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Mexican Laborers, American Workers, and New Deal Socioeconomic Politics: The San Antonio Pecan Shellers Strike of 1938

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In January 1938, over 8,000 people of Mexican descent who processed pecans for extremely low wages in very poor working conditions in the Mexican Quarter of San Antonio, Texas went on strike. The strike by 90 percent of the workforce was far more than just a labor action; it was a mass uprising on behalf of over 100,000 Mexicans, the majority of whom were American citizens, for improved pay and working conditions for agricultural laborers more broadly, a better standard of living for residents of the Mexican Quarter forced to live in appallingly poor conditions, and respect and inclusion of Mexicans themselves who had been branded as un-American and left behind in the local economy. The strike has been recognized as an example of expansion of union organizing in the Southwest and its far-reaching impact on the South, but it resulted in very meager and short-lived economic benefits for workers. This article examines the strike and sheds light on the function and economic effect of Jim Crow social formation in San Antonio's local politics during the Great Depression and how occupational exclusion in New Deal legislation and discriminatory local implementation of those programs created a category of the subordinated Mexican laborers. But even as Mexicans were taken advantage of and treated as an expendable source of cheap labor, they in fact were not just expropriable racial "others" subject to often unlawful deportation; they were essential to maintaining the area's entire socioeconomic system and were indispensable to implementation of the New Deal in San Antonio.

1. Introduction

On January 31, 1938, over 8,000 people of Mexican descent who labored for exceedingly low wages in very poor working conditions in the Mexican Quarter of San Antonio, Texas abandoned their work of processing pecans

and went on strike.[1] Over 400 pecan processing sites concentrated in the quarter operated with minimal mechanized equipment and relied almost exclusively on these residents' manual labor. Peak pecan processing season was from November to March, and during this time of year between 12,000 and 20,000 Mexican residents, known derogatorily as the "Pecan slaves of Texas"[2] worked for corporate processors at extremely low wages.[3] Overall, more than 100,000 Mexicans, the majority of whom were American citizens, lived in very congested and dire conditions in the Mexican Quarter, a segregated four-square mile area on the westside of the city.[4] The very impoverished and under resourced community, was described at the time as "one of the most extensive slums to be found in any American city."[5] Almost all of them were hungry and hopelessly in need of work and thus worked for extremely low pay during pecan season. However, wages had become so low by the beginning of 1938 that Mexicans had no recourse but to strike. On the morning of January 31, 1938, at the peak of the season, only about 10% of the usual workforce showed up at processing sites for work.[6]

Since the late 1900s, economic and political expansion across the United States had been increasing national and international linkages, and these developments inevitably had an impact in places such as San Antonio. The advent of the Great Depression in the fall of 1929 exacerbated the need for change, and the Roosevelt administration's large-scale national New Deal projects to address the Depression during the 1930s accelerated the pace of the transformation. The economic peril of 1930s legitimized workers' solidarity as a means of economic and social survival, marking a turning point in American society. However, Mexicans in San Antonio faced severe obstacles to gaining recognition as working-class Americans, entitled to rights, respect, and inclusion in the broader pluralistic, albeit discriminatory, American society. During the turbulent period of socioeconomic change in the second half of the 1930s, San Antonio stood at the intersection of the existing conservative Jim Crow agrarian and Democratic South and the developing transnational and industrial Southwest.[7] Further complicating circumstances was the fact that access to the pathbreaking and progressive national New Deal welfare programs was based on the racial and ethnic conceptualization and ideology that had been systematized in the late 1920s.[8]

Excellent diachronic studies of Texas history during the first half of the twentieth century discuss important subjects such as the social treatment of Mexicans, issues surrounding the framing of the Americanization of

immigrants, Whiteness, and class, and multilayered race relations among Whites, Blacks, and Mexicans. These studies recognize the significance of the Great Depression and the New Deal as historical turning points.[9] With respect to the San Antonio strike, gender studies pertaining to the manifestation of the political and social rights of women in a patriarchal ethnoracial community, research regarding the strike as a forerunner to the broader civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and transnational studies focusing on the cultural and historical ties between the U.S. and Mexico have all contributed to the diversity of research.[10]

All of these studies are informative and offer valuable insights into complex aspects of the history of Mexicans in the U.S. However, these studies tend to emphasize the importance of the opportunity that European immigrant groups had to form ethnic communities of workers and proactive immigrant participation in Americanization during the development of liberalism and the building of the welfare state and frame Mexicans as an expendable, objectified, deportable, and marginalized group that did not play a vital role in the socioeconomic change that took place at the turning point of the New Deal era.[11]

This paper through investigation and analysis of the specifics of the 1938 pecan strike illuminates the indispensable role that Mexicans played in maintaining the broader socioeconomic system that underwent such profound transformation during this time. What were the specific circumstances that provoked Mexicans living in the westside San Antonio slum to strike the pecan shelling industry in January 1938? Why did Mexicans' living conditions not improve after the strike? What was the meaning, significance, and impact of the strike in the context of local and national New Deal liberalism?

