

## INTRODUCTION

---

There is only one remedy left. . . . We of the laboring class must organize.

—MAXIMINO JUÁREZ, Tejano worker

ON MEMORIAL DAY 1937, thousands of steel workers and their families approached the gates of the Republic Steel mill in South Chicago. Thirty-one-year-old Guadalupe (Lupe) Marshall participated in the strikers' demonstration. Marshall came with her family to Chicago from Mexico in 1917. A volunteer social worker with Hull House, Marshall was active in the expanding Chicago labor and civil rights movement. The Mexican<sup>1</sup> female activist had been arrested two years before for participating in a steel worker demonstration. Marshall was one of the two hundred women who took part in the march on the plant, a demonstration one journalist described as having a "holiday atmosphere." Many women had their children with them, and the young ones ate ice cream and popsicles as a bevy of speakers addressed the crowd prior to the march. As the jubilant marchers proceeded to the Republic Steel plant, the situation suddenly changed from semifestive to deadly serious.

The police advanced toward us in a running step and were closing their ranks and crowding us, pushing us back all this time. Somebody hollered, "Mayor Kelley said it is all right to picket." Others said, "We have got our rights." I said to one of the officers in front of me . . . "There are enough of you men to march alongside these people to see that order is kept." . . . An officer . . . directly in front of me . . . had his gun out [and he] laughed real sarcastically in my face. . . . I was still talking to these officers in front of me when I heard a dull thud toward the back of my group, and as I turned around there was screaming . . . and simultaneously a volley of shots. It sounded more like thunder. I heard that and I couldn't . . . believe that they were shooting. . . . I turned around to see what was happening and the people that were standing in back of me were all lying on the ground face down. . . . I saw some splotches of blood on some of the fellows' shirts.<sup>2</sup>

Marshall tried to escape from the advancing police indiscriminately swinging their clubs, but the road was blocked by stunned strikers. She saw one demonstrator being bludgeoned by a policeman. Each time the striker tried to get up, the policeman would club him mercilessly. A very

2 • Introduction



Figure I.A. Chicago police mowed down strikers during the Memorial Day Massacre. Mexican American labor organizer Guadalupe Marshall pleading with the police to stop the merciless killings. The black line across the image is a police baton. (Courtesy of Illinois Labor History Society).

distraught Lupe Marshall screamed at the policeman, “Don’t do that. Can’t you see he is terribly injured?” Suddenly someone struck Marshall from the back and knocked her down. She tried to get up, but several police struck her in the back with clubs; then someone picked her up and took her to a patrol wagon. As Marshall was led to the police wagon, she stared in disbelief at men lying all over the field. Some of them were motionless. Others were groaning. Their heads were covered with blood, and their clothing was bloodstained. Sixteen men were packed in the patrol wagon with Lupe Marshall. All of them were seriously wounded. After driving around the city, the patrol wagon finally reached Burnside Hospital. Marshall saw other patrol wagons come up to the hospital. Among the strikers coming into the hospital was a woman with a small child who had been shot in the heel and in the leg. Though bleeding badly from the blows she had sustained at the hands of policemen, Lupe

Marshall went into the hospital dining room, gathered tablecloths and napkins and a pitcher of water, and began to put wet packs on the wounded strikers.<sup>3</sup>

Chicago steel worker Max Guzmán was one of the two strikers carrying American flags in the march that fateful Sunday. Police clubbed the twenty-six-year-old Mexican steel worker in the head as the first shots were fired, and he went down. Terrified protesters frantically fleeing from police passed Guzmán, lying dazed and bleeding on the ground. The fallen steel worker tried to pick himself up, but he was struck a second and third time by another policeman, who then grabbed him by his jacket and threw him into a patrol wagon. Guzmán was held at the South Chicago Police Station for nearly three days. While in lockup, Guzmán was fingerprinted and interrogated by the police. They asked him what he had done with the weapons. When the police told the steel worker he was a communist troublemaker, Guzmán responded that he did not know what the word *communist* meant. Although Guzmán had been in Chicago since 1920, he was not a U.S. citizen. Learning this, the police threatened Guzmán that they could send him back to Mexico anytime they felt like it.<sup>4</sup>

