

Fifteenth Annual National Association of Chicano Studies Conference

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Chicanos now comprise a large segment of the American work force. Historically, Chicanos have been among the most poorly paid and the most severely exploited workers, yet they have long played a key role in class struggles in the Southwest, and they have been in the front ranks of the current labor battles. Through collective action based in class and community solidarity, Chicano workers have fought against plant closings, phase-downs, and the deplorable working conditions of low-wage industries caused by the restructuring of the American economy. One of this decade's longest strikes thus far was waged by Chicano Phelps-Dodge copper miners in Arizona. In northwest Ohio, the Chicano migrant farmworker organization, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) engaged in a seven-year boycott of the Campbell Soup Company. Through a powerful labor-community coalition of Chicanos, blacks, and Asian Americans, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 645 in Van Nuys, California successfully contested the power of General Motors to close the local plant. In 1987, Chicana and Mexican women frozen-food workers in Watsonville, California won an eighteen-month strike for fair wages and benefits. Chicano labor activists are leading drives to organize undocumented Mexican workers in the low-wage, nonunionized sweatshops, underground operations, and service industries, where working conditions resemble those in the Third World. These and other experiences of the Chicano population, a people whose historical past has been omitted from the overall narrative of American history, are being researched and documented by Chicano scholars.

Since 1972, Chicano scholars from across the United States have gathered for the annual conference of the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS) to share research on Chicano life and culture. The fifteenth annual NACS conference was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, from April 9–11, 1987. More than 120 Chicano scholars from the Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast attended the conference. In keeping with the NACS' desire to make the study of Chicanos accessible, local Chicano community members were invited. The theme of the NACS conference—"Chicano Renaissance?: Can Chicanos Survive Their Decade?" refers to the public attention given to Chicanos (and other Latinos) as America's fastest growing minority group. Through continued im-

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migration and high birth rates, Latinos will soon surpass blacks as the nation's largest racial minority. However, they will carry with them the burden of impoverishment and oppression that accompanies this dubious distinction.

The thirty-seven panel sessions focused on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from immigration, the English Only Movement, to health care in the barrio. The conference papers were refreshing departures from the oversimplification and revisionism that characterized the first spate of Chicano scholarship in the 1970s. They reflected the disciplined research being undertaken by a young generation of Chicano scholars determined to present and interpret the Chicano experience accurately. The most interesting papers were those read at the eight panel sessions on Chicano labor issues. I was unable to attend all eight sessions because of their overlapping schedules. The following is a report on the sessions which I was able to attend.

The panel "Loyalty, Ethnic Identity, and Immigration in Mexican American History, 1915–1955" demonstrated the current efforts of Chicano historians to relate aspects of Chicano labor history to broader events in United States history. The session consisted of papers on the history of Mexican and Chicano workers in the 1920s and 1950s, decades in which voluntary and institutionalized immigration from south of the border increased the population of Mexicans in the United States. George Sánchez (Princeton University) examined how Americanization programs targeted Mexican immigrants in southern California in the 1920s, as American employers attempted to inculcate Mexican workers with ideas of thrift and time discipline to facilitate their adjustment to industrial work. Americanizers were also hard at work among Mexican women; caseworkers of the Visiting Home Association taught them songs about the virtues of work, and social feminists encouraged them to rebel against Mexican patriarchal authority. The Americanization programs were rejected by Mexican immigrant workers because most did not plan a prolonged stay in the United States. Nevertheless, these early Mexican workers were Americanized through their participation in the labor market and through their unfortunate experiences during the depression, when many were repatriated—or deported if they were union organizers.

A paper by David Gutiérrez (University of Utah) highlighted the pressures placed on Mexican American identity during the McCarthy era, when they were perceived as foreign, and consequently suspect. Gutiérrez noted that solidarity existed between Chicanos and Mexican nationals. Harassed by the anti-labor witch hunts and under constant threat of deportation, Chicano trade unionists empathized with the plight of Mexican contract laborers. The National Agricultural Workers Union, led by veteran labor activist and scholar Ernesto Galarza, not only defended the rights of Mexican nationals who were being brought into the United States through the Bracero Program but also worked to abolish the growers' practice of bringing Mexican workers into the country illegally to glut the farm labor market, depress wages, and even serve

as strikebreakers. The paper also noted instances when the efforts of Chicanos to defend the rights of Mexican nationals were undermined by conservative elements. The assimilationist Chicano organization, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), preoccupied with establishing a positive public image of Spanish-speaking citizens, argued before the courts that Mexicans did not constitute a racial group but rather were members of the Caucasian race. Rick Olguín (University of Washington) asserted that the congressional debates during the 1950s over the Bracero bill and the "Wetback problem" were mired in ideological differences shaped by foreign-policy considerations, primarily the struggle against world communism, and by biased public perception of Mexicans.

