers were released.

The use of city policemen to guard company property and protect employees was a common practice throughout the century. City officials claimed that police were there to keep the peace, but the presence and actions of police often precipitated violence. At a special conference in the 1919 laundry strike, the mayor of El Paso ordered the police chief to do whatever was necessary to enforce law and order. All sides were to be protected and no rioting or property violations were to be tolerated. Labor leaders protested that only the laundries actually received
protection. Besides, as one paper acknowledged, "no intimations of any violence on the part of the strikers had been reported to police...."

City police trespassed on the rights of strikers so badly, in the 1938 pecan strike, that the state industrial commission found against them in their investigation of the situation, and the middle-class owner and editor of the Spanish-language paper felt comfortable with the strikers' peaceful behavior that he backed them in La Prensa. During the strike, the police were accused of causing injury to a baby through their indiscriminate use of tear gas against pickets. Police sometimes took strikers outside city limits and left them there to walk miles back to the city. Jailed strikers were not charged for days. Police abuses were so rampant that the governor called for an investigation, and Maury Maverick, a U.S. Congressman, reminded police that the Constitution applied to everyone.

Cigar strikers acted as peacefully as did the pecan shellers for most of their strike, but the sheriff and his deputies seemed to think that they worked for the Finck Cigar Company. The union paper accused the sheriff of fomenting a disturbance in March, 1935 by forcibly trying to push pickets into the plant. The labor paper charged the sheriff with arresting strikers en masse and using former convicts, who mistreated the strikers, as deputies. The paper asserted that jailors delayed releasing strikers until hours after their bonds were posted. Strikers claimed that the sheriff visited the Finck plant to preach to workers that they
should be grateful to Finck for providing jobs and accused him of bragging that he would have to buy new boots after having to use them so often against pickets. They also accused his officers of threatening them with deportation if they did not return to work.

The most frequent task of city police during strikes was to guard plants and haul strikers off to jail at any hint of lawbreaking. During the 1938 pecan shellers "non-strike", unusual numbers of foot and car patrols were assigned to the West side, or Mexican American neighborhood, where the plants were located. As noted above, police arrested pecan shellers by the thousands on any conceivable grounds. Women and men were crowded by the score in jails meant for less than a dozen. One time, the police chief used a fire-hose to quiet down over-crowded strikers at the jail. Police also threatened strikers, as Mrs. Refugia Garcia testified at the harassment suit hearings: "Mr. Kilday told me if I was going to continue in that business [picketing] that he was going to split my head open."

Arrests at garment plants in the 1930's occurred so often that, in the Shirlee Frocks case, strikers returned to the picket line as soon as they were bonded by the union. So many police were at one plant that a local paper joked that it took one big policemen to handle one girl striker. Like the shellers, the women garment workers were arrested for blocking the sidewalk, carrying picket signs, disturbing the peace, assault, and after a court ruling allowing three pickets only, for congregating in
The use of police to arrest strikers was just as frequent in the post-WWII period. The owner's son at Top-Notch in 1965 took pictures of strikers to help police with their handling of pickets, and police accompanied company cars carrying workers home during that strike. Maria de Jesus Vargas thanked her guardian angel for not letting her get arrested in the 1971 Levi-Strauss dispute, but recalled that her friend, Evangelina Landeros, related that police pulled her by the hair when they arrested her. Union officials protested to the city council of El Paso, decrying police arrests of pickets. Two union representatives, calling police actions "intimidation" and "harassment", charged that police arrested pickets at the doors of plants, forced strikers to remove themselves from entrances, and picked on strikers on private property, even when they had the owner's permission to be there. The response of city hall was to tell the union to discuss the problem with the chief of police.

Police actions on behalf of the company had not ceased by 1959 at Tex-Son and 1972 at Farah. The presence of city police at the plant in 1959 was so obvious that George Lambert of the ILGWU facetiously suggested that, if the company could hire city police, so should the union, and both sides could settle the dispute Old West style, with a shootout. Police arrested strikers for picketing stores with signs and for handbilling before the ordinances could be nullified. Visiting supporters did not escape from such practices. The president of a brewery local holding its
convention in San Antonio, and its international union lawyer, were arrested for taking part in a picketing parade at Tex-Son.

Police arrested Farah picketers by the hundreds but did not follow up with investigations, indicating that the arrests served primarily the purpose of harassment. Police arrested strikers at Farah for any conceivable reason, such as booing at company employees, using company photographs to identify strikers. The first arrests were for violating an injunction of which many were not even aware, but others, later, were jailed for congregating contrary to mass picketing laws, as noted earlier.

The companies found the court system sympathetic to their interests and often relied on injunctions to curb union and strikers' actions. Courts could be counted on to issue injunctions but also to negate union suits against the company and police practices. The suit by strikers to try to halt police harassment in the 1938 pecan shellers strike offered a good example of decisions unfavorable to the union members. In his decision, Judge S. Tayloe declared that the law gave strikers the right to picket, but that he would not allow them that right in the interest of maintaining peace. The strikers had never been charged with, much less convicted of, violent behavior.

The courts were very obviously anti-union during the garment strikes of the 1930's. After the company sought an injunction to stop threats, assault, and "congregating in large numbers" in the Dorothy Frocks strike of 1936, the judge limited pickets to groups
of three and required strikers to carry only peaceful signs. He had also wanted the union to provide the company with picketers' names but later dropped that part of the ruling. The union had to rely on an outside judge to issue an injunction to stop the police force's repeated interference with strikers during the Shirlee Frocks strike, but even this restraint was temporary.

After WWII, courts continued to side with companies seeking injunctions to halt the violent actions of strikers, but tended to refuse similar requests by the unions, even though company employees retaliated with violence against strikers. Top-Notch officials in 1965 successfully sought a court injunction against violence by the union, which, in turn, countersued, less successfully. Besides including union officials in the suit, the company named Ana Maria Dorado and Margarita Reza as defendants. The suit asked that the local and named individuals refrain from "assaulting, cursing, and threatening employees" and accused the two women of attacking workers at the plant and in downtown El Paso. While placing a temporary restriction on union actions, the district judge refused the union's countersuit.

Garment strikes were characterized by violence, and the clothing companies lost little time seeking injunctions against the strikers. In 1971, Levi-Strauss asked the court for an injunction to stop unlawful tactics against their workers and the firm, and the court granted the company's request that strikers be made to obey picketing laws requiring them to keep fifty feet apart and prohibiting them from blocking factory entrances and
exits. During the walkout at Farah in 1972, a district judge issued an injunction to restrict picketing ACWA members within fifty feet of Farah property. The ACWA's business manager charged that the late Friday issuance of the injunction had prevented notification of strikers who had resumed picketing on Monday and been arrested. Although the police and fire commissioner of San Antonio asserted that the courts were open to ILGWU members who picketed Shirlee Frocks in 1937, the legal system was frequently allied with the companies against the Mexican American women strikers then and after WWII.