Hundreds of other Mexicans manned the picket lines during the disastrous 1937 Little Steel strike, like mill workers Philip Morengo and Max Luna from Indiana Harbor, Indiana, who came to South Chicago to join the protest. These men were among the strikers and supporters beaten, arrested, and murdered by police at South Chicago's Republic Steel plant during the infamous "Memorial Day Massacre." The unionization drives by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) found a receptive audience among the Spanish-speaking steel workers, who made up 5.4 percent of the Great Lakes region's steel workforce. Mexican steel workers from the mills in South Chicago, Illinois, and in East Chicago, Indiana Harbor, and Gary, Indiana, flocked to SWOC. In fact, Mexicans were the first ethnic group to completely organize. SWOC became a vehicle through which Mexicans could contest racial discrimination in work assignments, wages and hours, and promotions.<sup>5</sup>

Not much is known about the heroic role of Spanish-speaking blue-collar workers in the Little Steel strike action and in the larger CIO insurgency to organize the nation's basic industries that has been evoked by labor historians. Mexicans rose up in a series of strikes in the 1930s, and although these actions were overshadowed by the major conflicts involving Anglo workers, the strikes epitomized in microcosm a host of issues central to the Spanish-speaking population of the United States. At this time, Spanish-speaking workers took up the struggle to improve their social and economic condition as a rise in ethnic and class consciousness coalesced into campaigns to organize. Racism, ethnicity, and nationalism

#### 4 • Introduction

were central principles to the Mexican working-class struggle that erupted throughout the Southwest as any deference that existed among Mexicans vanished. In fact, it was Mexicans on the huge fruit and vegetable farms of California who initiated the massive strike wave that swept across the nation in the 1930s.

Mexican women likewise gained a voice and added a noteworthy dimension to the incipient union movement. Spanish-speaking women provided crucial support during strikes through explicit action. They held the picket line sometimes for months on behalf of their male kin. When the strikes were over, the women continued to lead the struggle for unemployment relief as members of Unemployed Councils, neighborhood relief committees, and auxiliaries. Advanced in their understanding of social and economic issues, Spanish-speaking workingwomen in Chicago, Detroit, San Antonio, Los Angeles, and other communities took part in relief demonstrations, resisted eviction efforts, dealt with demeaning relief workers, and led the fight for social insurance. As workers in the fields, in canneries and packinghouses, and in garment shops and cigar factories, Mexican women developed a consciousness of common interests that fueled the movement toward unionization and then political action.<sup>6</sup>

Protest backed by collective action was axiomatic. This immersion in labor activism by Mexicans broadened their political horizons as class-conscious workers, for in the early years of the Depression they also broke the fetters that bound them to the paternalistic control of the Mexican consuls. Loyal to their privileged class backgrounds and interests, these Mexican officials were untrustworthy: they acted as brokers between employers and Mexican workers; frequently colluded with employers in strikebreaking; operated in opposition to American unions, which had to counter the consuls' class-laden nationalist claims; attempted to sway Mexican unionists away from the Left-led labor movements; and condoned as well as assisted in the federal roundup and deportation of Spanish-speaking labor activists.<sup>7</sup>

The Communist Party of the United States is controversial in American history because of its Stalinist, undemocratic past. Nelson Lichtenstein and other historians, however, acknowledge that the party was a strong force for self-organization and actualization in immigrant and racial communities. The exemplary fight waged by the Communist Party of the United States for the real economic needs of the jobless and working poor, its leadership role in the difficult task of organizing migrant farm workers, and especially, its forceful opposition to racism and its legal battles on behalf of Mexicans through the International Labor Defense, attracted a considerable cross section of Spanish-speaking workers. The Communist Party is of great importance in *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights* because it contributed significantly to Mexican organizing and action,

just as Spanish-speaking workers added much to the party in terms of its multiracialism.

