

The Los Angeles County Strike of 1933

Gilbert Gonzalez

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GILBERT G. GONZALEZ

Center for Research on Latinos in a Global Society
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Abstract

Historians of Chicano, Southwest labor, and U. S. Mexico relations cannot avoid bumping into archival documentation that testify to the significant presence and activism of the Mexican government via its consulate corps within the expatriate communities across the United States. Numerous published studies verify that consuls actively engaged an interest in the political affairs of the immigrant colonias between 1920 and 1940, the period of interest to this study. Several strands of twentieth century (Chicano history, in particular community and political development, union organizing, and the California agricultural labor strikes of the 1930s, defy explanation without reference to the high level interventions by various Mexican consuls. However there is no consensus on the political significance of consular conduct upon Mexico de afuera. This study is an attempt to systematically address that question posed by Chicano historiography by never satisfactorily answered.

The harvest season began with the repetition of a familiar pattern. Following months without rain, sandy gulleys had replaced once swollen rivers, while browned scrub brush covered formerly grassy hills. Fed by costly irrigation projects, oases of market read, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and grains contrasted with the surrounding semi-desert. Summoned by the rising labor requirements, thousands of farm workers and their

families gathered to harvest these crops. Other than laborers and growers, few paid much attention to the cyclic social and economic drama that unfolded that season. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary to indicate that a groundswell of discontent building up among the laboring force would soon disrupt the normal pattern. The break occurred on June 1 as six hundred workers assembled at a meeting at Hicks Camp in El Monte, 20 miles from downtown Los Angeles, declared the largest strike in California agriculture up to that time.

Initially organized and led by the Cannery and Agricultural Worker Industrial Union, five thousand workers joined the rebellion, and waged a protracted struggle through June and July without reaching a lasting settlement. Without a resolution, the conflict simmered on and off for several years. Compared to the deadly drama of the San Joaquin cotton strike, or to the state violence in the Imperial Valley, the relatively peaceful Los Angeles county strike evoked none of the same tense emotions. Yet the strike merits our attention for several important reasons. First, the county strike premiered the high profile of the Los Angeles Mexican consulate (and, thus, the Mexican government) in the struggle for leadership with leftist organizations in the course of several tumultuous strikes during the 1930s. Secondly, the Los Angeles County strike demonstrated that, when faced with a labor conflict, local authorities and growers favored the consular leadership over the militant

1

2

activism of the CAWIU. lastly, the event also witnessed the re-birth of CUOM, renamed the Confederacion de Uniones Campesinas y Obreras Mexicanas, or CUCOM as it was popularly referred to by workers. As in the case of the moribund CUOM, the consul assumed the position of treasurer in the new organization and held that post until the consul-CUCOM link ended in heated controversy during the Orange County citrus pickers strike of 1936.

Relegated to the margins of the historical record, the strike has never garnered much attention from labor historians and occupies a minor niche within labor historiography. None of the several journal articles and book chapter or two that examine the affair satisfactorily analyzes the political substance of the Mexico-U.S.

linkage nor that of the Mexico-Mexico de afuera connection.¹ Whereas most of the previous articles focus on details of local events, the work of Abraham Hoffman raises the international ramifications surfacing during the conflict. However, Hoffman limits the analysis to events in El Monte and the exchange of polite notes between Washington and Mexico City. Beyond the problematic and sketchy treatment looms the near silence regarding the critical actions of Vice-Consul Ricardo Hill and his associate, Armando Flores. This chapter extends Hoffman's research by incorporating new data interpreted within a broader analytic perspective, that is, the general intervention and active leadership (or attempts thereof) on the part of consular officials and the Mexican government into the strikes of the period involving Mexican workers. This approach has the potential to convey a more accurate understanding not only of that strike but also of the role of the Mexican state within U.S. labor history.

2

3

The scenerio presents an unparalleled labor conflict in California history. Three nations were represented in the strike, including two consuls acting for two groups of largely foreign born nationals, and host country mediators and other local authorities. Indeed their respective consuls represented each of the antagonists in the negotiations that eventually led to a temporary settlement. Mexican consular intervention eventually receded from the scene in the late thirties. However, a decade of consular activism in the Mexican labor movement seriously impeded the CAWIU from making inroads among Mexican labor. During that period the farm labor movement, pulled opposing directions by the conservative nationalist charms of the consulate and the union militancy of the CAWIU, never composed itself long enough to establish its own union agenda.

The Economic and Social Context in Los Angeles County

By the teens, industrial and manufacturing inroads into the Los Angeles region were well on their way

to transforming the economy from agriculture to urban industry. However, before the death knell to agriculture sounded, several decades of a bi-furcated economy characterized Los Angeles County. Unlike its rural neighbors to the north and south, the 4000 square p' mile area straddled both an industrial and agricultural base. The city of Los Angeles contained the manufacturing and industrial sectors, the county held the agriculture and stockraising areas. In 1925, for example, agriculture and stockraising production totalled \$86,000,000. 250,000 acres of agricultural fields produced a variety of crops like citrus, grains, and vegetables. On the other hand, the city of Los Angeles' manufacturing outlets produced \$417,000,000 in goods. Although it remained a lesser component of the overall 3

4

economy, agriculture remained a vital and successful component. Boosters proudly advertised that Los Angeles county held more citrus acreage than any other county in the state and only Imperial county grew more field and truck crops than Los Angeles. The 1933 U.S. Census reported that, beginning in 1909, the county outperformed all others in the nation in the value of farm products. Carey McWilliams, the keen social critic of California, did not exaggerate when he bestowed the county with title of the "richest agricultural county in the U.S".²

Nevertheless, industrial inroads into agricultural zones provided for social and economic conditions which directly affected the strike. Oil production increased from four million barrels a day in 1900 to 105 million barrels in 1920, stimulating the development of port facilities, refining plants, road and building construction, and, of course, real estate. During the boom years of the 1920s, oil real estate, construction, tourism, entertainment, and exports expanded phenomally. Construction in the city of Los Angeles expanded seven times and totalled \$500,000,000 in value, placing Los Angeles third in the nation in the value of new construction. And in the county, eight new cities were created in that fabled, but short-lived, era. During the 1920s, migrants from across the nation poured into the region at the rate of 100,000 per year, a record pace. Within the decade the county's population increased by one million, reaching 2.2 million on the eve of the Depression. The rapid spiral set two simultaneous and apparently contradictory forces in motion. First, industrialization and urbanization eroded existing agricultural bases; secondly, an increased market demand stimulated the production of local agricultural products. The balance ultimately leaned toward urbanization, but not without some beneficial consequences for maintaining agricultural production.

The transition in land use from rural farming to urban sprawl ironically led to a system of temporary marginal farming areas. Eager real estate developers, ready to gain lucrative properties, aimed their sights at rich agricultural areas. While landowners waited for property values to rise, they held onto their lands through business arrangements with local farmers, in particular Japanese farmers. Rather than improve their properties, owners rented to the area's already experienced and extremely successful Japanese farmers. Skilled in the methods that elicited the best results from limited land areas, the Japanese had established a tradition of truck farming on marginal tenant parcels. That practice, begun at the turn of the century, continued during the ensuing urban growth of the teens and twenties. Subsequently, at least two economic formations, small scale truck farming, averaging approximately 17 acres per parcel, and a variety of urban systems interacted and expanded side by side.

At the turn of the century the Japanese population stood at 1200, but by the end of the Depression decade nearly 37,000 Japanese of the state's 100,000 residents lived in Los Angeles county. The vast majority were engaged in small scale tenant farming as is reflected in the statistics on Japanese land ownership at the end of the teen years. State-wide the Japanese owned only 8 percent of the farm acreage under their operation, amounting to 30,306 acres out of a total of 390,635 acres . In Southern California, a paltry 3.5 percent of Japanese-run farms were owned outright.⁴ These numbers strongly suggest that substantial numbers of Los Angeles county white landowners held contracts with Japanese agriculturalists. Thus, the landowner held a strong business interest in maintaining the Japanese as farmers.

Japanese farmers cultivated 44,000 acres in Los Angeles County during the heyday of

Japanese agriculture in southern California.⁵ Often using relatively remote acreage, such as land

5

6

relatively remote acreage, such as land under electric power lines, and moving with the seasons from one location to another as land became available, or from one soil type to another as demand for a particular crop increased, the Japanese turned large tracts of unused properties into productive farms. At end of the Depression, the Japanese, organized into grower cooperatives called associations, controlled 90 percent of the county's truck farms, growing crops like "asparagus, lima beans, carrots, and cauliflower" and nearly 100 percent of the strawberry crop. In the rural Gardena area, south of the city of Los Angeles, approximately 700 Japanese farms cultivated "bunch vegetables" in addition to strawberries and other berry fruits. Not only did the Japanese provide substantial foodstuffs, they also controlled one half of the produce market in central Los Angeles.

By all measures the Japanese engaged in intensive capitalist enterprises linked inextricably to the larger economy. These enterprising operations may have appeared to some as marginal farming outfits, but the business world considered them as substantial contributors to the expanding market economy.⁶ Extensive truck farming was labor intensive and required a substantially large cheap labor force. Consequently, the Japanese, like most growers in California, depended largely upon Mexican labor, and to a lesser extent Filipino and Japanese labor.