Company Propaganda

Strikes often became propaganda battles between the two sides. The companies, however, tended to come out ahead because they frequently had newspapers, city officials, and other government officials, speaking in their favor. Company officials presented their version of labor disputes in a manner that made themselves look good, or, if that was not possible, in a way that made the company seem victims of the unions and strikers.

During the 1919 laundry strike, the owners of two laundries advertised in a local paper to gain public favor. The statement from the El Paso Laundry was fairly mild, claiming only that the plant was back to normal and thanking customers for their consideration during the "recent delays and inconveniences." More openly hostile was the president of the Elite Laundry, who blamed
outside agents for fomenting discontent among his workers. In the ad, the owner explained that some employees had walked out because he had fired a girl who was not doing good work, and he defied the union to prove that his company paid less than $5.50 a week. He denied that his drivers had joined the walkout, waxing eloquent about their loyalty to him. He ended by saying, "this constant unrest and agitation is becoming disgusting to the public and we are confident that we have their support in the stand which we have taken."

Garment owners tried to get similar messages across in interviews with the press. In the Dorothy Frocks strike of 1936, the manager contended that his workers had always been treated well and that the strike was a complete surprise to him. He went on to say that Mexican workers "proved good and loyal workers if treated well and he had always done that." The next year, the president of Shirlee Frocks declared that the company was happy to provide some thirty women jobs during the slack season but not if they were to be victims of striker intimidation. Company officials followed up by closing the plant in order, they said, to protect the needy women from the violence that might occur if "they permitted them to come to work."

Tex-Son president Harold Franzel liked to represent himself as a victim of the ILGWU, as did Willie Farah with the ACWA in 1972. Franzel insisted that his company was being struck because it just would not agree to check-off union dues. Acting the benevolent patron, Franzel called the 1959 dispute a case of
"employee security against so-called union security." Through his attorney, Franzel described the campaign to discourage purchases of company products at department stores as an illegal secondary boycott, accusing the union of knowingly breaking the law.

For his part, Farah constantly painted the union as looking out for its own interest in asking for the check-off system of dues collection. Company officials told the press that the ACWA's goal was to "disrupt operations at Farah." It labelled national union representatives, sent to help local officials with the strike, as professional organizers who would destroy jobs in El Paso. Company pronouncements reflected Farah's opinion that unions were to blame for the "decline" of the country.

The companies had the money to buy newspaper space to present themselves in a good light. At times, officials got their workers to ask for protection against strikers or to testify about how things were at their particular company, because, of course, it made the company look even better if such declarations came from employees. In the 1919 laundry strike, workers, including 27 Mexican American women and men, signed an advertisement denying their support of the strike, which they called unfair, and claiming that the owners had always treated them considerately and kept their welfare at heart. The signers declared themselves longtime employees of the laundries. Less than a month later, a state industrial commission reported that wages in El Paso laundries were not only lower than in other industries, but lower
than in other laundries in the state. 23

A similar incident occurred in the tumultuous strike at Top-Notch in 1965. In a published letter to police, workers listed alleged abuses inflicted on them by strikers, reporting threats, slashed tires, and property damage. The last few lines of the letter sounded like the laundry owners' ads of 1919: "We cannot allow this situation to degenerate into a tragicomic vendetta. We ask those responsible for the public welfare to put an end to this deplorable, nerve-wracking, and absurd situation." This was ostensibly from people who most likely did not have even a high-school education. Twenty-five years later, Maury Cohen denied any company involvement in the letter writing. It was something he read in the paper, he said, and he was not sure that it had been sent to police.

In a quite similar incident in 1972, Willie Farah placed an ad in response to the bishop's public support of the strikers with the supposed signature of 8000 Catholic Farah workers. Because part of the bishop's speech to strikers had been mistranslated so that it appeared that Bishop Metzger had referred to the workers as "slaves", Farah employees denied being Farah's slaves and asserted that they made better wages than workers in unionized plants. They wanted to make clear that they were happy to work at Farah's. But the parish priest, Father Jesse Munoz, counted the alleged 8000 signatures and found only 2310 names. Further, workers from Farah called the priest disclaiming a connection with such an affront to Bishop Metzger.
The owners of companies involved in strikes did not always have to make costly efforts at publicity because other elements of the establishment did it for them for free. A reporter in the 1919 laundry strike found conditions at Acme favorable, basing his evaluation on the presence of a Victrola, a stove, and guarded elevator shafts. The El Paso Herald described the women strikers as plantation owners had pictured their slaves, "...[they] are enjoying their vacation. At the Central Labor Union hall, the girls are singing and dancing." The regular papers created the impression of the women strikers as foreigners by always referring to them as "Mexicans".

The press helped companies by publishing negative and one-sided declarations about strikers by company, city, and other officials in the pre-war years, and after WWII, by omitting, minimizing, or relegating to second billing union or strikers' positions. The local paper described the one scuffle during the 1933 cigar strike as a "crisis situation" after one patrolman lost his gun, although all that resulted were some scratches on both sides.

Accepting official versions of events was quite common in the 1930's strikes. The pronouncements of the San Antonio police chief and his officers' in the 1938 pecan shellers strike made the front pages. At one rally of thousands, the chief dismissed the protestors as "relief clients," but the paper did not raise the point that extremely low wages in pecan shelling forced workers on
relief rolls. Without verification or question, the papers printed a sergeant's testimony at state industrial commission hearings that his men had overheard Emma Tenayuca say that when the Communists took over they would "destroy the churches and murder the priests like they do in Russia." Police sergeant William Christophe's testimony during an injunction hearing in the 1937 Shirlee Frocks strike that "...Helen Rivas boasted that she wore boots and breeches so she could do a lot of fighting" similarly went unsubstantiated in the press.

The support of the press and other establishment institutions for company positions were just as evident in the postwar period. When Henry de la Garza was beaten by workers at Top-Notch in 1971, the El Paso press subtly questioned his injuries because, one paper said, police found him with a soft drink after the alleged episode. The San Antonio Express called the events of February 26 and 27 at Tex-Son in 1959 "riots" and splashed photos of women strikers being arrested across the front page, even though in some the women were caught in very awkward positions.