Radical views like anarchism, socialism, and communism were familiar to the progressive elements of the Mexican communities by the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, many early Spanish-speaking communist recruits, like the blacks who joined the party early on, were nationalists of various stripes. According to Devra Weber, the most visible Spanish-speaking radicals, who rose to leadership positions in the party, were those who had been influenced by the Mexican and Russian revolutions. Another politicizing factor was the workers' uprisings during and after World War I, such as the copper strikes in Arizona initiated by the Western Federation of Miners and the coal strikes in Colorado led by members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Admittedly, these ideologies and events did not push large numbers of Mexican American radicals into the party orbit, but these factors did strengthen their belief that change was probable within the milieu of working-class unity and could release them from their purgatory of exploitation and oppression. A discussion of the communists is thus crucial, because in the next twenty years communists and communist sympathizers frequently participated in the leadership of key Mexican American unions and left-wing organizations like the Asociación Nacional México-Americana (ANMA).

The early New Deal labor legislation became the impetus for the first phase of Mexican labor insurgency, and the creation of the CIO in 1935 ushered in another wave of rank-and-file labor organizing. Mexican Americans had become actively conscious of both the positive and negative roles of the government in their everyday lives. They became educated in the function of mass pressure in obtaining amelioration of their condition from the government. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) kindled the hopes of Mexicans, who felt the government had now begun to recognize their right to organize. In the Southwest, Mountain States, and Midwest, union organizers targeted Mexican workers in mining, agriculture, food packing, steel, and auto work. Although the early unions, and later the CIO affiliates, were hardly consistent in eliminating racial barriers to hiring, promotion, and equal treatment on the job, the union movement for Mexicans became a powerful catalyst to remove the shackles of economic and political as well as racial subordination. Years of bitter anger and deep frustration transformed many Spanish-speaking labor actions into crusades against the abuses Mexicans suffered as workers and as American citizens.<sup>8</sup> The labor struggles of Mexicans were inseparable from the issue of civil rights, because whether the worker upheavals succeeded or failed, the labor movement set in motion important changes. Just as racial discrimination led Mexicans to pursue the righteous path to unionism, it pushed them into the struggle for social justice.<sup>9</sup>

## 6 • Introduction

Studies of American workers and the 1930s labor movement have largely ignored the role of Mexican Americans in this era's union drive; however, several historians have explored certain aspects of this neglected working-class experience. For example, *Cannery Workers, Cannery Lives* by Vicki Ruiz documents the history of Southern California Mexican women cannery workers in the CIO affiliate United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). Mario T. García devotes a section of his *Mexican Americans* to the activists who formed the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples (Peoples' Congress). *Bitter Harvest* by Cletus Daniel chronicles the attempts at unionization by California farm workers. And Devra Weber in *Dark Sweat, White Gold* analyzes the relationship between economic structure, human agency, and the state in shaping the early California agricultural workforce.<sup>10</sup>

This book, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, brings the struggle of Mexican workers to light during the years when they initiated a broad-based movement aimed at making fundamental changes in their social, economic, and political status. I argue that in the period encompassing the 1930s and the World War II years, Mexican Americans initiated a labor and civil rights movement that was the precursor of the early civil rights movement of the postwar years, which formed the foundation of the modern Chicano movement. The fundamental questions my book addresses are similar to those posed by historians such as Robin D. G. Kelley, Elizabeth Fauve, Dolores Janiewski, Lizabeth Cohen, Gary Gerstle, Michael Honey, Robert Korstad, and others who have studied labor upheavals among workers, white and black, men and women. How did Mexicans choose their terrain of struggle? What were the grievances of workers in strike actions and the tactics and strategies implemented? Why was community-based unionism important in building labor movements? What was the role of Mexican women as workers and as rank-and-file labor organizers? How was racial inequality contested? What was the significance of racial, ethnic, and national identity as a social and cultural force in mobilizing class consciousness and in establishing organizing tactics among Mexican workers? And how did the Spanish working classes fashion their struggles for fair employment and civil rights during the World War II years?