Chicanos and undocumented workers from Mexico are unquestionably responsible for the tremendous economic growth and prosperity enjoyed by certain sectors of the Southwest. This prosperity has been produced by labor-intensive production processes performed by low-paid workers. A panel titled "Chicanos and Labor Issues" examined how these workers are organizing at the community level to resist the conditions of the current Southwest labor market. Paper topics included: the impact of part-time work on Chicanos (Roberto De Anda, University of Arizona); the production and wage-earning strategies of rural Chicano and Mexican households (Victor García, University of California, Santa Barbara); and the efforts at political mobilization by Chicano and Mexican communities in agricultural towns to resist wage cuts and the further deterioration of working conditions (Laura González, University of California, Santa Barbara).

The panel "Immigration and Resettlement Issues" focused on the consequences arising from the relocation of American companies to the Third World, a situation that not only contributes to domestic job loss but indirectly to the expansion of the immigrant population in the United States. Preliminary findings of Chicano and Mexican researchers at Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, Mexico on the migration of Spanish-speaking guest workers were presented at this panel session. Estévan Flores (University of Colorado) discussed the relationship between country of origin and labor-market participation of undocumented Mexicans and Central American refugee workers in Southwest labor markets. Marta López Garza (Colegio de la Frontera Norte) presented research findings on the role of immigrant women in the settlement process in Southwest barrio communities, a topic of particular importance given the significantly increased work force participation of immigrant women from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Chicana scholars note that the large number of undocumented Spanish-speaking immigrant women entering the Southwest, coupled with the influx of Asian immigrant women, has intensified competition for low-wage jobs.

The role of undocumented women in the labor force is one of many research concerns of Chicana scholars whose crucial participation in the annual

NACS conferences and in Chicano studies research is increasing, a fact demonstrated by the six panels that dealt with Chicana-related topics. The panel "Chicano Familism" addressed the subject of family and employment among Chicana and Mexican immigrant women. Denise Segura (University of California, Santa Barbara) noted the importance placed on family and kinship networks by single mothers and by women whose husbands face periodic unemployment. As heads of households, the former category of women must rely on these networks to compensate for the absence of child care and even for inadequate income. In the panel "Chicanas and Social Analysis," Gloria Romero (University of California, Los Angeles) discussed family, occupational, and economic stress among Chicanas. The paper traced stress levels to Chicanas' high unemployment rates which, like those of Latina workers overall, are twice the unemployment rate of Anglo women.

The panel "Social Theory and Analysis" reflected Chicano social scientists' call for an analytic framework that incorporates Chicanos' role as racially oppressed workers in the United States labor market. This call draws its inspiration from the book *Race and Class in the Southwest* by Mario Barrera (University of California, Berkeley). José Calderón (University of California, Los Angeles) endorsed Marxist theory as a tool for analyzing the racial and cultural distinctions of Chicano workers but questioned the relevance of the theory of internal colonialism. Devon Peña (Colorado College) argued for more historical analysis in theoretical assessments of the work performed by Chicanos and recommended that Chicano scholars also consider changes in the forces of production.

Perhaps the most stimulating panel was "Recent Chicano Historiography," chaired by Mario T. García (University of California, Santa Barbara), author of the seminal text *Desert Immigrants*. García selected for critical review five recently published texts in Chicano history written by both Chicano and Anglo scholars. The paucity of historical research about Chicanos, especially the huge gaps that exist in Chicano labor history, received special attention. García encouraged Chicano historians to produce balanced studies and to refrain from using a "we/them" dichotomy. Such a dichotomy, García asserted, only distorts the historical record. Instead, he urged Chicano historians to aim for interpretations that present Chicano history as a dynamic of social relations shaped by culture, ethnicity, race, and gender. García's insistence on historical accuracy was not missed by the session's large audience. All the Chicanos in attendance were well aware of the profound implications that an increasing Spanish-speaking population has for Chicano studies. Particularly relevant is the extreme shortage of Chicano faculty and graduate students who are needed to conduct comprehensive research pertinent to this "people without history."