During the Farah strike in 1972, El Paso papers ignored the strike for as long as they possibly could. When they finally did publish accounts of the strike, they painted Farah positively, describing him as handsome and youthful looking, giving his version of why his speech to the Texas Council of Churches, where he was chastising the group for its support of the strikers, was abruptly terminated, and accepting company declarations without question, such as company officials' contention that "94% of its
workforce, including supervisors, executives, and officers have Spanish surnames," without mentioning how recent a practice this was. Strikers complained that the El Paso press was unfavorable to them by miscounting during their rallies. But the press' opposition was more subtle; for example, in a series on the strike, the Herald led each segment with Farah's side of the story. While labor unions worked to create unfavorable images of the companies, the latter had more funds and the backing of city officials and the press in creating positive depictions of themselves and making negative representations of the unions.

Discrediting the Strikers

Overall, those companies faced with a strike found it especially advantageous to disparage or discredit the union and strikers. Management did this in three major ways: by calling unions or strikers "Communists," radicals, or outsiders; by blaming them for any violence that happened during a strike; and by making ethnic slurs. Charges of Communist leadership or influence arose in all but the short garment strikes, but, interestingly, tapered off in the postwar period. In the garment disputes characterized by violence, companies attributed blame to the strikers, although workers contributed to it as well. Ethnic insults occurred mostly in the pre-war strikes.

The laundry strikers of 1919 in El Paso were not openly accused of being Communist, but allusions to ties with radical
causes were made. When white, male laundry truck drivers withdrew from the union rather than continue supporting the strikers, the local branch of the American Legion, to which all the drivers belonged, declared that in standing by their employers, the men were dealing a first blow against Bolshevism. The newspapers played up stories about Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) literature in Spanish seized by border agents, trying to link it with strikes in which Mexican American workers were involved. An unintelligible pattern of letters found in a men's room were interpreted as the trail of the IWW's advance guard, and the American Legion formed a committee to seek out 'red' partisans but had to conclude that there were precious few of them in El Paso.

Ed Finck excused his unwillingness to comply with NLRB rulings by accusing the women and children in the cigar strike of 1934 of being 'reds.' After being ordered to rehire the four leaders, Finck replied, "We still don't see fit to turn our plant over to the 'Reds' yet. They (NRA) want us to take these people back, and as we see them, they are Reds..." A letter from Sam Rayburn, Congressman from Texas, to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, asking for her investigation of the matter, contained a quotation from a Finck telegram: "...only a small proportion of our forces are striking those that are out are connected with the Communistic party [sic] and the leader who is president of the local cigar union is not only communistic but an alien..." Finck did not offer evidence of his charges.
The Mexican American women cigar strikers had to contend with similar insinuations from federal labor representatives sent to report and help settle disputes. In a letter to Benedict Wolf of the NLRB in Washington D.C., on the reinstatement of the four leaders during the second phase of the strike, Roger Busfield, secretary of the regional NLRB, declared, "I firmly believe that these four women are radical—almost to the point of being communists [sic]." He went on to offer his own evidence by pointing out that Mrs. Ernst refused a position as business agent for the local union at forty dollars a week to return to a job at seven dollars to ten dollars a week. As to Mrs. E. J. Padilla, he said that she had promised to act as a "walking delegate and see that 'Mr. Finck toes the mark.'" He added, "she also resents working under supervision of a foreman. As she stated, 'I want to be my own boss.'" The clinching evidence in his view came from Modesta Herrera, who he claimed offered this solution to the situation, "...close the plant and then re-open it under the management of the workers." In another letter, Busfield referred to the women attending a meeting in the Socialist hall where "fiery communist [sic] leaders" tried to get the workers to use force against the companies.

The pecan shellers were accused of being Communists or Communist-led from every quarter on the basis of Emma Tenayuca's early leadership of the strike committee and on the later takeover by UCAPAWA, which had a Marxist executive committee. The papers rarely failed to mention Tenayuca's vice-presidency of the state
Workers' Alliance and, particularly, her marriage to Homer Brooks, who had been a candidate for governor on the Communist Party ticket. The police chief liked to question UCAPWA president Donald Henderson's "past and marital connections", implying that Henderson had once been a Communist and was married to one. The mayor of San Antonio visited pecan plants and exhorted workers to keep away from Tenayuca and others in the Communist camp.

The police chief led the efforts of the local political machine to discredit the strikers, who posed a threat if members of the Mexican American community had their political consciousness raised. In testimony before a state inquiry into police harassment of strikers, the chief declared that "if the West side workers were organized by UCAPWA 25,000 persons would be lost to the 'Red Banner.'" He also questioned the validity of the strike on grounds that it was unauthorized because it was led by Communists. Others picked up on the police chief's allegations. The Reverand J. H. Lopez, of the National Welfare Council, announced that he would explain to the uninformed workers about the "issues at stake" if radicals were allowed to take over. The archbishop in San Antonio praised police actions during the strike, at the same time expressing concern for the living conditions of the workers. He added that Donald Henderson stood "heart and soul for Communism." Mexican Chamber of Commerce and League of Loyal Americans group members refused to support the strike unless Henderson officially pledged that no Communist led
or would ever lead the strikers.39

San Antonio's police chief was not content with making allegations about Communists; he played, too, on the theme that the strike leaders were outsiders. The chief called Donald Henderson "...an intruder down here that hasn't 600 or 700 followers..." He preferred to see the strike as a "disturbance out of Washington, D.C." His arrest of CIO organizer, J. Beasley Austin, called in to help during the strike, was probably based on the chief's attitude toward outsiders. The selection of Tenayuca as strike committee chair by the shellers and their reliance on people such as Minnie Rendon and Mela Solis indicated the local flavor of the strike, contrary to the chief's assertions.

Claims that workers had links to Communism were less frequent and effective after the 1950's. Not much notice was given to Franzel at Tex-Son in 1959 when he told reporters, after a huge parade by strikers, about an earlier newstory about Communist directives for labor to hold parades, commenting that it was an "interesting coincidence". Most people probably agreed when the secretary-treasurer of the San Antonio AFL-CIO Council said, "Franzel was resorting to the discredited technique of McCarthyism."

The other allusion to Communism came from columnist Paul Thompson of the San Antonio News. Supposedly urged on by Tex-Son company lawyer, Theo Weiss, Thompson wrote a story on George Lambert, the ILGWU international representative, which he began
with a line about Lambert's publicity work for the 1938 pecan shellers strike, led by two known Communists [Emma Tenayuca and James Morey]. Thompson made reference to a confrontation at the city auditorium in 1939 between an anti-Communist crowd and the Workers' Alliance, though noting that Lambert was not present. But the inference remained that Lambert was at least a "fellow traveler". In his reply, Lambert charged Thompson with trying to "smear me and cast doubt in the minds of strikers, most of whom are Catholics, as to my qualifications to head the strike."