With these questions in mind, this article provides insights into the function and economic effect of Jim Crow social formation in San Antonio's local politics during the Great Depression, local authorities' reaction to the strike, and how occupational exclusion in federal New Deal legislation and discriminatory local implementation of New Deal programs created a category of the subordinated, cheap, and migrant Mexican laborers within the socioeconomic system. Focusing on the local political sphere surrounding the Mexican Quarter, this article examines the conditions that enabled New Deal liberalism to become intertwined in multifaceted ways with local social policies and attitudes about race and inclusion throughout and after the strike.

2. The Causes and Conditions That Led to the Strike

Pecans are native to the southern United States and have long grown wild along the rivers of Texas. Commercialization of their hulled nuts began in the late nineteenth century, but a turning point for the industry occurred during the second half of the 1920s and the Great Depression. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, commercial pecans were processed by machine, but in 1926, a newly arrived pecan processing company, the Southern Pecan Shelling Company (SPSC), founded by Julius Seligman saw a business opportunity during the economic downturn, characterized by high unemployment and an abundant available Mexican workforce. The company believed it could substantially lower production costs if it reverted from mechanized to manual operations, and through subcontractors it exploited numerous Mexicans who would work for low wages in poor working conditions. Pecan shelling as part of household domestic work also played an important role in overall industry processing. During the height of the pecan season, women and older people toiled as pecan processors for extremely low pay as part of their domestic work to help their households.[12] SPSC grew rapidly under this system of subcontracted work and domestic work, which was part of a broader social fabric of occupational hierarchy in the regional economy as it moved from recession to growth.[13]

Seasonal Mexican labor in San Antonio's pecan industry was one part of a broader Mexican migrant labor cycle. San Antonio operated as an aggregation point for the flow of labor between urban industrial and rural agricultural areas extending across the state. By the first two decades of the twentieth century, the city had developed into a leading labor distribution center in the Southwest, employing Mexicans as unskilled and temporary manual laborers, who formed the city's social, economic, and political base.[14] Traditional Southern agrarian society, based on mutual dependency between landowners on one hand and tenants and sharecroppers on the other, which consequently was both benevolent and exploitative, was already becoming dismantled when the Great Depression struck. New Deal agricultural policies accelerated its demise and ultimately led to the establishment of industrial agribusiness.[15] The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and the Cotton Control Act of 1934 attempted to reduce cultivated acreage to slow declines in crop prices. Later these laws were extended to other farm commodities, providing federal support to owners and capitalists.

This system of agriculture depended on a cheap, temporary, and

nonresidential workforce during harvest seasons. Mexicans accounted for up to 85% of this labor force in rural areas. This reconfiguration of Texas's socioeconomic structure during the period of New Deal reforms established San Antonio as a prominent hub for the supply of labor.[16] Unlike industrial crops whose harvest seasons are in summer and autumn, pecan season is in the winter. By managing Mexicans as cheap laborers exclusively for manual work under a pyramidal subcontracting system for a limited operation during winter when the harvest of industrial crops had slowed, SPSC became the controller of raw pecans and nationwide processing and distribution channels.[17]

By 1938, SPSC produced nearly half the nation's output of shelled pecans, and its business had grown from $700,000 in 1930 to over $3,000,000 in 1936, with an initial investment in equipment of only $50,000, while "Pecan King" Seligman netted more than $500,000 and paid himself a $1,000 monthly salary.[18] This growth in profit came not from efficiency, mechanization, lower raw material costs, or higher commodity prices but from extremely low labor costs. In other words, SPSC's increased profit margin was based solely on low compensation for Mexicans' work. Agricultural production in Texas dropped sharply due to bad weather in 1937–38, and the entire Mexican Quarter became a pecan processing plant. Not only did women regularly shell pecans either at the workplace or at home during the winter, generating a small amount of cash to supplement family income, but men too, usually occupied in temporary work in rural areas, had no choice but to remain in the city cracking and shelling pecans that year.[19]

The pecan processing sites were filled with dense, long wooden structures and small *jacales* (simple adobe housing structures) built close to one another without windows, indoor baths or toilets, and festering millions of mosquitoes and flies.[20] Residents living in this substandard housing suffered from serious infectious diseases, and many frequently faced starvation. Infectious diseases meant that the quarter represented a distinct menace to surrounding communities as well. Almost ninety percent of families living in the Mexican Quarter lacked the minimum standard of living with the tuberculosis death rate five times higher than other areas in San Antonio and the infant mortality rate one of the highest in the nation.[21]