Responding to the regional need for labor, and stimulated by the forces unleashed by the Revolution, Mexican migration increased enormously during the first three decades of the century, swelling their population by as many as one-and-a-half million across the southwest. In the city of Los Angeles the Mexican population rose from 33,644 in 1920 to well over 100,000 in 1930. The county census placed the number of Mexican residents at nearly 200,000, but reliable observers estimated 250,000. These rapid increases in population inevitably led to the development of new

settlements. Approximately 30 small enclaves outside of the huge Los Angeles colonia, were scattered throughout the county at the end of the boom 20s. Popularly known as camps and subjected to the practice of restrictive covenants, many were tucked away on the fringes of towns. Segregation affected the colonia in practically all phases of life, and extended beyond the community, from work, public education, recreation, to residence and religious practice. Children attended segregated schools when not in the fields with their parents, and adults were denied equal access to public and private venues. Effectively segregated from Anglo neighborhoods, the metaphor 'across the tracks' became a popularly used referent for the 'Mexican quarter'.

Often camps appeared as landowners parceled vacant areas into rentals exclusively for Mexican tenants. Described by one observer as "Patches of ground...as small as twenty by thirty feet", these plots rented for one to ten dollars a month. Given the poor resources at their disposal, renters then build their own homes using inexpensive, second hand, or discarded materials and foregoing amenities. Extraordinary revenue accrued to landowners from otherwise unproductive lands. County welfare and health officials investigating several county camps reported that "the annual return to the owner amounted to over a thousand dollars per acre, in return for which the owner had made no investment whatever in sanitation or road improvements".⁷

Most Mexican laborers were employed primarily as common labor, a' nearly eight out of every ten of these worked in agriculture. One study, undertaken by Professor James Batten of Pomona College, contacted 788 randomly selected Mexican homes to discern, among other things, the occupational pattern. He reported that "the largest number of Mexicans visited were unskilled

laborers engaged in agricultural pursuits". Batten's study also found that 75 percent of the families earned less than \$100.00 monthly and that one-third reported their children working part or full time to help support the family.⁸ Even in relatively good times, poverty stalked the largely immigrant Mexican community as they began the process of establishing roots in a new, and often bitterly hostile, society. The Depression brought more misfortune.

As the economic barometer declined, county truck farmers countered dwindling returns by cutting wages as much as one-half. Wages that had been as high as .25 cents an hour the year previous were cut to .10 and .15 cents an hour. The decision was not by any means unanimous, but, after heated debate the powerful central Japanese Grower Association won over its members to agree to steep wage cuts. Cutting wages made business sense to the farmer, but to the farmworker it proved to be the an indigestible and bitter dose of employer policy. In the face of extremely low wages the strike offered the worker a realistic alternative for reversing the wage decline.

The Strike

The Los Angeles county strike, sometimes mistitled the El Monte Berry Strike, pitted the two largest minority communities in the county against one another in the largest strike to affect the region. However, highlighting the ethnicity of the opponents over their place in the division of labor privileges a superficial understanding of the struggle. More accurately, the strike constituted a conflict between small sized profitable business operators arrayed against their poorly paid labor force. While the strike had overtones of ethnic rivalry the fundamental issues propelling the strike emanated from a labor-capital relation. A study emphasizing the ethnicity of the antagonists merely

skims the surface of the conflict. Wages always remained the fundamental issue from the perspective of both worker and grower.

CAWIU organizers arrived in the El Monte area sometime in the spring of 1933 and encountered an absence of organization and an abundance of discontent. After a short period of CAWUJ activity in the El Monte area, worker enthusiasm seemed high enough to mount an organized challenge. Consequently, in late May a contingent of farm workers representing the San Gabriel Valley area, led by the CAWIU, appeared at the home of the secretary of the San Gabriel Valley Japanese Association.⁹ Their petition for an increase of wages to .35 cents an hour received no reply and in reaction to the affront a general meeting was called for June 1 at Hicks Camp in El Monte.

Hicks Camp bordered the sandy banks of the usually dry Rio Hondo River and agricultural fields. The hamlet-like community of rustic homes and dusty lanes housed 1000 residents in the off season and expanded to 1500 during the harvest. Like the many dispersed Mexican settlements throughout southern California, Hicks Camp appeared to the outsider to have no other reason for its existence than to provide some modicum of shelter for the labor of the surrounding farms.

As the first day of June turned to evening, Hicks Camp underwent a transformation from a quiet isolated colonia into the center of a county-wide strike movement. An enthused and angry 600 farm workers assembled at the meeting listened to speakers who urged their companions to redress miserable wages by calling a strike. Before the boisterous meeting's end a unanimous vote declared an immediate halt to all work in the area until their demands were met. In the fervor of the evening a strike committee comprised of Mexican, Filipino, and Japanese workers representing the area

work sites assumed the task of coordinating the strike. The committee of 50 immediately began the process of organizing the strike. In the deliberate attempt to widen the participation of workers, the CAWILY made a fateful decision that only two of its members should serve on this committee. Elected to the posts of treasurer and organizing secretary, the two joined with the other members and swung into action the next morning, issuing leaflets, flyers, and bulletins.¹⁰ Soon after the strike erupted it quickly spread and within a few days work stopped in many sections throughout the county.

Pickets were assigned to various work sites and, according to the Western Worker, organ of the west coast branch of the Communist Party, within a few days "over one hundred of the workers joined the CAWIU".¹¹ Daily meetings at Hicks Camp, the strike headquarters, brought workers together for briefings on the strike's progress. Mass demonstrations rallied support from dwellers in the settlements. Informational leaflets bearing the logo of the CAWIU printed in English, Japanese, and Spanish called attention to the Strike and invited workers to join the movement. However, the CAWIU hold on leadership was not always as secure as they imagined. Unknown to union leaders at the time, the Strike Committee included old-line CUOM leaders, one of whom, Armando Flores, assumed the leading position in the Committee. Although a print shop owner and not a farm worker, Flores eventually contested the CAWIU and their followers among the strikers and later led the strike movement. The second person to play a leading role along with Flores in thwarting the union, Vice-Consul Ricardo Hill, established a political partnership with Flores as both later assumed leadership and control of the strike.

Flores' presence in Los Angeles colonia activities dated back at least to 1926, and linked him to a militant pro-government, pro-consul, and pro-CROM past. Flores first

appears in the Confederacion de Sociedades Mexicanas (CSM) where he held the position of Pro-Secretario in the executive committee. The CSM, as discussed earlier, spawned the effort to establish the Confederacion de Uniones Obreras Mexicanas (CUOM) in 1927. His name also appeared on the roster of the founding convention of the CUOM and was elected Secretario de Actas (Secretary of the Acts) in the first CUOM executive committee.¹² Through his participation in these and other highly visible consulate inspired organizations, among them the Comite de Beneficencia Mexicana and the Cruz Azul, Flores gained a favorable reputation among Mexico de Afuera.¹³ He also served as Secretary of the Exterior in the Los Angeles chapter of the Partido Liberal Mexicano.¹⁴ By then, the PLM had long before retired its anarchistic ideology and, like Flores and the remnants of the CUOM, actively supported the government party of Mexico. Recognized as a labor leader, he delivered addresses at 16th of September celebrations hosted by the Comisiones Honorificas and the Confederacion de Sociedades Mexicanas. An avid supporter of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, Flores organized the Club Pro-Ortiz Rubio during the 1929 elections and campaigned tirelessly for Pascual Ortiz Rubio, the government candidate handpicked by ex-President Plutarco Calles.¹⁵ The Club held innumerable community meetings during the campaign and added to Flores stature as an activist, albeit one closely associated with the consulate.¹⁶ Due to his activism, and probably because of his CUOM past, Flores was widely known as an experienced labor leader. Through CUOM, the PLM, the Club Ortiz Rubio and other organizations, he established a wide network in colonias throughout the Los Angeles region.

Vice-Consul Ricardo Hill, Flores' mentor during the strike, began his service for the Mexican government in 1923 as a member of the Mexican legation in Tokyo. His first

consulate assignment placed him in St. Louis, Missouri in 1927. After several subsequent assignments Hill arrived in Los Angeles around 1933 and named vice-consul in charge of the Department of Protection under the supervision of Consul Alejandro Martinez. The responsibility put Hill into continual contact with colonia

residents, especially those seeking legal help from the consulate.