In the case of the Farah strike, Willie Farah made only occasional references to Communists but the press did not pick up the issue. Farah once told news reporters from the Los Angeles Times, after he had called the strikers Communists, that "the union had done the company a favor by getting rid of that filth." He saw the union's organizing efforts as a Communist plot. In his opinion, all his workers would be "happies" if only outside agitators had not come in to interfere with them. Farah's aversion to unions had been clear from the start and may explain why his allusions to Communism were not taken seriously by the press.

Although both sides engaged in violent behavior during strikes, the companies attributed such actions to strikers, and as we have seen, frequently sought legal sanctions against them. Tired of the on-and-off picketing of the Texas Infants Dress plant from 1937 to 1938, the company had the company union file suit
asking for protection from the terrorism of strikers. Workers accused pickets of displaying weapons, distributing insulting leaflets, making uncomplimentary remarks, and stoning their meeting place and their homes. As noted earlier, the company union president had accused pickets, on several occasions, of threatening workers while passing out circulars and of following workers home to abuse them verbally. Also noted earlier were the predictions by Shirlee Frocks' president that riots would result if strikers attacked workers, who were often accompanied by male relatives.

The post-war garment strikes were full of violent episodes, and the garment companies blamed the union and the Mexican American women members. In a press release after a federal conciliator failed to get the two sides to agree, Franzel repeatedly emphasized the violent behavior of February 26 and 27, terming events "[the] evil conduct" of strikers. He called on "high thinking people" to "join with us in condemning the shameful depths to which the strike has sunk" and promised never to rehire those who had "stooped to such a cowardly and dastardly level." In an interview, he taunted Tex-Con customers, who were cancelling orders, for knuckling under to strikers' intimidation and coercion. Slightly less dramatically, the injunction by Top-Notch management in 1965 and the letter from workers to police, noted earlier, branded the union members as troublemakers.

Farah in 1972 took every opportunity to accuse strikers of intimidation and the union of "deluding the public", "vilifying"
Farah supervisors, and "falsifying" the company's philosophy. In early May 1972, a district judge in El Paso responded to a Farah request for an injunction by prohibiting the union from using violence. A similar but more explicitly worded suit was filed by Farah at the San Antonio plant. In this injunction, Farah named local union officials and striker Janie Naranjo as defendants, whom the company accused of using English and Spanish obscenities, throwing rocks, eggs, oranges, and tomatoes, and assaulting workers. But Farah charges of intimidation by strikers lost force after the union circulated photographs of the barbed wire fence, with jagged metal spikes, around plant locations and of guards with dogs patrolling the sites.

Owners of plants on strike were more open about making ethnic slurs against the striking Mexican American women in the pre-WWII period than later. To reinforce claims that he was not shorthanded despite the strike in 1919, the owner of the Excelsior Laundry told reporters that almost all his workers were now Americans and asserted that these had done a large amount of work "of the very best quality." He boasted, "...Some of my Mexicans quit and I put Americans in their place..." and he went on, "The American used just half as much materials as the Mexican. The work was cleaner and whiter and better in every way." The Elite Laundry owner's ad, containing his explanation for firing a girl for not doing her work, reinforced notions that Mexican Workers were less capable of doing good work.
The owner of Acme Laundry, where the strike had started, was openly hostile in testimony before the state industrial commission. Having earlier called the twenty women, who, he claimed, were the only ones out, the "cheaper sort" of help, he demanded a separate wage scale for Mexican workers, because, he told the commission, Mexican workers in the laundries were not as quick, not as interested in their work, and not able to do as much work as American employees. He added that he had a hard time finding workers for the better jobs because Mexicans could only do routine physical labor. American women, he testified, were needed as sorters and markers. The two Mexican American women fired by him for union organizing had been sorters and markers.

The ethnic slurs in the cigar strike came mostly from people other than the cigar plant owner. Finck limited his remarks to calling Mrs. Ernst a "Mexican alien" whom the immigration service had under investigation in his telegram to Sam Rayburn. Strikers testifying before the state industrial commission accused a sheriff's deputy, though, of threatening them with deportation because they were "just Mexicans." The worst slurs came from Roger Busfield, who as NLRB regional secretary was supposed to help settle disputes. In one letter to the national offices of the NLRB, he complained that he was being hampered in his work by the writings of a "crack-brained Mexican fire-brand" who was supporting the women and that the women were being encouraged by "our long-haired Mexican soap-box orator." In another letter, Busfield, describing a meeting of the cigarmakers' local, noted
"it must be remembered that in dealing with these Mexican girls that we are dealing with an element schooled in the ways of Mexican labor—take what you want when you want it."

During the 1938 pecan strike, only a few insinuations about Mexicans were made, but garment plant owners in the 1930's were not so careful. The police chief in the pecan strike publicly declared that the Mexican American strikers were being "duped" by their Communist leaders, exhibiting the negative attitude that the establishment held of Mexican American workers as illiterate and docile. One pecan shelling company owner played on Anglo-American stereotypes of "lazy Mexicans" by charging that low pay envelopes reflected an "unwillingness" to work. Court testimony from various union members during the Dorothy Frocks injunction suit against the ILGWU local quoted the plant manager as saying that he did not want Mexicans in front of the plant and that he would take out their Mexican guts. According to the Spanish-language paper, Shirlee Frocks company officials in 1937 refused to sign contracts calling for comparable pay to that in the East because they claimed that Mexican American women did not do work equal to that of Anglo-Saxon women. The Mexican American women strikers therefore, not only had to contend with the commonly used charges of Communism and with being blamed for violence during strikes, but also had to deal with ethnic put-downs from several quarters.
Other Company Tactics

Companies involved in labor disputes turned to a variety of other tactics, besides use of the legal system and propaganda, in order to try to stifle strikes. Scare tactics during organizing and elections figured prominently inside the plants. In addition, companies invoked the principle of private property to thwart strikers' tactics. Further, some owners used their financial resources to hire professional public relations experts or union-busting lawyers to help break troublesome unions and their members.

Scaring workers suspected of being involved in organizing activities was one tactic commonly used by owners. Acme Laundry in 1919 fired the two Mexican American women attempting to recruit workers into the new union. Workers at Finck in 1934 complained to the NLRB that Finck spied on workers suspected of being union members and then fired them by having the plant nurse declare them physically unable to work. The Shirlee Frocks Company captured the attention of Dorothy Frocks strikers in 1936 by firing two union members.