Notwithstanding these harsh living conditions, San Antonio's westside provided Mexicans a place to feel a sense of community and gave them the opportunity to establish their livelihood and aspire for integration into the wider society. Contrary to popular perception that the Mexicans

living in the slum were passive and politically ignorant migrant laborers in the U.S. only temporarily, Mexicans participated in local and national political events, rallies, and debates and in cultural activities that should have made them part of American and Texan society.[22] A typical example of their engagement was the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), a political party which propagated liberal anarchism and socialism in the American Southwest.[23] The PLM operated as a natural presence in Mexicans' lives and the party's perspective served as a lens for Mexicans to understand their difficult living situation. Radicalism in class consciousness brought into the U.S. during and after the Mexican Revolution still thrived and echoed the traditions of revolutionary Mexico and labor movements in the U.S. during the 1930s.

During the Great Depression, residents of the Mexican Quarter began to express themselves and the challenges they faced in new ways, and the promises of the New Deal gave them impetus for activism. For instance, the Communist Party's Unemployed Council was established in 1930 and launched a Workers Alliance of America (WAA) chapter among Mexicans. At the heart of the upheaval was Texas WAA leader Emma Tenayuca, an icon of the mass movement, whose ability to appeal to people earned her the moniker "*la passionaria*."[24] Tenayuca and the WAA aimed to solve the problems of poverty and discrimination experienced not just by industrial workers, but by low-wage seasonal and agricultural laborers as well. They did not try to persuade Mexicans to join political parties, but instead addressed directly various social inequalities that led to poverty, unemployment, and the classification of Mexicans as low-wage seasonal migrant laborers.[25] The WAA used the material and human resources of the socialist and communist parties, agitated for the government to extend relief to Mexicans, and condemned the discriminatory local social structure.[26]

Mexicans' dissatisfaction intensified into a dynamic collective movement.[27] People in the Mexican Quarter gathered spontaneously in their neighborhood on the last weekend of January 1938.[28] On Friday, January 28, three hundred Mexicans in this area met at a nearby dance hall to discuss how to improve their situation *vis-a-vis* recent wage reductions from 7 to 6 cents per pound for pecan halves and 6 to 5 cents per pound for pecan pieces as well as from 50 cents to 40 cents per 100 pounds for cracking.[29] On Sunday, January 30, they held a mass meeting in Cassiano Park, a center of everyday life, to seek and inspire action to improve their pitiful social conditions and standing. The very next day, around 8,000 persons in the Mexican Quarter walked off their pecan processing jobs

to protest such dire working and living conditions.[30] As one participant recollected, they "were in the same boat … everybody was hungry, and there was no place to get a job. The wages were so low that they had no recourse but to go on strike."[31]

Reflecting a cultural environment of energetic debates about class and politics, Mexicans had participated in small-scale strikes focused on specific labor disputes in light manufacturing settings, such as cigar and garment factories since the early 1930s.[32] Unlike those strikes which had the character of typical labor and union actions, the Mexicans' protest movement of 1938 represented more a mass uprising among the Mexican residents, regardless of their connection to the pecan industry.[33] Indeed, the pecan industry was too small a socioeconomic presence for the labor dispute alone to have a significant impact on the broader economy. Thus, the strike constituted much more than a mere labor movement for workers' unionization. It represented a forceful voice for a broad appeal for improved pay and working conditions for migrant laborers in the larger agricultural industry in farming areas, for a better standard of living for residents of Mexican Quarter forced to live in appallingly poor conditions, and for recognition, respect, and inclusion of Mexicans who had been treated as a marginalized group, left behind in the local social economy.

3. The Socioeconomic and Political Environment Surrounding the Strike

Residents of the Mexican Quarter maintained their struggle for three months despite fierce opposition from city authorities led by San Antonio Mayor C. K. Quinn and Police Chief Owen W. Kilday. City authorities did not acknowledge that the residents were engaging in a justifiable mass action for better working and living conditions; instead, they informed the public that Mexicans were antisocial forces conducting a riot or revolution and portrayed them as a dangerous cancer that threatened the stability of local society.[34] The San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) cracked down on strikers and made mass arrests of Mexicans, declaring their gatherings and refusal to work at the pecan shelling plants to be illegal. Armed with heavy batons and tear gas, the SAPD rounded up Mexicans, charging them with "unlawful" assembly, blocking the sidewalk, carrying signs without a permit, and vagrancy. The Bexar County Jail overflowed and acquired notoriety as the "Black Hole of San Antonio," imprisoning more than 300 Mexicans, five times its maximum capacity of 60.[35] The city authorities'

strong retaliation against the social threat posed by Mexicans living in the westside slum attracted widespread local and national media interest. Pointing to the SAPD's harsh repression of westside residents, the Mexican government protested to the Texas State Department. It was the first time a foreign government had opposed municipal police actions in the U.S.[36]