Born into a distinguished Sonoran revolutionary family, Hill was hardly a newcomer to the world of politics. His father, General Benjamin Hill, served as a trusted ally to General Alvaro Obregon, whose forces later triumphed and insured the presidency for Obregon in 1918. Hill's brother, Benjamin, Jr. served as consul general in San Antonio, Texas during the mid-thirties. Hill thus moved into the foreign service with impeccable family connections that tied him to the fortunes of the ruling revolutionary government. His marriage to Esperanza Desquiera, of the landed Pesquiera family and owners of the Hacienda Cucuta in Sonora, further strengthened his ties to the militaristic Calles-Obregon machine of northern Mexico which was to rule Mexico from 1918 to 1934.¹⁷

Family connections served as calling cards for sinecures, evident in the process that led to the hiring of Hill in 1923. Documents in the Abelardo Rodriguez file at the Archivo General de la Nacion in Mexico City demonstrate that Hill received his post largely due to his father's loyalties to Obregon. Yet Hill had other qualities that made him a good candidate for consulate responsibilities. Like many children of the Mexican wealthy, Hill benefited from private schooling in Mexico City and abroad. He finished his preparatory schooling at the New York Military Academy, Cornwall-on-Hudson, where he undoubtedly learned English.¹⁸

Like all who served in government posts, loyalty to the president and to the administration's policies was of the highest order for the smooth operation of the consular corps. Hill's conduct during and after the strike demonstrated his full and complete allegiance to the 'party line'. Conventional interpretations misconstrue the roles taken by the Vice-Consul and Flores in relation the growers and local authorities' and portray the latter as successfully maneuvering Hill and Flores to fit their labor strategy. In his

classic work, Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941 Clete Daniel, for example, contends that "local authorities...seized the opportunity to remove Communist organizers... in order to permit full control of the strike to fall to presumably less clever and more malleable Mexican strike leaders"¹⁹ Daniel depicts the move against the CAWIU as one primarily inspired by local authorities and that the consul merely responded to their prodding.

Two crucial factors left out of Daniel's analysis provides the analytic paradigm for this study. First, the removal of 'communist organizers' concerned all parties involved in the conflict, save, of course, the CAWILY. This approach, on the other hand, recognizes that local authorities, the Japanese farmers, and the Mexican government shared the same anxiety regarding Communists in labor organizations. Moreover, each element feared independent union movements, particularly if led by leftists. Vice-Consul Hill required no prodding when it came to contesting the CAWIU for leadership. After all, anti-communist politics was not a novel undertaking for him. Only a few weeks before the June 1 strike meeting, Mexican federal police, hoping to prevent leftists from speaking at the May Day rally, arrested over twenty-one suspected communists on trumped up charges of 'appearing to intend to perform' terroristic acts. Like a faithful government servant, he carried out Mexico's political policy

13

14

towards labor unions and communists. Hill's consular duties and his family loyalties, committed him to the *course* that he enthusiastically assumed.

Secondly, Professor Daniel like other scholars, overlooks the political organizing undertaken by the Mexican government since at least 1926 to channel expatriate political activism onto conservative ground. The, nationalistic political spadework by the government through CROM and CUOM has sometimes been mistaken as evidence of WWI style anarchism, if not revolutionary radicalism. The confusion stems from a misinterpretation of the CROM's skillful use of rhetoric that mimicked leftist theory and language but in action had little to do with with Marxism or even anarchism. Radical in appearance, but conservative in action aptly

sums up CROM's and the consulate's strategy. Indeed, a cultivated tradition of Mexicanism, or a Mexican ethnic consciousness, prepared the ground for Hill and Flores. The CAWIU endorsed the Marxist principle of class politics, while the consul, in attempting to subvert radical tendencies and build a conservative union movement, invoked a narrow nationalistic Mexicanismo. That strategy stopped far short of the working class politics that formed the bread and butter of the CAWIU.

After Venice and El Monte, the strike spread to San Gabriel, Belvedere, and Santa Monica and soon encompassed several thousand workers in widely separated areas of the county. In the initial days of the strike, the odd coupling of Hill and Flores, on the one side, with the CAWIU, on the other, set the scenario for later developments that proved disastrous for the latter. As a portent of things to come, newspaper reports scarcely referred to the union. The Los Angeles Spanish language daily, LaOpinion covered the strike intensely but not one article focused on the union to any extent beyond mere mention. The silence appears

14

15

deliberate. At this stage, articles with extended coverage of the actions and statements by Hill and Flores appeared frequently. An example occurred on June 3, two days after the El Monte strike meeting, at the Venice Celery Growers fields where 125 workers demanded an increase to .30 cents per hour. The Venice strikers assigned a small delegation to seek out the consul and to appeal for support. In their words, they "abandoned their jobs and immediately sought out the Mexican consul in Los Angeles, so that the case may be investigated and justice done".²⁰ And yet the presence of the CAWIU is undeniable, else how do we explain the determination later displayed on the part of Flores and Hill to fight the union?

Isolation of the CAWIU from the daily intercourse of the colonia is reflected in the manner in which news articles scarcely mention the union, or if they are mentioned it is often a case of gross misspelling or errors in identification. One La Opinion item reported that strike circulars handed out in the affected sites were printed under the logo of the "Comite de Accion de la Union Industrial de Obreros de Agricultura y Ganaderia". The

exact translation, "Committee of Action of the Industrial Union of Workers in Agriculture and Cattle Farms", seemed a caricature.²¹ Naturally, as the strike spread and as incipient labor unions in the form of local committees were established, they felt the tug of two divergent political orientations. Out of the early turmoil Vice-Consul Hill and Armando Flores emerged as the most publicized and visible leaders, who, along with their followers on the Strike Committee, began coordinating the dispersed actions into a single movement.

Although two widely contradictory political positions appeared at the center of the movement the strike continued to gather energy during the first week. Meanwhile, Hicks

15

16

Camp remained the strike headquarters. By the end of the first week the two sides in the conflict distinguished their positions clearly-- and it was doubtful that the CAWIU had a clear hand in directing the strike. The consulate had taken such a central position that by June 5 the Strike Committee sent an official delegation to the Consulate where the strikers were assured of consular intervention directly with the president of the Japanese Association. According to the La Opinión Vice-Consul Hill also "ffered to make a personal visit to Venice and other nearby centers with the purpose of personally learning about the situation of Mexican workers in the region, and to take necessary steps in the name of the Consulate's Department of Protection to help the strikers".²² Then, as if a single organization, the delegates and Hill walked several blocks to the offices of Adele Callahan, the head of the county welfare bureau, to inform her of the plight facing worker families and requesting her cooperation. She assured the group of her willingness to help the needy.

Later that same day a meeting at Flores' print shop, presumably of the Strike Committee, decided on several critical courses of action that mirrored a wide political distance and apparent

independence from the CAWIU. First, the Committee formed several coordinating sub-committees; secondly, and more importantly, the committee decided to send an informational memorandum to the Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Relations and the Secretary of Industry, Commerce, and Labor. In addition to informing the Mexican government concerning the strike, the group resolved to seek the solidarity of "labor organizations in Mexico".²² Finally, they decided to communicate strike information to Mexican newspapers, and especially Mexican labor journals.

16

17

Within days of the strike call not only the consulate but the administration of President Abelardo Rodriguez and Mexican labor organizations were pulled into a conflict initially led by the antithesis of Mexican official politics, the CAWIU. Meanwhile, formal leadership began to swing to Flores and Hill, indicated by a June 6 rally in Santa Monica at which both men addressed the crowd. Further demonstration of Flores' leadership appeared in the form of bulletins without the CAWIU logo composed by him and printed in his shop.²⁴ News reports clearly placed Flores and Hill into the center of the controversy. Nevertheless, union militants actively engaged in the actions surrounding the strike, such as picketing, attending meetings and making their voices and political opinions heard, and urging militant tactics to discourage scabs.²⁵ In spite of their determination, and by their own reckoning, they failed to establish leadership within the Strike Committee and therefore worked on the periphery rather than at the center stage. Their confidence during the first few days of the strike proved unwarranted. With neither a firm understanding of the conditions affecting labor in the area, nor with the time to effectively prepare a union, the organizers would soon be on the outside. Though the CAWIU had a sizable following among the

workers, particularly the younger generation, leadership fell gradually to the conservative pro-consul forces.

The union managed to enlist members into the Young Communist League and, together with seasoned members, distributed food and supplies in the laborer settlements. Although their presence alarmed the conservative authorities and Hill and Flores, the CAWIU forces were too few, inexperienced, and with little skill in organizing among Mexican labor to exert strong leadership. In a short matter of time the union would fall from their already precarious leadership position.

18

Meanwhile, the strike entered into the second week, affected up to 5,000 workers, and extended across the county.

Hill realized that the CAWIU posed difficulties for negotiating a quick settlement, a sentiment shared by growers and local authorities. According to the local Japanese newspaper, Rafu Shimpo the growers asserted that if "the radical element [were] weeded out of the union movement [,] the farmers [would] have a better chance to cooperate with labor".²⁶ Growers agreed with Hill and Flores on one crucial point: both felt that the presence of radicals among the workers diverted workers' attention away from a commitment to reaching a negotiated settlement. Equally important from the perspective of the vice-consul (and local authorities) was that the CAWIU, a communist led organization, presented problems for the control of political organizing among Mexicans in the region. Futile attempts by Hill and Flores to pressure workers to negotiate during the early stages of the conflict were eclipsed by internal disputes within the Strike Committee. Eliminating the CAWIU became the first step in the settlement process.