I outline and address several important themes in *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*. The plight of Mexican farm workers at the dawn of the Great Depression is a central theme of chapter 1. Despite their diverse work experiences, Mexican workers found their job opportunities greatly influenced by the pattern of rapid regional specialization in agriculture. More than in any other region in the United States, agricultural expansion in the Southwest was large-scale and labor-intensive. It was linked to the

huge irrigation projects brought on line through federal land reclamation programs undertaken at the turn of the century or through private land development. The Texas lower Río Grande Valley and Winter Garden area, Arizona's Salt River Valley, and the California Imperial Valley became major specialized farming regions. All of these regions were coupled to huge labor reserves of Mexican seasonal migratory workers, whose basis was a family wage system long abandoned in other labor sectors.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 1 provides three case studies to show that, irrespective of whether Mexicans worked in Texas agriculture, Colorado beets, or California factory farms, their condition was deplorable and got progressively worse with the onset of the Depression and the repatriations and deportations the economic crisis triggered. Mexican migrant farm labor was a transnational movement involving both Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals that created interstate, regional, and international arrangements of labor migration. The task of forming and sustaining strong worker organizations within the Mexican community was impeded. Economic controls coercive in nature, as in Texas and Colorado, where they were the most terrible by any measure, and low wages hampered the maintenance of unions and strike funds. Like their black counterparts in the Deep South, most Mexican migratory farm workers were too poor, too geographically dispersed, and too vulnerable to oppressive controls at the beginning of the Great Depression to rise up in common struggle.<sup>12</sup> A key weakness was the ever-pressing demand for cheap Mexican labor from across the border, which sustained the necessity for oppression to ensure agricultural labor requirements.

Detailing this major segment of the Mexican working classes and discussing the political context of the early Depression years to discern what economic and social conditions Mexican workers faced provides background to repatriation, which is the focus of the second half of chapter 1. As the Great Depression deepened and many employers cut back on both labor and wages, the options for Mexican workers narrowed considerably and they flooded into the cities to seek relief. The strong objections of Anglos discouraged Mexican participation in assistance programs. It is at this time that the notion of the illegal alien gained notoriety, transforming Mexican workers into potential fugitives of the law unless they procured proper documentation. Tragically, repatriation victimized Mexicans who were U.S. citizens, legal residents who entered the country before there were official measures to confirm their legal immigration, and individuals unable to show proof of their legal status because of poverty.

It was the New Deal that inspired Mexican farm workers to organize, since many believed that the legislation would protect them against growers who wanted a labor force subservient to their objectives. In an unprecedented action, Mexicans were now demanding better wages and work-

8 • Introduction

ing conditions because they were particularly encouraged by President Roosevelt's guarantee of labor organizing and collective bargaining.<sup>13</sup> However, Southern Dixiecrats weakened key New Deal reforms by exempting agriculture and domestic work from the National Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act. The deathblow for the Mexican American working classes, largely consisting of farm workers, was their exclusion from the Fair Labor Standards Act reform in 1938. Agreements between farm workers and employers were never formalized, and the federal government failed to recognize the farm worker unions. Knowing farm workers did not enjoy the right of collective bargaining, growers used every means of coercion and legal suppression to put down worker insurrection, including collusion with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Border Patrol. Indeed, deportation was an advantage held in reserve until needed. The history of Mexican labor conflict in the 1930s thus offers an object lesson in the ways the state was employed to repress worker militancy. The federal government, as witnessed by its ruthless methods of repression in handling labor disputes and its intimidation and interception of those who were undocumented or legal U.S. residents, hindered more than helped the struggle of Mexicans for rights, dignity, and equality. Nevertheless, in the absence of significant political activism, the labor movement remained the central organizing base out of which Mexican American protest activity emerged.

