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THE MEXICAN QUESTION:  
MEXICAN AMERICANS IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY, 1940-1957

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## **The Mexican Question: Mexican Americans in the Communist Party, 1940-1957**

*Abstract. This paper will examine Mexican American labor activism between 1940 and 1957 in Southern California by exploring some key issues and political conflicts in the life of Ralph Cuaron. As a member of the Communist Party (CP) and an activist in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), he was a critical element in the Mexican American community nurturing leadership and laying the groundwork for political activism. Cuaron is representative of the generation that took the mantle of leadership in the period between the 1930s and the 1950s as a personal challenge to transform economic and political conditions of Mexican Americans. And, yet, Cuaron's project was not so narrowly defined that it excluded all but Mexican Americans Cuaron was ultimately concerned for the plight of the working man and woman. He had joined the CP because of its belief in the potential of the working-class to transform society and make it more democratic and egalitarian. By the end of 1957 however, Cuaron was at an impasse: branded a communist alien by the FBI and a nationalist by the leadership in the CP. Hence, Ralph Cuaron's life is a window into this historical past-a living archive.*

**The Mexican Question:**

## Mexican Americans in the Communist Party, 1940-1957

You see, the Party considered the Mexican part of the working class-no different, no better, no worse... We were saying [that] the Mexicans are a national minority and they need to be organized as a national group. This was the great contention.<sup>1</sup>

--Ralph Cuaron, 1999

This was the beginning of the period in the Party where the so-called National Question was being born. The Negro Question was already adjudicated. Now here comes another question. You have to look at it from the point of view like parents watching their [Mexican] children growing up. And its with great trepidation and frustration...and questions. How are we going to raise this child?... How do they fit in this socialist/Marxist thinking.<sup>2</sup>

--Sylvia Cuaron, 1999

Ralph Cuaron was not typical of the leadership in the Mexican American community in Los Angeles. By the mid-1930s, the total Mexican American population within city limits was estimated at over 200,000<sup>3</sup>. Relatively few within this large community joined the CP. Indeed, one estimate shows that the number of Mexicans in the Party in 1936 may have been as high as 1,916 (11 percent of the total membership in Los Angeles).<sup>4</sup> In another estimate of the same period, the number was closer to 435.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the exact numbers, the lives of many Mexicans were certainly touched by the activities of the CP through organizations such as the International Labor Defense, the Workers Alliance and, of course, their union activities, especially in the CIO.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Ralph Cuaron's long affinity with the CP, he had problems with the Party from the beginning. Though the Party claimed that it represented the working class -- the common man -- the leadership was not always made up of these folks. Cuaron was often confronted by a leadership that was highly educated and articulate which he felt tended to look down upon his humble upbringing and brash mannerisms. As Cuaron remembers in

an interview conducted in 1998, the leadership of the Party was not in the hands of *the people*. In other words, the Party was not being lead by the working-class; by those struggling daily to etch out a living, struggling to acquire fare wages, decent housing and self-respect. Moreover, the Party leadership and policies were highly oriented toward the East Coast (the CP's headquarters was located in New York City). That is, little was said and done on the West Coast or anywhere else in the nation for that matter, that had not been approved in New York.

In effect, there was little autonomy for local Party affiliates. The "power elite" of the Party wanted tight control over leadership and decision-making. Cuaron was opposed to this rigidity and on many occasions found himself challenging CP policies and upsetting the sensibilities of the leadership. The *Mexican Question* one of these issues that upset sensibilities.

The *Mexican Question* was an issue that lived in the shadow of the *Negro Question*. For African Americans, their identity had been largely settled as far as the Party was concerned: they were an "oppressed nation." In effect, this meant that they were a nation within a nation. According to an official document published by the Educational Department of the California Communist Party titled *The National Question*

"nation" was defined as follows:

This means, simply, that to constitute a nation any people must share a common history and tradition, a common life, language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common culture. All of these factors [must] be present in order to have a nation; if one or more is absent, you do not have a nation. The United States is a nation, as is England, France, Ireland, Italy, China, etc.<sup>7</sup>

This designation allowed this community a special status within the Party. The class struggle remained the principal priority within the Party, but the African American struggle would play a special role in its overall work and strategies.

Mexican Americans, on the other hand, were considered an "oppressed national minority." This meant that of all the factors mentioned above, Mexican Americans possessed only one—"cultural attributes."<sup>8</sup> The conclusion for many within the Party was that Mexican Americans would not receive the vigorous consideration provided to African Americans. Self-determination, for example, would be a right defended and developed principally for African Americans. Ralph Cuaron disagreed with this position and especially with its implications for Mexican Americans.