The inevitable and final rupture between Hill and Flores, on the one hand, and the CAWIU on the other occurred after an angry confrontation between the two on June 9th. The apparently internal 'conflict extended beyond the Strike Committee and the rank and file to include the Los Angeles Police Department's notorious Red Squad, the main intelligence gathering agency in the Los Angeles area. Dedicated to subverting and destroying leftist, and even liberal organizations, especially militant labor unions, the Red Squad naturally directed its attention to the strike and, in particular, the leaders. The Squad assigned several undercover agents, including one described as a Mexican, to infiltrate and investigate the ranks. A stream of reports kept the Department informed of the strike's progress. The evaluation of strike leaders by the

of strike leaders by the agency sheds light on the covert political alliances that favored the Hill faction over the CAWILY. The Squad's intelligence reports not only illuminated the distinction that the agency accorded to the two factions but demonstrated their support for Hill and provides insight into the evolution of the strike itself. Indeed, the eventual triumph of leadership by Hill and Flores defies explanation without reference to the cooperation of the Red Squad.

Red Squad undercover detectives submitted numerous reports, but the June 7 report sent directly to Captain William F. Hynes, the unit's commanding officer, provides irrefutable evidence of political cooperation. Agents working in the Venice area first observed "the Mexican consul...advising and directing the Mexican field workers" then proceeded to continue their investigation,

We went to 4065 Ocean Park Ave. and there found sixty or seventy Mexicans gathered, and in the midst of their group were two white fellows and a Jewish woman. We listened to their conversation and gathered therefrom that these three were communist organizers...

After questioning these three subjects, I informed them that we knew purpose in being among the field workers was not to lend aid and food as they had stated to the group, but that they really were there to create dissension and unrest among them. I warned them to stay away, owing to their affiliation the Communist Subsidiary [sic] organization—

Agricultural Workers Ind. Union [the CAWIU]. I

then went to the group of Mexicans assembled there in the meeting and informed them that these three people were communist agitators. I asked if they wanted to be led or influenced by any such organizations and they immediately answered they did not and were not aware that the communists were taking part in the strike movement I spoke to them regarding a raise in pay, saying they must also take in consideration that the grower himself was receiving very little for his product and therefore was unable to pay a very high scale of wages; told them that if their consul was advising and directing them, I was sure they would not get into any trouble, but if they were communist led and directed, it might lead to trouble for them, such as deportation, etc.²⁷

Well informed of the leadership situation, a Red Squad dual strategy aimed at steering the strike into the hands of the consul and eliminating the CAWIU as a factor in the strike. The strategy ultimately required direct intervention rather than the persuasive tactic used at the Venice site. However, planning for such action needed the participation of the consul and the Flores faction in the Strike Committee. The opportunity arose on June 9, at the Hicks Camp headquarters. Under the direction of the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations Puig Casauranc and with the support of the local police [and presumably the growers], Vice-Consul Hill led the charge to expel all

CAWIU members from the Strike Committee and from the movement. La Opinion reported a tense meeting orchestrated by Hill and Flores. "The expulsion," read the article, "made in public, was taken at the very moment that Señor Ricardo Hill, chief of the Consulate's Department of Protection, exhorted a large gathering of workers."

The two men expelled from the Strike Committee, Lino Chacon and J. Ruiz were charged by Hill with distributing Communist literature and "frequently urging militant measures against scabs", allegations which were certainly true, but tantamount to a crime in the eyes of Hill.²⁹ Many, but certainly not all in the rank and file, seemed accepting of Hill and generally followed his lead. Statements by eyewitnesses described the meeting and included a large measure of traditional respect for their consul. One was quoted as saying, "Today in the afternoon Señor Ricardo Hill, in whom we have placed all of our confidence, came by Hicks Camp to help us. We told him of the presence of those elements...and since Señor Hill discovered that these men were communists, he expelled them in the presence of all our companeros".³⁰

Although news reports portray the expulsion as an on-the-spot decision, in fact the action had much wider ramifications. At least two agencies, the Mexican government and the local police, not only condoned the action but were integral to the affair. I have already addressed evidence that implicates the police in pro-consul tactics two days before the Hicks Camp meeting. Other evidence further implicates the police as participants in the June 9th expulsion.

The CAWIU's version of the events alleged that some form of collusion between the police and Hill secured the move. According to the union the "police posed as friends of the strikers" before the consul assumed total leadership and that coup began when "on the pretext that the bosses wanted totalk terms, the police lured the settlement committee into the police station and held them there for several hours."³¹ In the strike leaders' absence, "the consul called a meeting, denouncing our comrades as 'reds' ...and warned them to keep away from

the CAWIU. The workers were turned against us." The Los Angeles Times version of the affair meshes with

that of the CAWIU. A Times reporter wrote that the meeting “was addressed by a representative of the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles. The strikers were urged to run the agitators out and were told that when this was done an earnest effort will be made to obtain a settlement.”³² The CAWIU further alleged that Hill promised the protection of the Mexican government conditioned on the expulsion of CAWIU members.³³ Such a charge was not out of line with the evidence shown here, and later events in the San Joaquin Valley cotton strike demonstrated that the government promised material implies the existence of conservative and militant factions within the strike movement which explains why Hill and Flores did not completely dominate the strike once they assumed leadership.

On the day following the expulsion, CAWIU forces rallied and were about to regain ground when it finally lost its position of influence. According to the Western Worker, union organizers

Were gathered in the [Hicks Camp] hall when the police raided it, arrested eight of them and jailed them. Soon after the Mexican consul again came on the scene...This time our comrades couldn't counteract his fakery since those not arrested were being kept away from El Monte by the police. The consul then formed his own organization of workers...Ten days later a so-called “liberal” union was formed.³⁴

Immediately after the June 9 meeting a commission of strikers, led by Hill, appeared at the offices of La Opinion "to give an accounting of the expulsion of the two individuals considered communists". Interspersed with much praise for Hill, their comments also reveal the links between the local authorities and the consul: "Now that we have expelled those two "leaders" the authorities have lent us all their support,

indicating to us, in addition, that the movement we have initiated is totally justified".³⁵ Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Relations also made marked reference to a notable improvement in "the attitude of the local authorities towards the strikers... probably due to the fact that Communist agitators" were eliminated.³⁶

Despite the expulsion, CAWIU militants and their followers continued participating in the strike. Often appearing at the picket lines, they ran scabs out of the fields, a favorite activity. On an old mimeograph machine they printed strategic and tactical directives and leaflets denouncing Hill. But these actions only led to the consul forces to tighten their hold, with the assistance of the police, over the strike. Whenever the 'agitators' appeared on the scene the police were curiously near enough at hand to undermine their activities, to give chase or arrest them. The CAWIU charged that Hill, with the assistance of growers and police, compiled a blacklist' of all activists and organized patrols "to keep [the CAWIU] out of the fields".³⁷ The Los Angeles Times reported that at one gathering of peaceful pickets, all

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members were "placed under arrest...as soon as they made their appearance.... On the other hand, peaceful picketing, i.e. non-CAWIU pickets, were left alone indicating that the level of militancy decreased upon the official departure of the union from the leadership.³⁹

With the CAWIU nearly out of the picture the pickets' aggressiveness seemed to tail off, a decline in militancy that may not have occurred 'without the intervention of the consulate. Pacifying the movement was

surely a goal of Consul Martinez, Hill's supervisor in the consulate. Consul Martinez took immediate opportunity of the expulsion by "appealing to them [the strikers] to return to their work at once and settle their difficulties peacefully."⁴⁰ Martinez's anxious plea failed ignite a general move back to work; instead the strike continued. And whenever CAWIU militants appeared, Martinez grew worried, as happened in late June when several appeared at the picket line urging strong tactics to remove scabs from the fields. Martinez responded with "instructions to the Mexican workers to disperse and not to congregate in the zones where the Japanese fields are located."⁴¹ Martinez' admonitions apparently sent strikers back to their settlements. According to his July 1st message to President Rodriguez, he sensed that "for the moment alarming characters have disappeared" and that "strikers have retired to their respective camps to wait the results of the negotiations".⁴² By then picketing was rather peaceful and with police protection planned during meetings between the sheriff, Vice-consul Hill, and Flores for coordinating the control of the picket lines. The June 25 edition of the Times reported that an "Announcement of [a peaceful picketing] plan was made...after a conference between strike leaders...the Mexican consulate, and Sheriffs officials..."⁴³

That Martinez seldom intervened directly, such as his endeavor to terminate the strike early, indicated that he assumed differing responsibilities from those of Hill. Apparently some

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tension between the two marred their ability to work harmoniously¹ yet both worked toward a common objective. Although Martinez had no stomach for unions and strikes, no matter the cause, both worked in tandem. Martinez sent periodic strike updates to President Rodriguez and Secretary Puig Casauranc. Marnez also addressed requests for intervention to President Roosevelt and California Governor James Rolph. Thus a division of labor distinguished Martinez's and Hill's responsibilities, the former worked behind the scenes and as conduit of information to and from Mexico City, the latter directed the day-t~day strike activities.