For city authorities, their response to the growing westside movement also took the form of a campaign to appeal to their political base. Responding to a social and economic challenge that threatened to undermine the existing system, Mayor Quinn's strategy was to denounce the growing movement as communist and un-American. Quinn exhorted Mexicans to return to work, arguing that they "will not be able to receive a fair, calm, and dispassionate hearing if you permit communist leaders to excite and agitate your people."[37] In Quinn's opinion, no legitimate union organizing or worker strike in the city's pecan industry was taking place; rather, city authorities were responding appropriately to suppress an antisocial, communist riot in the slum. Quinn stressed that the public would be prejudiced against Mexicans' claims as long as they followed red leaders.[38] According to Quinn, the SAPD was reacting forcefully against communists. Police Chief Kilday publicly declared that the communists were attempting to cause a revolution that could overthrow the whole social composition of San Antonio. He planned to split up all picket lines and mass meetings on the westside where he claimed that the communists were inciting helpless Mexicans to stop working and misleading them to agitate.[39]

Although the majority of Mexican Quarter residents were in fact American citizens, the local perception was that they were migrants staying in the U.S. only temporarily. This perception that stigmatized Mexicans was deeply rooted in historical and racial conceptions legitimizing prejudice and intolerance toward immigrants from Mexico.[40] Due to the heavy demand for cheap labor, the immigration acts of the 1910s and 1920s had permitted unrestricted entry of Mexican migrants, who were allowed to come to the U.S. physically to work, but these prevailing discriminatory attitudes toward the immigrants prevented them from becoming part of the social fabric of the nation. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, these negative attitudes toward Mexicans became incorporated into state and federal New Deal welfare politics.[41] When confronted with widespread mass unemployment in the Great Depression, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) did not simply limit the influx of new Mexican immigrants; it instead expressed a vested interest in removing as many

people of Mexican descent as possible–regardless of whether or not they were American citizens or had legal immigrant status—in order to allocate more jobs for what it considered to be "real" Americans.[42] Accordingly, the INS deported people of Mexican descent without checking their immigration or nationality status, and many U.S. citizens were deported or left the U.S. on their own because of the threat of deportation. Indeed, during the first half of the 1930s, over half of Mexicans forced to leave the U.S. were American citizens.[43] The 1938 San Antonio strike accelerated the pressure to deport and repatriate Mexicans, and the local police and fire departments, the Texas Rangers, and local immigration bureau units organized a riot squad that was stationed in the Mexican Quarter. The Texas Rangers were permitted to police Mexicans inside the city under the newly formed state Department of Public Safety in 1935.[44]

However, the perception of Mexicans' inferiority was not only imposed from the outside against them; it was also given meaning internally from sectors within the Mexican Quarter itself. In fact, the social, political, and economic complexities of the Mexican Quarter prevented the labor movement from coalescing into a interwoven ethnoracial community organization to foster a collective consciousness among Mexican residents.[45] The San Antonio Mexican population was a not a monolith. It included a Mexican middle class, who established their own enclave in the northern region of the westside to segregate themselves from the impoverished living conditions elsewhere in the district and to avoid association with the migrant laborers residing in the slum.[46] Further, two prominent Mexican American organizations, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, in fact spoke out against the strike.[47]

LULAC sought to adhere to and be accepted as part of the prevailing social structure of the American South and integrate as a White organization to the extent possible in the existing Jim Crow social order.[48] To further that purpose, it exclusively admitted only Mexicans who were U.S. citizens into its membership. But the majority of LULAC members were actually not part of the middle class and instead stigmatized Mexican Americans who lived in very impoverished conditions. And although some LULAC members held steady jobs in the city, many of those had family members who were still partially engaged as cyclical migrant laborers. LULAC's opposing the strike despite these realities illuminates the clear differences in priorities within the Mexican Quarter at the time. LULAC embraced a class mentality that aimed to raise the status and public perception of settled

Mexican residents as Americans who were striving for respectability by pursuing the American ideal of improving their position in life through self-help and hard work to become more Americanized and earn their place in American society and democracy. This concept was inherently incompatible with the reality of the poverty and lack of opportunity that Mexicans living in the slum experienced in their everyday lives and Mexican laborers' lack of socioeconomic mobility on society's occupational ladder.[49] This divergence between LULAC's mission and mindset and the pressing needs of very low-wage migrant laborers who were cast as un-American ethnoracial minority radicals prevented mutually beneficial coalition work between LULAC, which purported to represent Mexicans who were middle class and/or had U.S. citizenship, and social movements on behalf of Mexican laborers living in the slum.[50] As such, social, political, and economic factors impeded formation of an effective Mexican coalition discussed by Zaragosa Vargas that sought to equate labor rights with civil rights.[51]

