

Imperial Valley, California, Farmworkers' Strike of 1930

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On January 1, 1930, several hundred Mexican and Filipino lettuce workers in Brawley, California, walked off their jobs in a spontaneous protest against declining wages and intolerable working conditions. In less than a week they were joined by 5,000 other field workers, and the impromptu walkout of Imperial Valley lettuce workers turned into a serious strike, ushering in a decade of farmworker militancy that sent tremors throughout California's powerful agricultural establishment.

Early in the strike, the leadership was reluctantly exercised by the Mexican Mutual Aid Society, a conservative and nationalistic workers' association that had replaced the Workers Union of the Imperial Valley following the collapse of the cantaloupe pickers' strike in 1928. With the same weak leadership they had exercised during the cantaloupe workers debacle two years before, the Society, under the guidance of the Mexican consul, Edmundo Aragon, made conciliatory appeals for a peaceful resolution to the strike to the leaders of the Imperial Valley's vegetable and melon growers' organization. Just as they had in 1928, the growers rejected the polite overtures of the Society out of hand and quickly galvanized local, state, and federal authorities to smash the strike before it gained momentum. Despite its conciliatory and conservative nature, the Society represented to the growers an intolerable challenge to the absolute control they had held for decades over a Mexican work force that they long regarded as inherently tractable and submissive.

The employer onslaught, augmented by threats of wholesale deportations from federal immigration officials, and violent attacks on strike meetings and arbitrary arrests of strike participants by local law enforcement officials, threatened to destroy the strike early on. But the tide suddenly changed when the Communist Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), after reading about the strike in the *Los Angeles Times*, sent in three young organizers to take over leadership of the strike.

Although beginning in 1920 the Communist International in Moscow (Comintern) had advised Communist parties around the world that organizing agricultural workers was essential to "guarantee in full the success of the proletarian revolution," U.S. Communists virtually ignored agricultural workers until the 1930s. It was only after the Comintern sanctioned independent organization of unorganized workers into dual unions, and the newly founded Trade Union Unity League committed itself to the organizing of agricultural workers, that the party, under the auspices of the newly established Agricultural Workers Industrial League (AWIL), made any sincere effort to organize California farmworkers.

When TUUL organizers Frank Waldron (who as Eugene Dennis would take over Communist party leadership in the late 1940s), Harry Harvey, and Tsuji Horiuchi arrived in Imperial Valley in January 1930, they had no previous experience organizing agricultural workers. But they knew enough about organizing to remain undercover as much as possible, only coming out in the open after several days of painstaking cultivation of a rank-and file leadership. Once out in the open, they immediately established an AWIL chapter and moved to integrate Filipino workers into every aspect of strike activity. The organizers blanketed the valley with leaflets summarizing AWIL

strike demands, which included a minimum hourly wage of fifty cents for all workers, with higher pay for more difficult or skilled work; a guarantee of at least four hours' pay any time workers were called into the fields; an eight-hour workday with time and a half for overtime and double time for Sundays and holidays; abolition of the labor contracting system; recognition of the AWIL; no work for children under sixteen; no discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or union membership; improved housing provided by employers; and the establishment of a hiring hall under the exclusive control of the AWIL.

By nurturing rank-and-file activism, and focusing on bread and butter issues of primary importance to the strikers, rather than on abstract ideology, the Communists were able to breathe new life into the faltering strike. But by going public, the AWIL organizers also exposed themselves to an effective employer and government counterattack fueled by an anti-radical hysteria that unleashed violent strikebreaking tactics reminiscent of the Red Scare excesses of 1919.

On January 12, AWIL organizers were arrested on vagrancy charges and thrown in separate jails where they were subjected to brutal interrogation. The International Labor Defense Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union sent representatives to the valley to try to win the release of the organizers, only to see them beaten up by the local sheriff. It took four more days for the organizers to be released on bail, but by that time, the strike was on the verge of collapse. The authorities had been able to block shipments of food and other strike relief effectively starving the strikers back to work. In addition, angered by the AWIL takeover of "their" strike, the leaders of the Mexican Mutual Aid Society, mostly local businessmen, cooperated with the growers and local authorities in undermining the strike. Mexican strikers were threatened with arrest and deportation and were given false promises of free land if they "voluntarily" returned to Mexico.

With the majority of the Mexican strikers either deported or back to work, AWIL leaders called off the strike on January 23, just over three weeks after it began, without winning any of the workers' demands. The strike had failed largely because of the employers' unbridled power to smash the strike with the full cooperation of government authorities. But the collapse of the strike was also due to the total lack of initial planning and organization and the ability of the growers and the Mexican Mutual Aid Society to effectively play upon ethnic divisions in the work force.

Yet, despite its ultimate collapse, the 1930 Imperial Valley farmworkers strike inaugurated a decade of rising ethnic pride and class consciousness among Mexican and Filipino farmworkers which, when combined with the aggressive leadership of increasingly effective Communist organizers, ensured that growers could no longer take their control over their work force for granted.

References

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