Notwithstanding that events, like the expulsion, appeared to be dictated by local individuals, deeper review of the evidence strongly implicates the supervision of ex-President Calles and of Secretary Puig in

Mexico City. Puig's July 1st memorandum summarizing the strike to President Abelardo Rodriguez highlighted the Mexico City-Los Angeles connection in the expulsion:

Consul Martinez (in Los Angeles) explained that the presence of elements connoted as communists among the strikers made the work of the consul difficult, and for that reason the authorities refused to support those elements [the strikers] and the employers rejected any negotiations. The consulate received instrudions to correctly organize the striking elements and procure the elimination of the communist leaders. (Emphasis Mine) On the 12th the consul communicated that the definite committee was formed, the existing conflict settled, and the elimination of agitating elements of communist affiliation. These satisfactory results were communicated to CROM.⁴⁴

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The new committee formed under consul supervision centralized all strike activities and ordered that henceforth no transaction other than those of the new Strike Committee would be recognized as authoritative.⁴⁵ By June 14, five days after the expulsion, the consul held complete leadership and to such a degree that his word gave final and official approval to the Committee's decision. Moreover, Committee meetings which were usually held at the worker's settlement, Hicks Camp, now took place at the consulate offices. Federal mediators assigned to the strike observed the change in headquarters which isolated the more militant workers, and symbolized the change in leadership:

All leaders of the striking Mexicans and their activities had been transferred to the Union League Building...in the offices of the Mexican sonsul [sic] and the Mexican government was represented by

a Mr. Hill, Mexican vice-consul, and a Mr. Marcus, attorney for the Mexican consul who acted as the spokesmen for all Mexicans involved in this dispute.⁴⁶

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"For the first time since the strike began", announced an article in La Opinio "the Mexican consulate and the strike committee, the two forces in the strike, are working together to gain the triumph of the movement"⁴⁷ With the CAWIU out of the leadership the strike now became an overt political dependency of the Mexican government. Henceforth all Strike Committee decisions required the approval of the consulate Both looked toward Mexico City, particularly the CROM and General Calles, and Washington D.C., for legal, moral, and monetary support. By the middle of June the strike had stalled the harvest of vegetables and berries, while growers preferred to wait until the workers tired of the strike. Hill and the Strike Committee opted to use Mexico as a lever to force the growers to the bargaining table and negotiate under federal arbitration. A flurry of messages from the consulate offices to Mexico and Washington enlarged the scope of the movement. In telegrams to the White House, Flores made an urgent request for a "full investigation as soon as possible"⁴⁸ Two days later the Department of Labor's Conciliation and Mediation Service directed commissioner E.H. Fitzgerald to "take up the situation affecting Mexican laborers...in southern California."⁴⁹ In spite of Fitzgerald's

intercessions, including seven meetings with the Strike Committee and Hill between June 21 and June 25, the negotiations were deadlocked. Finally on June 26 the two sides agreed to bargain.

Hill, Flores, Attorney Marcus, and fifty men from the Strike Committee represented striking workers at the lone negotiating session held on the 26th. Japanese Grower Association Secretary, S. Fukami, represented the growers. The Association initially offered .15 cents per hour but, after two days of lobbying by the Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce, finally agreed to .20 cents.⁵⁰ After three hours of parleying "the Mexican group

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refused to sign". Acting independently, a majority of the Strike Committee felt that they had the growers 'on the run'⁷ and pushed for "a wage for all Mexican workers in California". Although agreeing in principle to .20 cents per hour, the Japanese Association refused the general pay demand, forcing a standoff and frustrating Hill's efforts to get the Committee to accept the growers' offer and end the strike.⁵¹ Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce staff member, Ross Gast, commented in an inter office memo to Dr. George Clements, head of the Chamber's Agriculture Bureau, that "he [Hill] told me privately that he wanted to sign but could not control the group." Hill was especially frustrated because he had already worked in backroom meetings to hammer out the agreement with "the strike leaders, the El Monte Chamber of Commerce, and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce" and the growers.⁵²

Members of the Strike Committee at times took matters into their own hands rather than give full responsibility to Hill and Flores. Episodes of worker independence indicated that while Hill and Flores exercised a large measure of control over the strikers, an activist faction probably led by William Velarde, an IWW-sympathizer, refused to become pawns regarding the settlement. In spite of Hill's failure to control all the delegates at the bargaining table, his presence, nevertheless, played a major part in the eventual outcome of the strike.

Other than that one episode of independence, a majority of workers appeared to embrace the

leadership of Hill and Flores. Given that acceptance, the intercessions to the Mexican President Abelardo Rodriguez, to ex-President Plutarco Calles, and to CROM apparently had the support of the strikers. Thus communications to CROM headquarters in mid-June urgently requesting "funds to purchase provisions to sustain the movement" surely led the workers to believe that outside assistance

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led the workers to believe that outside assistance would lead them to victory.⁵³ Another similar message sent to Mexico's Secretariat of Commerce, Industry, and Labor requested that the Secretary sponsor a boycott of all Japanese goods imported or manufactured in factories owned by Japanese. A similar appeal had already been made to the local Mexican colonia, and merchants were asked to donate groceries for distribution to strikers' families.

CROM responded to the request for support with enthusiasm. Eucario Leon, CROM Secretary General, assured Flores that the organization stood solidly behind the movement. "For your information", he wrote, "we have given instructions to all CROM federations and confederations to declare a boycott of all articles of Japanese origin...we also request that our Government join in solidarity with this decision.. we have also asked the unions to send monetary support as soon as possible..."⁵⁴ Pleased with Leon's reply, Flores answered in the pages of La Opinion that "the institutions of Mexico continue cooperating to obtain the triumph. The triumph will not be that of the Mexican pickers, but of all Mexicans."⁵⁵ Reduced to a secondary factor in the movement, the pickers' struggle was transferred to the governing institutions of Mexico which assumed a central place in the conflict.

Following the receipt of the CROM response La Opinion headlines broadcast "CROM Supports the Strikers" and reported that a CROM commission scheduled a meeting with President Rodriguez to request "rapid measures to back the movement."⁵⁶ Flores also petitioned Ex-President Plutarco Calles, the real power

behind the administration of President Abelardo Rodriguez. Flores wrote, "Taking into consideration your undeniable sympathy for the agricultural laborers, we respectfully implore whatever help possible to sustain the strike..."⁵⁷ The message assured Calles of "our gratitude for material and moral support"⁵⁸ Calles responded favorably to Flores' petition and the next day wired \$150.00 by way of the

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favorably to Flores' petition and the next day wired \$150.00 by way of the consulate in Los Angeles. Two days later he sent another \$600.00. From El Sauzal his resort-like hacienda in Ensenada, Calles began to orchestrate Mexican activities linked to the strike, and even the strike itself.

Calles emerged a hero among the strikers, and in the worker settlements shouts of "Viva el General Calles" reverberated through the paths and streets. One leader described Calles as "a great friend and defender of the working class"⁵⁹ and "high protector of the working class. "Others simply said that they had "no words to express their gratitude to General Calles." A representative of the Strike Committee, enthused by Calles monetary donations, exclaimed that "The moral support from Mexico is sufficient to take us to victory."⁶¹ Sincere feelings of appreciation buoyed the movement throughout the county as strikers felt that Calles' timely contributions saved the struggle from collapse.

Actions and messages from Secretary Puig further enthused the pickers. Puig expressed his government's interest in the strike to U.S. Ambassador Josephus Daniels, carefully pointed out that all radicals were expelled, and requested Washington intervention on behalf of the strikers. A IA Opinion article reported that Puig not only declared the Mexican government's support but added that \$1000.00 was to be sent to the Los Angeles consulate as a demonstration of the President's cooperation.⁶² A CROM statement followed Puig's message, assuring that the "boycott operates with full vigor in the Republic" and that CROM affiliates in Baja California "are prepared to raise a fund...to help the Los Angeles workers." All totaled the moneys originating Mexico and sent to the consulate for disbursement to the Strike Committee came to over \$4000.00; Calles personally sent over \$1000.00.