In the postwar period, garment companies resorted frequently to scare tactics during organizing and election time. Hortex management in 1953 tried to appear nonaggressive during the strike, but its real attitude surfaced ten years later, when the NLRB found that the company had biased union elections by showing press clippings of strike violence from 1952 and threatening employees with the loss of their jobs and loans made them by the
company. The NLRB also found that supervisors stood at polling sites during the elections, creating fear among workers who might have wanted to vote union. The next year, in another report, the NLRB found Hortex guilty of firing three workers for union activity. It was easy to see why the ACWA had lost the election.

Both Franzel at Tex-Son in 1959 and Farah in 1972 attempted to scare workers away from the union. Franzel sent his employees a memo saying, "If you sign the [union membership] card, you will give the union a lot of power over you, your welfare, and the welfare of your family." Farah was much more pernicious in his methods. When rumors circulated about organizing efforts in 1969, Farah showed films on company time about union corruption. The company retaliated against those suspected of being involved with the union by humiliating them—making them sweep floors. In the quest to root out unionists, Farah management checked out any extra movements of workers and interrogated people about union sympathies. Others suspected of participating in organizing were fired. One woman striker remembered being fired two months before the strike, because her son was organizing, so she went to the union hall and began a daily leafletting of the plant until the walkout in May, 1972.

Companies faced with picketing strikers used their control over their property to circumvent their opponents. All the garment companies after 1950 used company vehicles to transport
workers to and from the job during violent episodes, which were frequent in the clothing disputes. In 1971 at Levi-Strauss, the company tried to fool strikers by putting workers in a closed truck, to prevent a repeat of the previous day when strikers had opened the doors of a van to get at workers. Tex-Son owner Harold Franzel hired taxi-cabs to carry workers home during the altercations of February 26 and 27, 1959, and in 1972 Farah used company buses to bring Mexican commuters from the bridge to the plants. Ruben Cohen in 1965 at Top-Notch brought in lunches to his employees, according to his son, in order to "...keep them from being beaten and heckled..." Farah in 1972 encircled his plant with barbed wire fences to keep out trespassing strikers. Franzel hired city police and Farah hired security guards with dogs to keep strikers away from company property. Both Cohen in 1965 and Farah in 1972 used cameras to record strikers' actions for use in police arrest warrants.

In the later strikes, companies hired experts to help break the strikes. Franzel's choice of a lawyer to negotiate with the ILGWU on the contract in 1959 was very obviously an attempt to break the union. Theo Weiss, a former president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, which had long touted the city to business as a haven of cheap labor, denied his role as union buster, claiming that he was attorney for companies that had union contracts, too. But the ILGWU had lost contracts with Juvenile, Jay-Ann, Texas Tiny, and Texas Infants with Weiss as attorney in each instance. In addition, in a dispute with Bernard Altmann,
the union won only after Weiss left as company lawyer. The evidence certainly seemed to indicate that both Tex-Son and the ILGWU saw the strike in 1959 as a do or die situation.

Willie Farah in 1972 hired a New York firm to do public relations work some six months into the strike. As things turned out, Farah's combative public stance alienated so many people that the public relations director was kept busy trying to minimize public appearances by Farah and prevent his gaffes when he did make public statements. After the contract was signed, the company hired a former executive from General Electric to head industrial relations and to stop leaks about Farah's attempts to water down the effectiveness of the contract with the ACWA. The new public relations head took the position that the less national publicity about labor-management relations, the better. In all of these ways, then, companies worked to dampen existing labor protest.

Conclusions

The resources available to companies to oppose the union and striking Mexican American women were enormous. Companies obviously opposed the formation of unions. But other institutions, as well, aligned themselves against the Mexican American women strikers and their unions. Companies used city police forces, local ordinances and state laws, and a sympathetic court system to their advantage during strikes. Police guarded
plants, escorted workers to and from the job, arrested pickets indiscriminately, and at times, used sheer physical force to disperse picketing unionists. Courts interpreted laws to favor the companies. The laws on mass picketing in the 1930's limited pickets at a plant to three persons and were used again and again from 1959 through 1972, even though earlier versions had been found unconstitutional. Companies involved in labor disputes counted on a court system ready to impose injunctions against strikers but unwilling to stop police and company violations of workers' rights. Companies were aware of being able to rely on the rest of the establishment in pro-business Texas.

The companies that were struck had the financial resources to outlast strikers, even when strikes lasted years, and that, combined with the availability of cheap labor, often meant victory for the companies. Most firms used company vehicles to transport workers to and from work during labor disputes. The owner of Top-Notch in 1971 bought his employees lunch and had it brought in so that they would not need to face pickets. Tex-Son's Franzel in 1959 spent thousands opposing the strikers, from hiring taxicabs to take workers home to hiring city police to guard the plant to hiring the union-busting attorney and former Chamber of Commerce president, Theo Weiss as company lawyer during the strike. In 1972, Willie Farah, likewise, spent money on putting fences around his plant and hiring security guards with dogs to patrol the premises. In all of these ways, companies could checkmate the unions as they tried to use the collective power of
the workers to win more favorable terms of employment.

Companies always, of course, in an anti-union, pro-business state such as Texas, had the advantage of money, power, and institutional support. But what made the odds even more uneven was the fact that the workers in these strikes came from a minority population that was politically as well as economically disadvantaged. Companies, helped by the press, portrayed the strikers as Communists, as responsible for the violence that occurred, whether deservedly or not, and as less competent and more unpredictable than Anglo workers. What is astonishing is that, given the power of the opposition, Mexican American women workers throughout the twentieth century organized and participated in labor protests. Against great odds, they rejected the wages and conditions of work imposed by their employers and took matters into their own hands. Sometimes they even won.
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Chapter VI

Conclusions

In Texas in the 20th century, the position of the Mexican American population was dismal. Historian David Montejano, in his study of Anglos and Mexicans in Texas from the 1800's to the present has argued that Anglo relations with Mexican-heritage people have been predicated on the economic position of each group and are reflected in the labels Anglos applied to Mexican Americans: when Mexican Americans had access to the means of production, Anglos regarded them as "Hispanics" or "Latins", but when Mexican Americans were laborers, Anglos saw them as "Mexicans". The majority of Mexican immigrants coming to Texas since 1900 were unskilled laborers, who, because of the light industry nature of the state's economy and discriminatory practices of employers, ended up in low-paid, stratified, and dead-end jobs. For most of the century, the only advantage the Mexican American people had in some areas of Texas was that they constituted a majority of the population. In San Antonio and El Paso, the Spanish-surnamed population exceeded 50% for most decades. But economically, politically, and socially, the Mexican Americans in both cities, and indeed throughout the state, shared second-class citizenship with Blacks.
In this context, labor organizing served as an important means of resistance. Traditional unions tended to ignore Mexican American women as minorities and as unskilled female workers. When unions did so, as in the pecan shelling and cigar industries in San Antonio in the 1930's, Mexican American women protested their work situations on their own and undertook, with great creativity and talent, all the duties associated with directing a strike. The garment industry, in contrast, had well established unions with a long history of organizing, and Mexican American garment strikers, both before and after WWII in San Antonio and El Paso, were strictly directed by Anglo male or female organizers, union representatives, and managers into set channels of strike activity. Similarly, the laundry workers in El Paso in 1919 were controlled by an entrenched labor leadership of Anglo men who pushed the Mexican women into traditional strike roles. But, when Anglo male authority did not respond to the needs of the Mexican American women strikers, they turned to Mexican culture and often to violence in an attempt to take control over their own destinies.