For city authorities, ensuring and effectively promoting economic recovery during the Great Depression required municipal control that relied on the existing paternalistic power structure and racial occupational hierarchy. The Texas Constitution enacted after Reconstruction prohibited the creation of any statewide relief system that provided assistance to individuals directly. Accordingly, the local political machines controlled and managed the actual operation of welfare policies. This existing rigid social structure remained fixed in a different form, even under the influence of the policies of the New Deal. Since the city's politics depended on a growing number of White workers as a percentage of the voting population, authorities distributed welfare and relief by implementing unfair promulgations to protect White workers from having to compete against Blacks and Mexicans, thus upholding the White privilege of the existing local Jim Crow regime.[52]

The development of New Deal welfare policies during the period also contributed to concretizing the Mexican laborers' social position in order to facilitate more business-oriented management of the cycle of seasonal labor that stretched across rural and urban areas. A striking example was the 1935 federal Social Security Act, which excluded agricultural workers, domestic servants, and public employees from welfare and unemployment insurance. The unfairness of this exclusionary welfare distribution was accentuated in urban areas, particularly San Antonio. Federal government agencies had primary responsibility for managing the provisions of the Social Security

Act, including distribution of social security benefits, and other New Deal legislation, but states also held significant power regarding how programs were implemented and were responsible for about half of the programs' operating expenses. While the federal legislation and federal agencies did not condition individuals' receipt of benefits on U.S. citizenship or legal immigration status, the Texas state Works Progress Administration (WPA) prohibited noncitizens from participating in its programs. The Texas Relief Commission followed the state WPA's approach and removed people of Mexican descent from the welfare rolls, regardless of their citizenship status.[53] The state Unemployment Compensation Commission rejected over 40% of the 3,000 claims made during 1938, 75% of which came from Mexicans living on the westside.[54] Only a favored few Mexicans had the opportunity to possibly receive public welfare relief as part of the New Deal.

Despite economic difficulties during the Great Depression and its aftermath, San Antonio's population increased by approximately 10% during the 1930s from 231,542 to 253,854. More than half of this growth was due to an influx of working-class people, with a notable increase in the number of unskilled Mexican migrant laborers. It coincided with rapid growth of the Mexican Quarter and posed a social problem that could strain the state's budget.[55] The city's local politics operated according to the machine politics of the Southern Democratic Party based on Jim Crow race relations.[56] The city split itself into different districts according to the machine's voting patterns: the north for wealthy Whites, the east for Blacks, and the south for White workers, with the Mexican neighborhood on the west side at the bottom.

White workers in the south side constituted about half of San Antonio's increasing working-class population.[57] The newly arrived Whites mixed with the existing German, Irish, and Jewish descent people who were already living in the city before the 1930s to form an aggregate White social grouping regardless of their different ethnic backgrounds as long as they could see a clear dividing line between themselves and the Blacks and the Mexicans.[58] White workers obtained regular jobs preferentially in the city's south side, which had developed into a new commercial center during the Great Depression. In particular, massive federal government projects to construct and expand military bases became San Antonio's primary source of income and the largest employers of White workers. The city also had over 300 manufacturing plants as ancillary facilities, producing goods valued at $40 million by 1939.[59]

Blacks comprised only about 10% of San Antonio's total population. Still, they built a community on the east side that was integral to the machine politics.[60] Black voters accounted for a large percentage of poll tax payments and comprised a quarter of the votes in county and municipal elections. Led by a community boss, Black votes backed the local machine in order to secure public works, regular jobs, and other patronages from privileged Whites in power.[61] Although their participation in machine politics did not provide Blacks the same social status as Whites in Jim Crow Texas, some Blacks were able to obtain and maintain a basic standard of living. During the Depression, machine patronage provided poor Blacks an alternative to poverty and a semblance of welfare relief.[62]

The political machine which exercised complete control over municipal functions relied heavily on the few wealthy White businesspeople, landowners, and capitalists in the northside and outside city limits. For capitalist advocates of rapid industrialization in urban and rural farm areas, abundant Mexican seasonal migrant laborers living in the westside slum had been essential to economic recovery and growth and were one of the city's most significant selling points to attract outside capital.[63] These laborers who received virtually no government relief during the Great Depression under the local welfare policies based on the southern Jim Crow social structure in San Antonio, were forced to work for exceedingly low wages in order to survive and were indispensable to maintaining the city's entire socioeconomic system because they performed essential work that no one else was willing to do.[64] As Professor Carlos Castaneda of the University of Texas described in 1936, the wages of Mexican laborers were meager, considering the hard work that no one else would do for that or any other compensation.[65] Indeed, Mexicans in 1938 earned at most only $2.40 for 40 hours of work per week, making them the lowest paid workers in the entire country.[66]