A common assumption in political circles in and out of Mexico contended that Calles openly pulled the strings at the President's office and at the Secretariat of Foreign Relations. The flow of information back and forth from Mexico City to Los Angeles concerning the strike always reached Calles' headquarters and strongly implicates him in the ordering and supervision of the enterprise. A special memorandum on the state of the strike prepared by Puig for President Rodriguez reflected on Calles' role in the support movement. In that memo Puig quoted from his previous wire to Calles: "With pleasure I write, my General, that from the beginning of the strike this Secretariat has been in constant contact with the striker's committee, and the CROM Executive Committee has given absolute support to the movement".⁶⁴ In a later telegram the line of authority is further delineated as Puig informed Consul Martinez of Calles' enthusiastic evaluation: "Senor General Calles congratulates the Secretariat [of Foreign Relations] and you for your efficacious and patriotic labor undertaken in the strike of Mexican workers, thus complying with the orders transmitted from the President via this Secretariat".⁶⁵ [Emphasis Mine]

Upon the breakdown of the June 26th negotiating session, commissioner Fitzgerald prepared a preliminary report for the Director of Conciliation, H.L. Kerwin. Meanwhile the Strike Committee decided to continue the strategy of seeking outside support by sending telegrams to the Mexican ambassador in Washington, the Department of Labor, and the AF of L "soliciting their support for the movement." In a fitting move, the Committee voted to send two delegations to Mexico. The first was to go to Baja California to meet with General Calles and express their appreciation for his help and to provide information on the status of the strike. "Our principal object", stated Flores, "is to give Señor General Calles our personal

thanks for his moral and material support...and to inform his of the course of our negotiations with the Japanese growers".⁶⁶ The second delegation was to journey to Mexico City to conference with "leaders of the principal labor organizations, including CROM, to request assistance and support for emancipating the Mexican workers in California."⁶⁷

Nine delegates led by Flores traveled to Ensenada and met with Calles at El Sauzal. Calles did more than receive the expressions of their gratitude as he offered his "counsel and recommendations regarding the orientations that the strike should assume."⁶⁸ The next day an additional \$600.00 arrived from Calles compelling the Consulate to issue a bulletin stating that Calles "has demonstrated that he is truly concerned for all the problems of Mexicans, whether residing in the Fatherland or in a foreign country."⁶⁹ Not content to send money, Calles then wired Governor James Rolph requesting state intervention. Using racial tones to illustrate his argument, Calles noted the "duty to strike given the miserable wages received from the Japanese bosses, who even while living in a country of high culture are shorn of all human sentiment and deny their workers those rights enjoyed in the modern world."⁷⁰ Again the appreciative strikers shouted "Viva el General Calles!" as Governor Rolph called upon the State Department of Labor Statistics to investigate the conflict.

Calles, the government of Mexico, and the ruling party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, entered the fray in a collective fashion but it was Calles who emerged the larger than life hero. So strong were feelings aroused among the striking pickers that Calles received an informal but significant honor, the title "Father of the Movement".⁷¹ Nevertheless, the hot summer month of July began without a settlement on the horizon. In Mexico, on the

other hand, Calles, the PNR, President Rodriguez, and CROM lost no time in organizing nationalist propaganda in defense of the strike. Calles, for example, issued telegrams in late June to Luis L. Leon, the editor of the 'official' newspaper, El Nacional and to the PNR President, General Manuel Perez Trevino, urging their collaboration with the support campaign. The CROM responded to the strikers' pleas by alerting all of their affiliates to back the strike.

From across Mexico, CROM unions sent messages requesting support from the President's office. However, Calles outdistanced his compatriots in the support campaign when he wired President Roosevelt "begging attention to the wretched and painful economic situation of our Mexican laborers...owing to the ill treatment which they receive from these orientals."⁷² The official organ of the ruling National Revolutionary Party, El Nacional thoroughly supported Calles' call for 'justice', repeating the claim that the strike was merely the "legitimate defense for our workmen suffering under the oppression of cruel Japanese" and later referred to "miserable salaries which [Mexicans] received from these Orientals". Racial images in communications by Mexican government authorities appeared frequently. Even Flores and Hill consistently emphasized the ethnicity factor thus making it appear that the Japanese as an ethnic group, and not growers of any other nationality or 'race', were the target of the strike. Hill and Flores played on race and used it to justify the strike and undermine the growers' credibility.

Among the local authorities, other than the police and sheriffs, having significant impact on the eventual outcome of the strike, the Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce played a key role. Much of the credit for bringing the two sides together for the negotiating sessions in June and later in July rested with the Chamber. Their interest in the situation

devolved partially from the highly questionable leases held by Japanese farmer, in apparent violation of laws that placed a three year limit on land leases to Japanese citizens. Japanese-run farms produced a multitude of crops that entered the Los Angeles market and contributed to the economic health of the area. Dr. George C.

Clements, Director of the Chamber's Agricultural Bureau, acknowledged that the greater part of the Japanese growers were "illegally on the land" and that this fact "would unquestionably be reflected back on the landowner". He recommended that every effort be made to "squelch" violent confrontations that might lead to publicizing "any violations of the Asiatic Exclusion Act".⁷³

Problematic land leases prompted a nervousness within the Chamber, and afraid that violence might bring the issue to the fore, urged a negotiated end to the strike. Toward the latter days of the strike that seemed to drag on, Clements gave a sigh of relief, pleased that the Chamber was "able to get the Sheriff's office to use diplomacy rather than force in preserving the peace."⁷⁴ Chamber staff member Ross Gast contended that, in spite of one incident of police intemperance, over the course of the strike "police authorities on the whole tended towards favoring the Mexicans".⁷⁵ He forgot to mention that 'agitators', militants, and communists were selected for doses of arrests and physical violence. In sharp contrast to the Imperial Valley and San Joaquin Valley strikes, surprisingly few arrests and episodes of violence occurred and no strike leaders (other than CAWIU members) were ever arrested. Except for occasional articles, and rather minor ones at that, the anti-union Los Angeles Times paid surprisingly little attention to the conflict. A gadfly columnist for the Times humorously summed up the reasons for such little space devoted to the strike: "Sheriff Biscaluz's men and the county constabulary certainly know their berries. They have handled the ticklish berry

constabulary certainly know their berries. They have handled the ticklish berry strike situation with tact and finesse. Hundreds of men ready to cause strife...have been kept well in hand with only a few instances of actual physical violence."⁷⁶

Another possible factor, relations between law enforcement and the consulate, may also have intervened into the conflict. A year previous Consul de La Colina presented Sheriff Frank Dewar, Deputy Sheriff Edward Duran Ayres, and County Supervisor Henry W. Wright with honorary badges of the Mexico

City police force. Inspector General Jaime Carillo handed out the handcrafted, gold embossed badges, and Consul de La Colina spoke briefly of "the cordial relations which exist between Mexico and the United States and the effective cooperation of the police in both countries". Sheriff Ayres answered de la Colina's warm salute in kind during the conviviality (as the journalist covering the affair described it) and referred specifically to his official visit to Mexico City as a guest of the metropolitan police chief. While in Mexico Ayres visited each precinct station and gained a close view of the technical and judicial branches of Mexico's police. It is highly probable that Deputy Sheriff Ayres' trip was taken as a consulate.

Five months before the strike flared, Mexico again honored Los Angeles' law enforcement. On the recommendation to Mexico City's Inspector General by Consul Martinez, Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz and Police Chief James E. Davis received honorary badges from the Mexico City police department. Martinez recommendation rested on his conviction that the awards would "provide more effective ties in the already good relations that happily exist between the Mexican and American authorities". Martinez further suggested that a friendly pistol shooting match between Los Angeles and Mexico City police departments would do well to cement "happy relations".⁷⁸

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Several more factors combined to make the Los Angeles strike much less violent than the San Joaquin Valley and the Imperial Valley conflicts. Race and ethnicity certainly played a role in determining the rather aloof and on the surface, at least, neutral position which the Chamber of Commerce, the sheriff, and the police assumed through most the conflict. In this case, that the workers were severely discriminated against found a counterbalance in their adversaries, the Japanese farmers, who also experienced racist public policy, in particular, limitations on land use and ownership. In spite of their economic success, caste-like restrictions circumscribed any political power that their economic success would otherwise have warranted. Not one Japanese served as sheriff or police, joined the County Chamber of Commerce, or served on a city council. Thus authorities were somewhat removed from

having political interaction with the growers, and stood apart from racial identification with the Japanese. One Chamber official noted the distinction in a rather blunt memo to Clements:

"I note your memo regarding the Mexican and Japanese trouble. I am inclined to agree with you that both of these groups are playing against the American interests here... Personally, I am not very much in sympathy with playing much with either the Mexicans or the Japanese"¹⁷⁹

Although the Chamber generally sided with the growers, they did not advocate an all-out use of force to destroy the incipient union. Given the racial tenor of the time, had the growers been of white majority a drastically different outcome might very well have occurred.

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Moreover, the agricultural economy of the county affected by the strike was not nearly as central to the economic life of the region compared to the San Joaquin and Imperial Valley strikes that followed within a few months. In the latter instances, the regions were distinguished by the primacy of their agricultural enterprises. County Chamber officials recognized the extremely important part played by Mexican labor in the overall economy of the region and the state and feared that an all out confrontation might fuel sentiment to raise more barriers against Mexican migration. Clements and the Chamber, with the cooperation of the Sheriff, hit upon a strategy to undercut the union by peaceful means and divide the ranks. First, Clements contended the "the Mexicans be fed", for in his opinion "a full bellied Mexican rarely fights and is more tractable". He subsequently asked for relief supplies from the county welfare office which acceded to his request. Secondly, he recommended that all able bodied citizens of "Mexican stem" be transported as soon as possible to wherever their labor is needed in the state. Sheriff Biscailuz agreed but added that he "thought the finer thing to do...would be to scatter

them through the San Joaquin Valley as needed". Lastly, Clements urged that every effort be made to encourage Mexican nationals to accept the Mexican government's offer to colonization projects. Undercover agents were assigned to the labor camps to stimulate an interest in repatriation. Apparently, only the offer of relief was taken up by the strikers as proposals for repatriation and migration failed to have their intended effect.⁸⁰

In seeming contradiction to at least one of his three pronged proposal scheme, Clements deeply regretted the loss of Mexican labor through the mass deportation campaign hatched in the offices of the county welfare department. Clements' remarks mirrored the

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with which the Chamber considered the policy. He lamented "the loss of 150,000 Mexicans from California in the last three years" and felt that "a marked shortage of this type of labor" was bound to "create [a] bidding [war] by the employers for the few remaining Mexicans in the state."⁸¹ Further restrictions spelled possible ruin for some employers by running up the cost of labor at a time when capital searched for ways to cut costs. Clements warned that the shortage created an ideal situation for labor organizers among Mexican workers.