The American Federation of Labor blocked the entrance of Mexican workers into American unions, many of which maintained racially separate locals, and reinforced divisions within the American working classes. Chapter 2 presents a history of several labor struggles in the era of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). It first focuses on the organizing campaigns by Mexican farm workers in Texas, Colorado, and California, all of which proved difficult for the reasons outlined in chapter 1. In Texas, the struggle by workers was the more desperate because they had to face the Texas Rangers, who had been the most brutal in their dealings with Tejanos (Texas Mexicans). Still, the new opportunities for organizing initiated by the NIRA spurred Mexican American industrial workers to organize. The continued rural-to-urban migration within the Southwest and Midwest regions ultimately afforded them a stronger organizing context within which they could mobilize. Using the NRA code violations as an organizing tactic, Mexican female cigar workers and dressmakers went on strike. It was Mexican women workers who first challenged the long-standing problem of labor surpluses produced by the flow of women commuters from Mexico into border cities like El Paso, a situation that neutered unionism as well as the strategic advantage that would be available to both Tejanos and Mexican nationals if they formed an alliance against their nemesis.

Radicals played a prominent role in forcing this labor action. A better understanding of Mexican American labor radicalism is needed, particularly the complicated ties to communist-related unionism. Spanish-speaking workers brought radical traditions into the Communist Party that included old and new forms of collaborative action, some of which were unorganized and spontaneous strategies; Mexican working people maintained a sense of racial identity and solidarity; and the role of women in this radicalism was prominent. The party shaped and was shaped by Mexican working-class radicalism, of which cultural and national identity was a key element. Communist activity among Mexican workers is introduced and discussed in chapter 2 with an examination of the protracted Gallup, New Mexico, coal strike of 1933. This strike took place in the important Third Period (1929–33) of the party’s revolutionary unionism, when communists took over the leadership of many labor struggles and embarked on a worker offensive against employers.<sup>14</sup>

The Mexican coal miners of Gallup launched their strike under the auspices of the radical National Miners Union (NMU). At this time, employers in the Southwest were as rabid in their hatred of Reds as they were rabid in their hatred of Mexicans. In the prevailing climate of repression, coal operators Red-baited the workers, the state governor declared martial law, and a reign of terror was launched against those identified as supporters of the NMU. The miners were blacklisted, denied relief, and subjected to deportation. The Immigration and Naturalization Service targeted labor leaders belonging to La Liga Obrera de Habla Español, who together with NMU members, were hounded out of the country on charges of communism. A pattern developed that would characterize many of the strike actions by Mexican workers during the period under study. Time and again, the allies of employers—the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Border Patrol—broke up labor strikes and carried out searches and arrests of Mexican workers.

How the institutional frameworks of the New Deal and the CIO, and the character of particular Left-led unions determined the mobilization of Mexican workers in their opposition to abuse, as well as their successes or failures, represents another important theme of *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*. CIO organizing by Mexican Americans is the focus of chapter 3, which begins with the onion strike outside Laredo, Texas, in 1936 led by La Asociación de Jornaleros. The significance of the onion strike is that it marks the beginning of transborder organizing by Left-led unions in the United States and their counterparts in Mexico. Prodded by the Communist Party of Mexico, the Communist Party of the United States took up the task of organizing Spanish-speaking workers, helping them obtain relief, fighting against discrimination, protesting police violence, and defending them against deportation.

During the Great Depression, Mexican American women were prominent as leaders of radical labor and civil rights movements. The way the party envisaged the class struggle opened up areas for Mexican American working-class women. The party's early ventures into labor organizing ignored the majority of Spanish-speaking women because, like the majority of black women, they were concentrated in domestic work and agriculture. Working through a variety of communist-led mass organizations, from the International Labor Defense to the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples, the Communist Party eventually produced a noteworthy group of Mexican American women leaders, who included María Solis Sager and Emma Tenayuca (Texas), Luz Salazar (New Mexico and the Mountain States), and Guadalupe Marshall (Chicago).