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STRIKE

Even though city leaders portrayed the Mexicans' organizing activities as un-American violence and proclaimed their duty to subdue such a dangerous insurrection, nearly everyone in San Antonio and most of the nation believed that a labor strike was taking place. The tide of New Deal liberalism was gaining momentum and threatening the local social and political machine structure of Jim Crow Texas. Communist and socialist activists had supported the grassroots movement of oppressed

and unemployed workers in Texas since the 1910s, and national political parties and trade unionists began to pay attention to the situation in the Mexican Quarter. They hoped to position the Mexican slum in the San Antonio westside as a critical battlefield in the more extensive campaign to expand New Deal liberalism and the labor movement to the South.[67] As part of this effort, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) rebuilt a dysfunctional local independent union and reconstituted it as the Pecan Workers Union in San Antonio Local No.172 of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) in November 1937.[68]

Further, opposition to San Antonio's strong machine politics was rising within the local liberal Democrats. The liberal Maury Maverick defeated the machine stalwart Quinn in the Democratic primary for Congress in 1934 and held the seat for two terms, further strengthening CIO-led unionization efforts in westside San Antonio. While supporting the reform policy of New Deal liberalism, Maverick's involvement in the unionizing activities in the slum was part of his political campaign.[69] To make a breakthrough against solid machine politics and further the pursuit of liberal economic reform, Maverick brought pressure to bear for change, stimulating further working-class activism in the westside Mexican slum as well as the eastside Black community.[70] As such, activists subscribing to broader radical political ideologies joined with local movements to establish an organizing base among Mexicans in the San Antonio west side.

It is important to understand that UCAPAWA came into existence after Mexicans had already organized their own social movement themselves for improvement of their working and living conditions. Mexican themselves, not UCAPAWA, made the decision to strike on the morning of January 31, 1938, and UCAPAWA joined the strike as it gained momentum. Initially, UCAPAWA was not the sole representative of the collective action in the Mexican Quarter.[71] However, UCAPAWA publicly announced five demands in labor-management negotiations on February 7, 1938, as a representative of the strikers: a wage increase, supervision of the union shop stewards, recognition of the union as the collective bargaining agent, a closed shop policy, and a requirement that city health standards be met.[72] With the support of Maverick, the CIO, and Texas Governor James Allred, UCAPAWA ordered an investigation of possible SAPD violations of pecan shelling workers' civil liberties and held hearings before the Texas Industrial Commission from February 12 to 15.[73] On March 8, UCAPAWA and SPSC agreed to submit their dispute to arbitration, and soon thereafter,

UCAPAWA ordered a stoppage of all strikes, and SAPD released all the Mexicans held in police custody. The next day, the Mexicans returned to work, and UCAPAWA was approved as the sole bargaining agent for SPSC's pecan shelling workers.[74] On March 22, UCAPAWA announced the strike's success at a mass meeting before the city hall, with an estimated 25,000 people streaming into the streets to celebrate the victory.[75]

However, the victory UCAPAWA claimed was in reality only a relatively narrow win limited to trade unionism. The union's victory did not represent achievement of the objectives of the original social movement launched by Mexicans in the slum. About a month after the strike had started, UCAPAWA international President Donald Henderson appointed new activists to lead Local No. 172 to draw a line between its efforts to unionize the pecan processing industry and other social movements of Mexicans living in the slum.[76] UCAPAWA removed the radical Mexican element from the front line of the strike and took the lead in negotiations with SPSC themselves, thereby enabling them to focus on union organization to ensure the strike would be recognized as official trade union activity. UCAPAWA to meet its own goals in the strike needed to conduct negotiations with SPSC as the exclusive representative of its union workers in order to achieve a victory that would establish its organizational legitimacy and authority.[77] At the time of UCAPAWA's declaration of victory, Mexicans were still suffering intense government repression with continued arrests of innocent people, deportation, and an otherwise harsh crackdown by city authorities. But the strike negotiations and arbitration proceeded between UCAPAWA and SPSC as the sole parties and did not include other Mexican activist leaders. The Arbitration Board decided on April 13 on only a slight wage increase per pound of pecans processed, representing a pittance of a benefit for the workers at minimal expense to SPSC.[78]