The experiences of Mexican American women workers in Texas clearly reflected the impact of their triple oppression. In the first decades of the century, mostly single women worked, but as the century progressed, Mexican American women, like other American women, increasingly joined the workforce. But job opportunities throughout most of the period were scarce and involved unskilled labor such as laundering, cigarmaking, pecan
shelling and dressmaking. Mexican American women did not have significant access to pink collar jobs until the 1960s when structural changes in the economy opened up that sector to them. The conclusions of historian Julia Blackwelder that employers in San Antonio chose to pay the higher cost of not hiring Mexican American and Black women out of their assigned stations rather than "rock the boat" of job segregation exemplifies Mexican American women's status for decades. Likewise, Mario Garcia's work on El Paso showed that Mexican American women received lower wages than Anglo women because the former were deemed fit only for back labor and that, too, attests to the disadvantaged work situation of Mexican American women in Texas in the twentieth century.

Furthermore, even as Mexican American married women with children joined the labor force in increasing numbers, their role expectations often did not change. As Patricia Zavella showed, the cannery women in Santa Clara subordinated job responsibilities to family needs and when men did help at home, a reversion to old ways occurred as soon as the canning season ended. Mexican American society expected Mexican American women, especially married ones, to be private individuals, concerned primarily with family. The marital situation of the most active Mexican American strikers confirmed such expectations. Sophie Gonzales divorced her husband because he could not accept her constant association with male unionists. Maria de Jesus [Blanca] Vargas from the El
Paso garment strikes never married. In the Farah strike, both Virginia Delgado from El Paso and Janie Naranjo from San Antonio were divorced. Gregoria Montalbo, local 180's president in the 1959 Tex-Son strike, was married but had no children. These women could be active because they did not fit the mold of the nuclear family where the mother's sole consuming interest would be the family and where even a job had to revolve around family needs.

As my study shows, Mexican American strikers took on numerous public roles contrary to the expectations of Mexican American society.

Mexican American women had all the characteristics of unorganizable workers, but as we have seen, they were not passive victims in the workplace. Women in the laundry, pecan-shelling, cigar, and garment industries, throughout the twentieth century, protested exploitative work conditions, low wages, and attempts to rob them of their dignity. They initiated strikes, made decisions about how they would protest, raised funds, provided leadership, and took matters into their own hands, making use of Mexican cultural traditions and sometimes going so far as to attack strikebreakers, who were usually other Mexican American women. As they had done with the expectations of Mexican American society, the women turned upside down the union's negative images of them as minority workers.

The basis for traditional craft unions' neglect of women and minorities was their presumed unorganizability. The actions of the women in the cigar strike of 1933 and the pecan shellers'
The strike of 1938 in San Antonio showed how well equipped the women were to deal with strike duties. During the cigar strike, the Mexican American women selected leaders—Mrs. Ernst, Mrs. E.J. Padilla, Adela Hernandez, and Modesta Herrera— who later became officers of the newly created cigar local, picketed the plant, and presented their demands to the owner and the press, as well as demanded that city officials look into health conditions at the plant. The women developed their own fundraising activities, ranging from the organization of a traditional carnival to daringly parading the streets of the city asking for contributions. When their attempts to secure an audience with the cigar plant owner failed, the Mexican American women arranged for an arbitrated end to the dispute.

In the 1938 pecan shellers' strike in San Antonio, the weak position of the unions, including the new UCAPAWA, and the large numbers of Mexican American women in the industry precluded their omission from public participation in leadership roles. Two Mexican American women, Emma Tenayuca, state chair of the Workers' Alliance, and Minnie Rendon, the secretary of the pecan local, along with Leonard Avila, the local's president, set up picketing on the first day of the walkout, only to be arrested by local police determined to prevent the political awakening of the Mexican American masses. Mexican American women were part of the strike committee that defended Tenayuca to the press and protested her jailing to police. The women participated enthusiastically in
picketing activities, returning repeatedly to their duties despite arrests, beatings, and teargassing by police. Women, including Minnie Rendon, helped lead a convoy to Austin to demand publicly from Governor James Allred an investigation of police harassment. A teenager at the time of the strike, Alberta Snid, remembered, "My sister and I signed up for the delegates. Why, I don't know why, we wanted to go.... A lot of people joined and they were going as a delegation to Austin." Three Mexican American women formed part of the negotiation committee that agreed to an arbitration board settlement of the strike. Thus, despite UCAPAWA attempts to coalesce the locals into one organized structure, the Mexican American women had a big impact on the strike's direction.

The violence that appeared in the cigar and pecan shellers' strikes was, for the most part, instigated by local police and directed towards the strikers. As representatives of an established political machine, used to depending on the acquiescence and bought vote of the Mexican American workers, the police relied on violence to maintain the existing power structure. Their harassment of strikers and violation of strikers' rights led to protests from the Mexican ambassador and others, forcing the governor to mount an investigation of the situation. Headed by a known liberal, the state industrial commission ruled against the police, concluding that there was no cause for police actions in arresting strikers at will and, without filing charges for days, beating women and men pickets, teargassing indiscriminately, and threatening union members for
belonging to UCAPAWA. The commission, however, had no power to enforce its decisions, and the governor refused to send in rangers to replace the local police.