Emma Tenayuca played a key role in organizing San Antonio's Tejano workers by leading demonstrations and strikes for relief work and organizing relief workers to contest job discrimination. More important, Tenayuca reaffirmed the message that their struggle was part of the struggle of all Mexican workers for civil rights. In chapter 3, I assess Emma Tenayuca's role in community and labor organizing as well as her activities in the Communist Party as its ablest Mexican American spokesperson. The focus of this chapter is the challenge of Mexican American agrarian unionism centered on Emma Tenayuca, as well as a united effort by a major union, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, in Southern California. Chapter 3 ends with a discussion of the initial CIO union drive by Mexican American workers in Los Angeles.

Chapter 4 examines the campaign by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill) to organize Mexican nonferrous metals workers in the Southwest, focusing on the union drive in El Paso, Texas, during the years 1939–43. The nonferrous metals industry suffered from oversupply and depressed prices, which resulted in cutbacks in production and employment. Owing to disputes, the copper industry operators could not reach agreement on an NRA code. Unemployment and widespread deprivation eclipsed long-existing wage differentials between this mining region and other regions. Given the prevailing open-shop atmosphere, unionism in the nonferrous metals industry was nonexistent. For most of the 1930s, Mine-Mill was at low ebb and the membership declined. However, despite infighting and disputes with the AFL, the NIRA collective bargaining provisions and the copper code led to the restoration of interim local unions at some southwestern mines and metal processing refineries.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans made up over half of the 15,000 miners and smelter workers employed by Phelps Dodge, Nevada Consolidated, Anaconda, and American Smelting and Refining Company

(ASARCO) in the Southwest. All the Spanish-speaking miners worked as low-wage common laborers, lacked seniority provisions, were subject to company domination, and outside the workplace were victims of pervasive discrimination. Given the oppressive conditions, there was little optimism that a successful labor movement could arise in the southwestern copper industry. Mine-Mill possessed a history of rank-and-file militancy, and the Southwest region's Mexican miners and smelter workers embraced it. Drawing on the ancient conflict between aggrieved Mexican workers and the mining companies, Mine-Mill tapped a core of activism among these minority workers, who were just as indignant about the social discrimination they endured, which reflected the larger racial climate of the Southwest region. Mine-Mill represents an institution in which Mexicans could actually advance their labor and civil rights in a New Deal context. Mine-Mill's interracial unionism proved successful in cross-border alliances and was equally crucial to the union's success in building its locals.

According to historians of American communism, the American Communist Party, in unity with the Comintern's Seventh World Congress, called for a Popular Front against fascism, de-emphasized its Marxist ideology, and eventually supported Roosevelt's New Deal coalition. Indeed, in a few short years, the party had made a great transformation. Slogans about "social fascists" and building a "Soviet America" were replaced by efforts to carve a niche for the party in the mainstream of the American reform tradition. Communists joined mainstream civil rights organizations in greater numbers. Spanish-speaking left-wing organizers served as the primary force behind the Mexican American coalition effort in the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples, a Popular Front organization that emerged at about the same time as the fall of Madrid to the fascist armies in March 1939. The leftists also used their influence in the CIO and in the Workers' Alliance of America to bring Mexican Americans into similar progressive organizations behind President Roosevelt.

World War II profoundly affected Mexican Americans. Disproportionate numbers fought overseas as a result of unfair draft selection; others entered wartime employment and, despite resistance, for the first time held skilled jobs. They also became a focus of wartime hostility. An early Mexican American civil rights movement emerged during World War II as the wartime experience and the growing power of the black vote elevated the importance of civil rights in national politics. At the same time, the Communist Party's sudden shift to an extreme antiwar position, the Dies Committee's investigation into "un-American" activities, and the rising anticommunism among CIO leaders all weakened the party's base of support on the eve of World War II.