Ironically, the union's victory in the strike also resulted in a significant reduction in employment in the westside slum, with the magnitude of the workers' displacement unprecedented in American union history.[79] SPSC tried unsuccessfully in the later part of 1938 to have the pecan shelling industry exempted from the Fair Labor Standard Act, which mandated a minimum wage of twenty-five cents per hour and a forty-hour work week. After this failure, SPSC closed many plants in the Mexican Quarter. Following five months of preparation for re-mechanizing shelling operations, SPSC in March 1939 opened three mechanized factories in San Antonio, which employed a minimal number of workers.[80] Although mechanized factory workers' wages were approximately three times

higher than what Mexican laborers had earned for subcontracted manual work because of the new national minimum wage law, SPSC's turning to mechanization decreased workforce demand dramatically, resulting in SPSC soon employing fewer than 800 union workers in the Mexican Quarter.[81]

Mexicans' joining the union did little if anything to further their broader goals of having their labor rights treated as civil rights, improving their dire living conditions, and ensuring a position of respect and inclusion in the larger American society. To the contrary, the results of the strike reinforced their socioeconomic status as marginalized, migrant, temporary, or domestic laborers outside the system. Indeed, this exclusion of Mexicans was not by chance; in fact, it was essential to maintaining the labor rights of non-Mexican American workers.

After the strike and SPSC's turning to mechanization in its plants, home shelling as domestic work continued to offer additional cash income during the winter for many families in the Mexican Quarter, as it had done before the strike. In fact, shelling of pecans as domestic work increased its market share in the San Antonio pecan industry in 1939. Mexicans' earning additional income by buying pecans in the shell from companies such as SPSC, shelling them at home, and then selling back the processed pecan meat for a meager profit did not violate the Fair Labor Standards Act because doing so did not make them company employees entitled to receive a minimum wage. Even if domestic workers' profits were only two or three cents per pound, it was better than nothing because New Deal liberalism had made no explicit commitment to remedy the social inequality that underlay the multitude of problems Mexicans faced.[82]

Ultimately, the union's meager victory in the strike did not translate into improvements in Mexican laborers' daily lives or social conditions. Even after the strike victory, the pitiable living conditions in the Mexican slum remained the same. The poor agricultural harvest of 1937 due to bad weather had greatly reduced the demand for Mexicans' seasonal agricultural labor in rural areas, and many Mexicans turned to pecan processing to earn an income instead. At the time of the strike, Mexicans living in the slum needed a "business agent" to handle their grievances and help them improve their social and economic status as well as restore tranquility in their everyday lives in the face of social and economic oppression. Hence, they had no alternative but to accept the transition of their self-initiated walkout into a union-led strike.[83] But good weather returned in the spring of 1938, and many Mexicans abandoned the strike because they once again

had the prospect of getting seasonal jobs in rural agricultural areas to earn a family living. They left behind domestic pecan shelling, further increasing the demand for this very low paying work in the same impoverished living conditions of the slum that existed before the strike.

As an activist from UCAPAWA Local No. 172 pointed out, the unionization campaign failed to grasp the breadth and gravity of the problems that Mexicans living in the slum faced, explaining "that seasonal work, transient labor, low pay, and extreme illiteracy of the workers here make this an exceptional problem which cannot be handled solely from a trade union angle and cannot be judged from trade union standards alone."[84] UCAPAWA placed little emphasis on understanding and addressing the horrendous effect of the local implementation of the New Deal, which effectively relegated Mexicans in the slum to the status of expropriable migrant laborers and deprived them of the entitlement to receive the benefits of economic recovery. As a result, the union failed to recognize how the Mexicans' self-organized social and political movement in the slum differed from strikes led by other immigrant ethnic groups or Black workers in terms of response strategies and the nature of the underlying problems.[85]

To facilitate the integration of pre-existing Jim Crow structures and New Deal liberalism, the SPSC, local government leaders, and White elites treated Mexicans as migrant, on-demand, permanent sources of cheap laborers who had no entitlement to upward socioeconomic mobility. As long as this attitude of those in power that considered Mexicans to be unworthy "others" prevailed, the liberal democratic vision of industrial unionization, in which workers assert their rights in their occupations, achieve social advancement, and eventually integrate with the mainstream American citizenry, would provide nothing for Mexican laborers, many of whom wanted that very inclusion and economic security.[86] The power of San Antonio officials and local elites based on the existing socioeconomic structure was reinforced as more capitalist business policies and practices that further benefited management developed in response to the strike and the national minimum wage law and ensured that Mexicans remained under the control of those in power as a source of cheap migrant laborers with no upward social mobility. This process perpetuated the exclusion and ostracization of Mexicans in the ethnoracial formation regenerated under New Deal welfare programs during the 1930s.[87]