The local political machine held onto power, as the fear of thousands of Mexican Americans rising in protest was troublesome to all elements of Anglo society in San Antonio. The press supported the police actions, calling picket parades "mob actions", and praising the actions of the police chief for preventing a Communist takeover. Both the Ministers' Association and the Archbishop of San Antonio did likewise, denouncing UCAPAWA leadership as Communist and anti-American. The labor press failed to cover the strike and subsequently exhibited political banners supporting the police chief at the labor hall. Even Mexican American civic groups, with their middle-class aspirations to become part of the American melting pot, refused to side with the shellers until Donald Henderson swore that all Communist influences had been eliminated. Fortunately for those in power, UCAPAWA control had channeled the Mexican American strikers' energies toward the original issue of wage rates, and due to economic necessity, the pecan shellers forsook Workers Alliance' influence that had given the protest an aura of an ethnic movement for justice and settled for the arbitration board's decision to return wages to previous levels.

The Mexican American women cigar strikers of 1933-35 resorted to violence only after all other avenues had been exhausted.
After Finck reneged on the arbitrated agreement, the cigar strikers turned to the NLRB and a state industrial commission inquiry in attempts to force negotiation of the dispute with Finck, but the lack of power behind decisions against him by federal and state agencies created an impasse. It was only then, when the women faced the reality of their powerlessness in the larger society and the limit to their ability to affect the strike, that they embraced violent tactics against their immediate opponents—the Mexican American cigarworkers. The actions of the sheriff and his deputies in the cigar strike in dealing with the Mexican American women strikers revealed the larger society's attitude that, as one deputy put it, "you're just Mexicans."

The actions and reactions of the Mexican American women strikers in the laundry strike of 1919 in El Paso and the pre- and post-WWII garment disputes were significantly different. Guided by an established union bureaucracy, the women performed their assigned tasks faithfully. In 1919, the CLU advised the women laundry strikers to form a committee from each plant to go out and persuade scabs not to take their places in the laundries. The CLU leadership took on all other strike assignments: speaking to the press, calling for meetings, raising money, appealing for support, and presenting demands to the owners. Having in the past used the labor paper to castigate Mexican immigrants for taking the jobs of Americans, the CLU now had to present the Mexican American laundry women in a favorable light, as American citizens deserving of rights and protection. The women dutifully succeeded in
convincing some Mexican aliens not to serve as strikebreakers, and attempted to help raise funds by knitting at the labor hall, but other actions on their part are revealing of the inability of the CLU to meet their needs.

The Mexican American women garment strikers took part in strikes that were organized by Anglo, male dominated unions with established procedures and practices. Even when the local ILGWU organizers were women, these were, before 1945, Anglo women most of whom knew no Spanish and had no knowledge of Mexican customs. The ACWA was even more male dominated: all local managers and union lawyers were men, who, like CLU leaders in 1919, carried out all public functions for the strikers. Furthermore, fighting to stay alive in a right-to-work state, the garment unions left little room for unconventional behavior, expecting the Mexican American women to participate along predetermined lines and to work for particular bread and butter issues.

The Mexican American garment unionists performed their strike tasks well, from the everyday ones, such as picketing, to the more official ones as local union positions opened up to them. Mexican American women in the 1930's served as sub-organizers for the ILGWU in San Antonio, as well as presidents of the locals in some instances. But even then, the picture that emerges from news accounts of the strikes is that many of the Mexican American women's actions were done in conjunction with the Anglo organizers. Rebecca Taylor went with Natalie Maldonado and Anita
Fierro to persuade the mayor to accept Social Security cards as proof of the strikers' employment at the plant in the 1937 Shirlee Frocks strike. Helen Rivas, well known for her activism, seemed always to be with Taylor, Merle Zappone, or Joanne Ramsey, sometime ILGWU educational director. The organizers did all the press work, even with the Spanish-language paper.

The heavy hand of the ILGWU was most evident in what the Mexican American women unionists did not do during the garment strikes in the 1930's in San Antonio. They did not see their disputes in terms of justice as had the pecan shellers or respect as did the cigar strikers; they asked for better wages and conditions and for recognition of the union. The garment strikers did not rely on the Mexican consul as had the cigar strikers and pecan shellers, nor did they have Mexican speakers at their rallies and meetings. The shellers picked Tenayuca as strike chair and the cigar strikers put Mrs. "Refugio" Ernst and her four associates in charge from the first day, but the garment strikers seemed to consider Zappone and Taylor as strike heads. The Anglo leadership of the ILGWU accounted for the better treatment of the women by city hall. While the local government opposed the strikes and jailed the women continually, they were not physically mistreated by police, or called outsiders or Communists by local officials, or as severely limited in their picketing by the courts. Their frequent confrontations were labelled disturbances by the press, and the ILGWU won contracts with two of the three struck companies. Rebecca Taylor's tendency to confer with local
establishment officials before proceeding with strike activity was a big factor in minimizing the negative attitude of the local establishment.

Mexican American women unionists held more official positions in locals after WWII, but because of the strict overseeing of strike events by union management, they did not necessarily have more opportunity to affect decisions during the strikes. While a Mexican American woman was president of the local and Sophie Gonzales was ACWA organizer at Top-Notch in 1965, the male union manager and the local's lawyer handled the press and contract negotiations. Although the presidency of Montalbo and chairing of most committees by Mexican American women had an impact, the ILGWU kept the women busy with parades, leafletting, the boycott, and a film in the 1959 strike at Tex-Son. The ACWA placed Mexican American men in charge in 1972 at Farah in El Paso, and the Mexican American women strikers picketed, paraded, did office work, spoke to selected audiences, and did boycott work. Interviews with strikers reveal, however, that the ACWA did not encourage female picket captains, women talking to the press, or women's input on final contract negotiations. The garment unions ultimately recognized the Mexican American women's domination in the industry through official positions at the local level, yet the unions preferred to keep the women to standard union practices that limited their chances of making decisions about the conduct of the strike.
While there were other effects, the major result from the restrictive and authoritative direction of strikes by the long established ILGWU and ACWA and in 1919 in El Paso by the CLU, was violent confrontations between Mexican American strikers and strikebreakers. The Anglo male leadership of the CLU charged the Mexican American laundry strikers with the job of convincing strikebreakers not to replace them in the plants, and the women did persuade some Mexican commuters. But the Mexican American women did not content themselves with doing this; they went to the international bridge to try to nip the problem at its source. In their roles as pickets, they used unsavory terms to scabs and laundry drivers who had reneged on the strike. Furthermore, the women came very close to violence, threatening to pull one scab's hair out for continuing to go in to work. Obviously, the women felt compelled to go beyond the limits set by CLU and extend their assigned roles through unconventional behavior.