12 • Introduction

The struggles by Mexican Americans for full citizenship during the World War II emergency is another theme I take up in *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*. In fact, the potential for racial equality reached fruition during World War II. Chapter 4 shifts to the labor scene in Los Angeles, which now had the nation's largest Mexican population, made up overwhelmingly of blue-collar workers, who in 1941 were swept up in the ferment of one of the largest CIO-led strike waves. With the start of the war, many Mexican Americans migrated to war mobilization centers to seek work in the defense plants. CIO unions educated workers about federal standards and policies and labor grievances. Taking on greater roles in rank-and-file and community activism through CIO-supported civil rights associations, Mexican American workers brought new meaning to the relationship of labor and civil rights.<sup>15</sup> As a product of the Popular Front and the CIO labor organizing drives, the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples worked to incorporate Mexican Americans and Mexicans into American life and citizenship through political mobilization. In Los Angeles, a coalition of progressive CIO unions and left-wing activists assisted the Peoples' Congress in combating racial and ethnic strife. An important activity of the Peoples' Congress was confronting the profascist organization of the Sinarquistas.

World War II represented a turning point for Mexican American workers, whose demand for equality in the workplace and in the nation as a whole made them the chief actors in the struggle for civil rights. This heightened consciousness was brought about by the opportunities for political and economic advancement afforded by New Deal labor legislation, the government's patriotic wartime propaganda, the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices hearings on discrimination, and the bloody interracial violence that swept America's cities in 1943. The entry of Mexican Americans into the CIO unions and their fight against shop floor discrimination served as an important catalyst in the unfolding struggle for social and political advancement by this fast-growing, urban working-class population. As always, Mexican American women played as important a role as the men in mobilizing and leading support for the cause of civil rights.

Chapter 5 focuses on the overall experiences of the Mexican American community during World War II. Like blacks, Mexican Americans combined the fight against fascism abroad with the struggle for civil rights to achieve racial and social equality at home. Mexican Americans came to realize that they needed the help of the federal government to gain rights as American citizens and called on it to intervene. The federal government's policies regarding Mexican Americans were shaped more and more by foreign policy decisions. The new context of international pressures, urbanization, and full employment made federal authorities deeply

sensitive to the outbreak of racial disturbances such as the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots. President Roosevelt therefore used the FBI and various arms of military intelligence to infiltrate Sinarquista fund-raising cells operating in the United States. However, race relations were not a centerpiece of Roosevelt's domestic policies. Nor did race relations strike a responsive cord among white Americans: they resisted what little assistance was given to racial minorities. Despite all the official dogma about equality, there was no coordinated and concerted government effort to deal with racial discrimination. In the end, government enforcement measures were unresponsive to the realities of race relations in the Southwest. The Mexican Americans were kept in their place as excluded and exploited second-class citizens—they were the last hired for defense work, were discriminated against in federal job training programs, were assigned mostly unskilled jobs, and had to cope with the larger issue of racism. Segregation barriers in most cities of the Southwest were strong. Anglos maintained the racial status quo and therefore resisted fair housing, and federal housing apartheid policies led to related social problems, such as the segregation of schools. Along with black workers, Mexican Americans fought against the widespread discrimination in defense work, sought to increase and expand job opportunities and end discrimination in the unions, and moreover continued to participate in the pursuit of full equality. In so doing, Mexican Americans helped change the character of race relations in the United States.

Mexico declared war against the Axis powers on May 28, 1942, and quickly began fulfilling its wartime commitment to America by providing tens of thousands of agricultural contract workers, tankerloads of oil, and massive amounts of other crucial war matériel as well. Over the next three and a half years of war, the economic and military links forged between Mexico and the United States would define relations across the Río Grande for decades to come. Mexican immigrant labor, bilateral trade, energy sharing, and security cooperation are all modern-day issues that were first confronted by Mexico and the United States as wartime allies sixty years ago. As will be seen in my discussion of the Mexican contract labor program, labor representatives questioned the contract labor program's impact on domestic farm workers, while Mexican Americans were concerned that the braceros would take away jobs and contribute to more racial discrimination.