Clearly the Chamber hoped for a rapid and peaceful solution, yet by June 30 the strike lingered on, the pickers confident that their government would lead them to victory. Events turned in favor of the Chamber when on July 4 Martinez received instructions from President Rodriguez to settle quickly. "I deem it advisable", stated the President, "that you actively resolve the strike at the earliest".⁸² Martinez response indicated that he held private, but friendly, discussions with the growers several days before reaching the formal agreement on July 6. On July 4 Martinez informed President Rodriguez via phone that "in his estimation a .20 cents per hour offer was satisfactory." Since Martinez made no mention of the opinion of the strikers, we can assume that their views did not enter into his calculations.⁸³ On July 6 the two sides agreed to a 30 day settlement that increased wages

to \$1.50 per nine hour day (or 16.5 cents per hour) for 'steady workers' and 20 cents per hour overtime; temporary workers were to receive .20 cents per hour. Both sides agreed that the terms were to be re-negotiated on August 15th. The agreement witnessed by Japanese Consul Satow and Consul Martinez increased salaries by a few cents but, more importantly, lowered the amount offered by the Growers Associations on June 26. Hardly a victory nevertheless workers went back to work

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under a new union. On July 15 the CROM affiliated Confederacion de Uniones Campesinas y Obreras Mexicanas (CUCOM), born during the confrontation with the CAWIU, celebrated its organizing convention.

In spite of the minimal gains, Armando Flores, the first Secretary General of CUCOM, praised the settlement La Opinion reported that "don Armando Flores, who since the beginning of the strike became its leader...considers yesterday's agreement Mexican labor's biggest triumph in the strike movements of the United States."⁸⁴ Although previous news articles referred to him only by name, with the settlement Flores' stature rose, and he traditional title of honor and status, *don*, now preceded his name. Consul Martinez also received favorable comments for his role. Deputy Thomas Barker of the State Division of Labor and Law Enforcement praised Martinez for having providing "splendid aid and cooperation" during the negotiations.⁸⁵

In its congratulatory message, Mexico's government laid to rest any doubts regarding the lines of authority. The Official Bulletin of the Secretariat of Foreign Relations announced that

Upon the termination of the strike movement, General Calles, through the Ministry of Foreign Relations, congratulated Consul Martinez and Vi-Consul Hill. The Ministry of Foreign Relations pointed out that the effective and patriotic labors of these men had

been carried on in compliance with orders from the President of the Republic.⁸⁶

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General sentiment placed responsibility for **defeating the** Japanese growers on the shoulders of the Mexican government. "The victory", stated a journalist in La Opinion "without doubt, was reached thanks to the decided cooperation offered by the Mexican government, the labor associations of the country₁ and in particular General Plutarco Elias Calles who from his residence in El Sauzal sent large donations of money for sustaining the movement."⁸⁷ As was to be expected the CAWIU attacked the agreement as a 'sellout' that gained the workers little for their sacrifices. One active faction on the Strike Committee, led by a IWW sympathizer and CUCOM Under Secretary₁ Guillermo Velarde, bitterly assailed the settlement which they also charged was a 'sellout'. So angered did Velarde become that he turned against Hill and "stopped coming to the (consulate] office".⁵⁸ Flores, as was to be expected, lauded the agreement, and added that Mexican institutions and leaders saved the strike from defeat. Flores emphatically declared the wage agreement a victory, not by the workers, but of the Mexican government. "If General Calles had not intervened in our favor", he exclaimed, " sending money to help the striker's families, the movement unequivocally would have failed".⁸⁹

Several observations raise doubts regarding Calles' motives and give us pause. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce contended that the Machiavellian Calles saw an opportunity to recoup political ground vis-a-vis his contenders by posing as a defender of Mexico and its working class. That certainly must have motivated Calles, since there is little evidence that he ever distinguished himself as a defender of working class interests. Less 'noble' reasons were proffered by Secretary Puig during candid conversations with Ambassador Daniels and Japanese Ambassador Hon on the subject of Calles intentions. Daniels July 5 dispatch to the Secretary of State details

Puig's perspective on the matter: "In reply to a question by Mr. Hon as to whether General Calles was "very much interested" in this situation, Doctor Puig replied that the General's interest was due chiefly to "his geographical propinquity". Daniels accepted Puig's statement at face value, implying that Calles had no deep interest in the strike other than personal or political ambition. 90

In spite of the elimination of the CAWIU and the firm consular leadership, the Chamber nonetheless misread the roles of Hill and Flores in the strike and expressed grave doubts about the two. Clements failed to appreciate that, without Hill at the helm, the CAWIU would have led a much more serious labor struggle. Hill knew as much and, like Martinez tried to end the strike through arbitration and appeals to Mexican patriotism. However, once he entered the fray he encountered difficulties in controlling the strike, in particular the Velarde faction. A significant level of workers' militancy forced Hill to ride out the storm, so to speak, until he could bring workers to settle with the growers. The Chamber misread Hill's realistic strategy as a sign of a determination to continue the strike rather than to end it. Clements and the Chamber may have been tossing up smoke screens to coverup their poor handling of the strike, but if not they were, of course, wide of the mark in their assessment. Hill may very well have appeared to be the source of worker belligerence but his motives were akin to those of Clements.

In inter-office memos some Chamber officials went so far as to charge Flores with vague allegations of undercover communist connections. Other equally fantastic charges were brought against David Marcus, the American lawyer who assisted the consulate in legal matters, alleging that he worked as a labor organizer. Hill, on the other hand, fell victim to accusations of 'questionable activities, especially the interjection of the Mexican government

in what the Chamber considered a purely local matter. The Chamber walked a thin line: to the consul's credit he had eliminated the "agitators", but, probably because of the striker's recalcitrance, Hill appeared to prolong rather than shorten the strike. And the everpresent communist bogey loomed in the background, while worrisome land leases could have repercussions for landowners.

In spite of the temporary settlement, the Chamber decided to address a grievance to Washington, requesting a Department of Justice investigation of Hill's involvement. Clements laid out the complaint to his superior, Mr. Arnoll, the Secretary and General Manager for the Chamber. He alleged that CROM and the Mexican government directed "Mexican consular offices" to interfere and "organize the Mexican people and agitate". "Call the attention of Washington and request that the Department of Justice" make an investigation, he pleaded.⁹¹

The complaint went to the Department of State with the request that the matter be forwarded to the Department of Justice. Rather than involving Justice, State chose to keep the issue as quiet as possible and maintain the matter under their purview. State's Division of Mexican Affairs reviewed the charge and their preliminary evaluation found that "little actual evidence" of "improper intervention" had been submitted.⁹² In further discreet investigation officials concluded that no action be taken "without more conclusive evidence than we now have that Mexican intervention in the dispute was of a character which might be held either unlawful, unfriendly, or improper".⁹³

Several months after the strike reached a closure, Ambassador Daniels' communique to Secretary of State Hull commented on a Mexican Foreign Relations bulletin reviewing in

Relations bulletin reviewing in detail the government's actions taken in the strike. The comment stated what appeared to be the official State opinion regarding Mexico's (and Hill's) conduct. The memo dismissed any basis for charges of misconduct by suggesting that the bulletin "need not be read unless you are interested in the matter". Daniels continued:

The dispute appears to have been settled....The bulletin describes in great detail the various steps taken by the Mexican Foreign Office to support its nationals in California...My impression is that its principle purpose was to demonstrate to the Mexican people the efficiency and vigor with which the Mexican government protects its nationals living in even so powerful a country as the U.S.⁹⁴

State accepted the Mexican government's narrow view that the conflict involved Mexican laborers against Japanese farmers and posed no immediate threat to U.S. interests. Mexico's proud insistence that its actions protected the interests of its citizens living abroad was found acceptable. State by then knew the difference between a nationalism harmful to U.S. interests and that nationalism exhibited by the Mexican state which accommodated to U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Mexico's skillful manipulation of nationalist rhetoric concealed a corporatism adapted to U.S. economic and political hegemony. The State Department could afford to uphold the larger view that as long as conservative objectives grounded consular activities., the strike and nationalist appeals merited minor attention.