In the garment strikes, animosities were so great between the two sides that strikers' actions ranged from threats to beatings. Nonstrikers at Dorothy Frocks in 1936 feared going to work because if pickets caught them, they would undress them publicly. Beatings resulted in bruises and in one case at Texas Infants Dress Company, a chipped tooth. Threats by strikers to turn Mexican workers in to the INS were common in the El Paso garment strikes. During the Hortex strike of 1953, strikers threatened workers with lifelong bodily disfigurement, and carloads of them went to the Mexican city of Juarez to punish scabs with physical
attacks. In two days in February 1959, Tex-Son strikers bit, kicked and pulled the hair of non-strikers. Only at Farah in 1972 in El Paso did Mexican American women strikers deny totally taking part in violence, although Farah strikers in San Antonio admitted whacking non-strikers with picket signs on at least one occasion.

Caught in low-skill, low-paying, segmented, and stratified jobs, the Mexican American women strikers had few options. But these most unorganizable of workers not only protested their situation at work, they even protested when the unions left them too little control. Joining a union and taking part in strikes must have appeared as a means to make some difference. But for the laundry and garment strikers, the pervasive control from the Anglo and Mexican American male hierarchy must have made the union seem just another patron, or boss, unwilling to give them an opportunity to change the system. The only recourse was to go outside that system and physically confront their immediate opposition, other Mexican American women.

Conditions outside work offered no alternative. Companies had not only economic power but political power as well. Mexican American women tried to expand their options by seeking the support of the press, workers in other industries, the Church, Mexican American groups and voluntary organizations, but as we have seen, these were sometimes as powerless as the women and other times unwilling to expand their concepts of appropriate women's roles. It is understandable, then, that the women
strikers began to develop an "us against them" mentality that focused on those people they could reach—the Mexican American women non-strikers.

In his sociological study of workers' unity, *Cultures of Solidarity*, Rick Fantasia maintained that solidarity is a fluid state whereby actions impinge on other actions to produce new conditions which bring in participants who develop a level of unity, unexpected and maybe even unattainable in other circumstances. During a strike, the Mexican American women continually experienced direct, face to face opposition from the companies in the form of fences, guard dogs, company-provided transportation and company-hired protection of strikebreakers. Such opposition created a sense of solidarity for those who faced these odds together. The Mexican American women strikers had few resources to deal with bosses that were unreachable in most terms—class, geography, or connections with the establishment.

The feelings of solidarity for the group could only increase when the larger society expressed its opposition and its preference for the company through denials that a strike existed, police harassment, court injunctions, and the manipulation of ordinances. When one adds the constraints placed on them by supporters who expected them to behave peacefully, as did the Mexican American middle-class, or in an orderly manner, as did the unions, or in a non-radical way, as did the Church, then here was another reason for the Mexican American women strikers to turn to each other for solidarity. Each level of opposition added to the
development of their consciousness as a group apart from all others. Thus, the ties of ethnicity were broken by those of perceived economic interests. Solidarity based on economic interests proved to be more durable.

This development of a group solidarity was not just a reaction to levels of opposition, however, but also rested on the actions of group members that improved their economic situation. Fantasia has asserted that when strikers experience actions by other strikers that enhance their overall position, the solidarity of the group expands likewise. In Mexican American women's strikes, what others saw as unacceptable behavior, the women seemed to view as advantageous for their cause; it was behavior shared and understood to be positive. A good example is the beatings that Mexican American women administered to other Mexican-heritage women in the garment strikes, which often started as mere struggles at picket lines and escalated to carloads of strikers going into Juarez to attack strikebreakers. Each successive act of violence was another thread in the web of solidarity for a group which saw no other means to power.

In the face of the great odds against them, Mexican American women strikers sometimes relied on Mexican customs and traditions to express their defiance of the opposition. In the 1936 Dorothy Frock's strike, the strikers adopted the singing of corridos as a way to let the nonstrikers know how they felt about their scabbing. Singing was also an expression of their solidarity,
something they could do after arrests while waiting in jail for the union to bail them out. Another more common tactic that also depended on Mexican customs was to undress strikebreakers, with the understanding that to do so was to bring verguenza, or shame, to the whole family. Incidents of unclothing of scabs occurred in all the garment strikes except Farah in 1972 and was applied to Anglo women, too, perhaps because Mexican American women believed that any woman would feel humiliated to be treated so in public. The most interesting case of using Mexican customs came from the Mexican American workers at Tex-Son in 1959, who stuck pins on dolls looking like particular strikers and dropped them from the plant to strikers. The Mexican American strikers appreciated the significance of the gesture and sought their own faithhealer to counter the ill-will of the strikebreakers.

The terms that Mexican American strikers employed against strikebreakers came out of Mexican cultural traditions. In the 1919 laundry strike, the Mexican American women called nonstrikers ronosos, meaning scab, but in Spanish denoting a scabrous or leper-like person. In the garment strike of 1938 at Texas Infants, the women shouted to strikebreakers that the latter were mulas, or "mules". In Spanish, however, a mule is more than stubborn, it means stupid, dumb, not smart enough to catch on. During the garment strikes in post-war El Paso, the Mexican American strikers responded to a particular Mexican phrase from workers by stoning them. The Mexican American workers liked to yell, "se van a morir de hambre!" or "you're going to die from
hunger," which to the strikers was a very real possibility as Mexican Americans often lived on the verge of poverty.

The prominent Texas folklorist Americo Paredes has asserted that Mexican Americans have used Mexican ways, in particular songs, to thumb their nose at the opposition, even when these have been other Mexican-heritage people, if the differences represent the stresses of cultural conflict. Mexican Americans see their Mexican-heritage opponents as vendidos, or sellouts, and the immediate historical reality of their Mexicanness becomes less important than their representation of the Anglo culture. The Mexican American women were able to degrade their Mexican American opponents by publicly unclothing them, for instance, because in their eyes these women stood for the company, the Anglo owners, and the Anglo establishment. Such an attitude would increase the feelings of solidarity for their side, as true representatives of Mexicanismo, as opposed to the accommodating strikebreakers. What is ironic is that both sides in such disputes shared a common culture but identified at bottom, on the basis of where they stood with regard to the picketline.

In view of their triple oppression as women, workers, and Mexican Americans, it is not surprising that the Mexican American women strikers searched for ways to improve their work situations by going outside the system. Whether the women turned to Mexican customs and traditions or resorted to violence against women strikebreakers, it was their way of expressing the unfulfilled
needs that traditional unions, concerned with bureaucratic goals, failed to identify, much less meet. The Anglo community denied their existence as Americans, companies refused to acknowledge their rights as workers, and society at large, including unions and strike supporters, circumscribed their role as women. It is understandable that the Mexican American women strikers in Texas responded by retreating to familiar Mexican ways or with violence. What is significant is that these "unlikely strikers" not only struck, but in a variety of ways worked to improve their lives and gain control over their fate.
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