Chapter 6 recounts the efforts of Mexican Americans to organize for equality in the postwar years because they were not enjoying the fruits of peacetime economic expansion. Most continued to be employed mainly in agriculture at low pay and under miserable conditions. In the industrial workplace, Mexican Americans experienced job loss as a result of low seniority and layoffs. Unemployment was demoralizing, and there

14 • Introduction

was deep-seated discontent among those Mexican American blue-collar workers who had work because they were relegated to the worst unskilled and semiskilled positions with the lowest pay. Owing to a renewed race hatred, Mexican Americans still suffered violations of their rights. Police violence against Mexican Americans, who were widely identified as lawless, continued to fuel great bitterness in the Mexican American communities, where the residents were overcharged for run-down housing and suffered other inequities, such as the high numbers of youth pushed out of school. School dropout rates increased because teachers in the overcrowded urban schools believed Mexicans were inferior and thus less capable of learning. The nation's second-largest minority was socially segregated from Anglos, another sign of the deepening racial polarization of America.

In the postwar years, the Mexican American struggle for full citizenship increased. Unions once again were invaluable in the successful grassroots mobilizations, for they served as vehicles for empowering Mexican Americans to fight for their civil rights. Mexican American trade unionists were at the forefront of the movement in advocating economic and social equality. In seeking to reverse the declining fortunes of their unions, Mexican Americans participated in demonstrations and strikes for full employment and higher wages during the conversion to a peacetime economy. The struggle for equality concentrated on expanding Mexican American employment and ensuring decent jobs, and it began as a fight to make the FEPC permanent. Mexican American trade-union activists pushed for antidiscrimination laws at the state level, demanded shop floor seniority and wage parity from local unions growing racially conservative, sought to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act, and led community-based struggles for equality. Protests in the communities addressed the controversial issue of wanton police abuse; protestors also called for better housing, schools, and other adequate services.

Amid frequent charges of communism and in an atmosphere of racist antialien hysteria, Mexican Americans demonstrated their determination to cross the color line to advance the cause of labor and civil rights. To be sure, the heightened sense of identity and the welling up of consciousness among the Mexican American people were dashed by the rise of the Cold War. McCarthyism, including the purge by the CIO of left-wing unions, many with a sizable racial minority membership, impeded the Mexican American civil rights movement. The union campaigns on behalf of Mexican Americans would be defeated by Taft-Hartley and the Red Scare crackdown on outspoken dissenters in a broad assault against civil liberties. Mexican Americans were harassed and intimidated, and their credibility was compromised when they were denounced as subversives. These men and women thus paid a high price for their resolve to realize their

goal of racial equality. Meanwhile, traditional Mexican American civic leaders who shunned direct action were similarly put on the defensive by reactionaries and hard-line civil rights opponents.

Another disturbing factor, and a more immediate menace than the Red Scare, were the legions of work-starved *mojados* who posed a direct threat to the living standards, health, and education of Mexican Americans. Together with the Mexican contract labor program that began in 1942 and would continue over the next twenty-two years, the influx of *mojados* rapidly increased the number of Mexican nationals in the United States. Unemployment and underemployment as a result spread among the Mexican American working-class population. The attendant deportation frenzy created by the McCarran-Walter Act through “Operation Wet-back” to deal with an unraveling contract labor program further racialized Mexican Americans, already the victims of a hostile environment.

Yet Mexican Americans were no longer willing to accept their inferior status, as is indicated by the rise of a grassroots movement for full equality. The first change in the political scene came from the emergence of vocal groups working for greater Mexican American participation in the political process. The newly formed all-Mexican American organizations educated community members on current issues, registered them to vote, and pressured the major political parties for fair representation. I conclude that the period extending from the New Deal years to the postwar era was a turning point for Mexican American demands for civil rights. Specifically, the activism that flowed out of the CIO union movement laid the groundwork for the rise of a postwar Mexican American civil rights movement. *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights* will help reveal this hidden legacy of Mexican American workers and their numerous contributions to the American labor and civil rights movement.