Post-Script

Within a few months of the July settlement, Hill engaged in a widely publicized verbal altercation with a Los Angeles police officer over an incident unrelated to the strike or labor matters. His superiors agreed that his conduct and the surrounding controversy necessitated a transfer, without prejudice, to New Orleans. Flores remained as CUCOM secretary general but, after internal re-shuffling and a dispute, lost the leadership to his opponent, William Velarde. The union counted nearly 2,000 dues paying members and about an equal number of non-dues paying members enlisted into 42 locals.⁵⁰ Under the new leader, CUCOM embarked on an independent course, and although formally affiliated with CROM and the consulate it loosened its former ties to the consulate, and initiated a period of independence and cooperation with the CAWIU. Between 1934 and 1936 CUCOM launched several important agricultural strikes in the southern California region in a united front with other national unions and the CAWIU. After the CAWIU disappeared in 1935, the CUCOM opened its ranks to known leftists and communists without questions.

However, CUCOM's independent course was not without challenge. In 1935 Hill returned to Los Angeles with written instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Relations to "take charge of Mexican labor problems in the United States".⁹⁶ Hill's first opportunity to engage 'labor problem' solving appeared in 1935, with stirrings of a strike among citrus pickers in neighboring Orange County. CUCOM organized the pickers and prepared for the possibility for a strike, while Hill made frequent appearances at worker meetings. Velarde certainly must have recalled the unfortunate conflict concerning the 1933 strike, but with labor tensions mounting, the 1936 picking season

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opened with the largest and costliest strike to affect the citrus industry to that date.

This important strike of over 2,500 pickers has been described elsewhere and rather than repeating previous findings a summary of that strike, underscoring the significant details, will follow here.⁹⁷

As he did in the 1933 strike, Consul Hill sought more than to assist his compatriots, he aimed at nothing less than leadership. At his side, Lucas Lucio, an honorary consul by virtue of his activity in the Santa Ana

Cornision Honorifica, accompanied Hill. Hill's objective remained his attention to steering the strike away from radicals, in this instance, separating the rank and file from following the union leader, Velarde. In the midst of the strike, that objective would bring Hill into a fiery struggle with Velarde and eventually split the union into factions. After several weeks of contention, Hill gained control of the six-week long strike, ousted Velarde and any influence he had in the strike and caused a major break between the consulate and CUCOM.

As in past strikes, Hill's nationalistic strategy divided the pickers by choosing to represent only Mexican laborers and ignoring the Filipino and American pickers. Velarde and his comrades organized pickers as a class regardless of nationality. Observers noted the inclination demonstrated by Hill to split workers into national groups. J. B. Nathan, an AFL organizer,¹ reported that "According to members of the strike committee.. Consul Ricardo Hill activity has tended to split the unity of the strikers composed...of Mexican citizens...Arnerican-born Mexicans, Filipinos, and Americans".⁹⁸

Hill's objectives reached beyond leadership, he led the drive to oust Velarde from representing the pickers. Again we see, as in the events of 1933, the inclination by Hill to work with local authorities to develop a consensus regarding politically appropriate activities

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for the CUCOM. Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce official, Arthur E Clark met with Hill two months before the strike and told him "very firmly" that Hill needed to "do a big job of housecleaning in that alleged Mexican union". Hill claimed to Clark that a partial "housecleaning" had occurred. Growers insisted for more, that above all, Velarde must be eliminated from all union activity. President J.A. Prizer of the Orange County Protective Association, the local organization of growers spearheading the anti-union drive, declared to the membership that Hill gave his word "that the radical element which had brought about the strike would be out of the picture"^{1~} Hill kept his word according to Maxwell Burke, Santa Ana lawyer and Lucio's employer. Burke wrote that Hill and Lucio advised the workers to "deliberately [keep] themselves free from any radical group" Burke added that he had known Hill "for a number of years...he has never used his office of his personal

influence for any radical movement..."¹⁰¹

Once the strike had erupted the strong militancy of the workers could not be easily harnessed and after four weeks of a standstill, violent confrontations with police and vigilantes became a daily episode. Nevertheless, Velarde and Hill continually vied for leadership. At the sixth week, Hill mounted a determined campaign, aided by police and sheriffs who made particular efforts to arrest Velarde compelling him to go underground. With the protection of authorities, and true to his word, Hill, with his partner Lucio, accompanied by sheriff deputies, made the rounds of picker communities throughout the county urging the expulsion of Velarde and all radicals on the strike committee. Velarde charged that "Hill and Lucio have no authority" and that they were attempting to "trick the Mexicans into a settlement" and furthermore, that "only the union can negotiate union

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matters, not the consulate".¹⁰² By the sixth week of the strike Hill controlled the union with the cooperation of the police who arrested Velarde on the incredible charges of 'vagrancy', and on one occasion for driving on the wrong side of the road. With Velarde safely out of the picture Hill, assisted by the Inspector General of Consulates, Adolfo de la Huerta, proceeded to negotiate on growers' terms an end to the strike. Growers demanded, and received, a commitment from Hill and de la Huerta "to use their best efforts to clean out radical and red elements, particularly Velarde and his union group from the ranks of the Mexican pickers". With the approval of Hill, growers 'blacklisted' 60 alleged radicals.¹⁰³ Moreover, union recognition, the one demand that union militants regarded as non-negotiable, was absent from the agreement.¹⁰⁴

The editor of the Pacific Rural Press, a conservative farmers journal reported that Inspector General de la Huerta "offered to call off the strike if the farmers would agree to a bit of "face saving". What was meant by face saving was not clear. However, the editor further alleged that de la huerta, speaking for the strikers,

threatened Mexicans to return “to work...quietly warning them that the Mexican government would not stand behind them if they refused to accept the terms of the agreement”.¹⁰⁴

Angry union militants had good reason to charge Hill with subverting the union by turning workers against Velarde and negotiating for the union. One leader, Bernardo Lucero, attacked Hill and Lucio at a CUCOM meeting, where it was reported that “he told the workers of the treachery of Lucas Lucio” and Consul Hill. Lucero went on to hold Hill responsible for “splitting the workers with fine words and promises”. CUCOM gathered itself and issued a lengthy statement regarding Hill’s coup. It castigated the consul for “traitorous” and “contemptable” act” that “undermined the unity of the workers”. “All the explanations that...Consul Hill may make...” read the statement, “will never wipe [the] disgrace from the records of the labor movement”.¹⁰⁵ The executive committee unanimously repudiated the consul and declared that CUCOM would sever all relations with the Mexican consulate.

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Despite Hill's cooperation in excluding radicals from the strike movement, growers felt that Hill failed them by leading the union rather than calling an immediate end to the strike. The county branch of the California Associated Farmers, a conservative organization dedicated to rooting out unions in agriculture, sent a complaint to the State Department contending that Hill had gone “far afield of his duties as a consular representative” and demanded his recall. Just as the Los Angeles County Chamber of Commerce had done three years previously, the Associated Farmers ignored the service performed by the consul. Hill's views were well known and expressed in writing: "I have not been very active [in] organizing Mexican labor, except in cooperation with the local police, Federal officers, and the National Labor Relations Board...so that there would be no disorder among our people". Hill further averred that, "any radical group will let it be known that they are against me".¹⁰⁶ No one could accuse Hill of ‘coddling’ radicals, one pro-consul lawyer contended that due to Hill's efforts "when certain... radical people appeared...they had been told that they were not needed nor wanted".¹⁰⁷

Why and how the Associated Farmers failed to recognize Hill's motives and cooperative actions remains unclear, and there is suggestive evidence that many were satisfied with Hill's activities. What is clear is that Hill opposed strikes, and according to federal mediator E. H. Fitzgerald, Hill stated to him on "more than one occasion" that he was "not in favor of strikes”.

strikes". Indeed, Fitzgerald understood the importance of Hill in thwarting Velarde and his group. In a strike update written to his superior, H. L. Kerwin, Fitzgerald asserted that without Hill "Radical and communistic leaders will step in and trouble is bound to come [and] Mexican officials will lose control". Employers, he continued, "will find that they would have been better off" with Hill as union leader. Upon hearing of the demand for recall of Hill he found the farmers' charges unfounded. The charges against "Council [sic] Hill" he wrote, "was based on reports that were not reliable and not in keeping with the facts".¹⁰⁸

The complaint reached Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who read it carefully and had his staff evaluate the allegations. He reported to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins that "It does not appear that the difficulty is due to the activities of the Mexican consular officials".¹⁰⁹ Notwithstanding the confidentiality of the State Department's report, the Mexican Embassy nevertheless received the document. Edward L. Reed, chief of the Division of Mexican Affairs, met with Luis Quintanilla, Charge d'Affairs in the Embassy, and in handing over the report offered his own opinion on the matter. Quintanilla subsequently sent the report and his evaluation to the President's Secretary in Mexico City. In glowing terms Quintanilla absolved Hill of any improprieties and described Hill as a model consul and a defender of exploited Mexican ex-patriates. "In my humble opinion", wrote Quintanilla, "the conduct of Consul Hill merits applause from those who know perfectly well the difficulties inherent in the charge of Consul of Mexico in regions of the U.S. where a tradition exists of systematically exploiting Mexican labor." Furthermore, "there is no complaint at all against Hill from the American government Mr. Reed as

well as the American functionaries responsible for this matter have the highest regards for Hill, and profoundly respect him and perfectly comprehend his position".¹¹⁰

Consul Hill received a just reward two years after his departure from the consular service. He was made a deputy to the Mexican congress from the state of Sonora.

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