5. CONCLUSION

A former striker of the San Antonio pecan shelling industry in 1938 later recalled her experience and the strike's ultimate resolution thus: "We learned that through the organization, we could do something. Maybe we did not win that much as far as money was concerned, but we learned that being united is power, regardless."[88] To properly assess the meaning of the strike, it is essential to consider the process by which it unfolded and its result in an objective manner from various angles, beyond solely that of the triumph of unionism. Considering the strike not in terms of victory or defeat but as to its meaning to a broader movement in society, the strike exemplifies the multilayered aspects of interracial and ethnic relations linked to the socioeconomic transformation taking place during the New Deal period. The incorporation of Mexicans into union membership did not simply involve moving from being part of the local agricultural market to becoming players in the national industrial labor market; it involved the convergence of the two market systems.[89]

The strike initially began as the collective action of Mexicans living in the slum demanding social change. However, the local historical marginalization and discrimination against Mexicans merged with a facet of racialized New Deal liberalism to sanction brutal policing of Mexicans by the city authorities to dismiss them as rioters. Despite New Deal liberalism's growing centrality to the American way of life, access to its benefits depended on who one was and the character of one's occupation. Mexicans living in the slum were relegated to the position of surplus cheap migrant laborers, unentitled to socioeconomic upward mobility and ignored in market competition for regular jobs.[90]

As the Great Depression ushered in significant social, economic, and political changes, debates over who should receive much needed relief and inclusion in the system gained new prominence. Although Mexicans were valued as cheap laborers, they were marginalized from the framing of a discussion of New Deal liberalism and excluded from the identity of working-class Americans struggling to achieve economic prosperity as average U.S. citizens.[91] Under such circumstances in the late 1930s, this new form of occupational exclusion closely linked with social belonging became as important as actual legal citizenship status.[92] Mexicans' social status as migrant laborers meant that those in power could treat them as a commodity, permitting commercial profiteering of them within the Jim Crow racial order while maintaining the façade of New Deal liberalism.

According to Nancy Fraser's theorization, the distinction between regular jobs and those of migrant laborers can be compared to the difference between "exploitation" and "expropriation." Exploitable "workers" are accorded the status of rights-bearing individuals and citizens on the one hand, while expropriable "others" who include "migrant laborers" are constituted as unfree and dependent and are stripped of political protections.[93] Applying this framework to the pecan strike further elucidates the difference between the union's organizing efforts with its meager strike victory and Mexicans' activism for substantive change in their social and economic conditions and status. The results of the strike reinforced the clear distinction in American labor ideology during the New Deal between Mexican "laborers" who constituted an unfree workforce without political power and the opportunity for social mobility from other American, union, and regular "workers" who despite being exploited were accorded the status of rights-bearing individuals who possessed at least some opportunity for upward mobility. The new liberal socioeconomic structure that manifest and was reinforced in the social, political, and business environment of San Antonio during the pecan strike represented more broadly a reconfiguration of the position of the American worker in society, with its capitalist market which maintained racial disparities in society but allowed for the possibility of economic growth for some ethnoracial minority "workers," but not for Mexicans who existed outside the system. However, the entire system in San Antonio depended on the use of Mexicans as an expropriated "commodity" of migrant laborers who lacked any possibility of upward socioeconomic mobility. Even as Mexicans were taken advantage of and treated as an expendable source of cheap labor, they in fact were not just irrelevant, expropriable racial "others" or deportable aliens; they played an indispensable role in implementation of the New Deal in San Antonio.

NOTE

[1] *San Antonio Light*, January 31, 1938.

[2] Felipe Ybarra, "The Pecan Slaves of Texas," AR66, Folder.1–3, Harry Koger papers, Labor History Archives, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter "UT Arlington").

[3] Selden C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassmore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor* (Washington D.C.: Work Progress Administration, 1940), 6–12; Anita Perez, Interview by Glen Scott and Maria Flores, OH116, Texas Labor Archives, UT Arlington.

[4] Menefee and Cassmore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio*, 3. There are a variety of terms used over time to refer to people of Mexican descent living in the U.S. See Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the

Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (November 1997): 553, n. 1. I use the term "Mexican" in this paper to refer to all people of Mexican descent living in the U.S., particularly residents of the San Antonio westside, regardless of their national citizenship or immigration status. I do so to emphasize how powerful social forces led the vast majority of Americans to view Mexican Americans as "others" or "un-American." Mexican was also a term of self-reference during the time period discussed in this article. In this paper, I also apply a theoretical framework that posits that racial management and control of immigration and labor operates behind the ideology of free labor. Thus, I employ terminology that distinguishes the American "worker" from the Mexican "laborer." For free labor ideology, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American's Unfinishied Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1988), 156–57; Yoshiyuki Kido, *Amerikagassyukoku to Chugokujinimin: Rekishi no Naka no 'Imin Kokka' America* [Chinese Immigrants in the United States: The Making of a 'Nation of Immigrants'] (Nagoya: Nagoyadaigaku Shuppankai, 2012), 77–81; and for racial labor management, see David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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[10] Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

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[16] Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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