Much of the frustration expressed by Mexican American Party cadre, and their supporters, would identify "chauvinism" (a term used then to denote racism) as a persistent barrier to the full integration of this community into the Party. For example, Cuaron and other members often complained of the refusal by some

Party leaders to allow club meetings to be conducted in Spanish. Another related issue was the refusal by some Party leaders to allow the printing of material in Spanish. Other complaints accused leadership of being complicit in allowing an atmosphere of disrespect to thrive within Party circles. As one Party activist complained in 1950, the vulgarization of the Mexican people as "lazy, dirty, slow-witted and inefficient," was infused within the Party ranks. As he explained: "Only recently a Mexican comrade, invited to the home of an Anglo progressive, was greeted as he came into the house with the statement, 'We cooked an awful lot of beans because we knew you were coming.'"<sup>9</sup>

Cuaron's criticisms, however, pointed to deeper theoretical disagreements. Cuaron's principal criticism was that the Party consistently failed to understand or take into consideration the Mexican American experience and, thus, was largely ineffective in organizing this important, if not critical, constituency. Cuaron's other criticism was that

the Party's policies, progressive as they might appear on paper and official rhetoric, were hampered by a pervasive attitude that work among the Mexican people had to be approached "slowly." Cuaron's determination to push the Mexican Question was not motivated out of nationalistic or separatist notions. Instead, his position was, at its core, internationalist and class-based. His struggle was guided by the principle that Mexican Americans had an important role to play in the class struggle and that the Party needed to apply a policy or program that would reflect the wants, needs and desires of this community. Only through such an approach was the Party going to succeed in mobilizing this community.

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## The National Question

By the time Ralph Cuaron had given up hope of returning to the sea as a merchant marine, in late 1946, the CP was well on its way to reversing the revisionist politics of *Browderism*. Two year earlier, in June 1944, Earl Browder, the Party's general secretary [years), declared that the Party was officially dissolved and was immediately recast into the Communist Political Association. Browder's decision was based on his belief that the wartime unity established between Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union (after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941) would spell the beginning of a new era in labor and class relations. In effect, the Party was softening its traditional line against capitalism: it was now going to collaborate with capitalism for the greater good. His decision, however, caught a great number of Party activists by surprise, causing confusion and even anger. According to Dorothy Healey:

I could not accept the conclusion that Browder drew from it, that the wartime cooperation of management and labor in preventing strikes and maximizing production should continue after the war. . . . Browder was in effect declaring class peace for the foreseeable future.<sup>10</sup>

By the summer of the following year, in 1945, Browder was deposed and the Party was officially reestablished. What Browder had not counted on was the crumbling of the war-time pact and the resurgence of tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. As a result, the CP returned to its hard line against capitalism and the United States government.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Browder's leadership had established some significant policy changes (or reversals) that affected the position of Mexican Americans in the Party.

Browderism, in effect, had spelled a new approach toward minority groups inside and out of the Party. From Browder's vantage point in the early 1940s, minority group aspirations should be inextricably tied to those of the nation. In other words, Mexican Americans should not expect to be treated with special attention and should forge their future along with the rest of the country. The Mexican American would no longer be viewed as an "Oppressed National Minority," but simply as another "National Group"--a designation that allowed for no special considerations within the Party. Mexican Americans would be treated, as Cuaron explains, "no

different, no better, no worse."

On the surface, Browderism appeared to be some benevolent gesture to help Mexican Americans uplift themselves and to join the larger American community. However, the outcome of this policy was far from positive. According to an internal Party report:

... Mexican comrades were placed in English-speaking branches with no regard for their right to speak Spanish and excluded from participation in the Party because of their lack of knowledge of English.

Under such circumstances the Party could not but decline in its Mexican membership. For Mexican people joining the Party expecting to find understanding of their special problems and seeking ways to fight, found in many respects the same attitude as encountered outside of the Party. There was a complete failure to develop Mexican leadership in the Party.<sup>12</sup>

The *Negro Question* under Browder met a similar fate. With the focus on national unity during the war, there was no time or resources to spend on the struggle for racial equality and Black liberation. Again, these issues would take a back seat to the war against the fascist enemy and to the new world that would await the country after the war. Even some national Black Party leaders such as Ben Davis gave public support to the Browder line. According to Harry Haywood, a leader in the Party and in the African-American community at the time, Davis had once stated that, "The U.S. general staff has on many occasion ... provided that they deserve the full confidence of the Negro people ... we cannot temporarily stop the war until all questions of discrimination are ironed out..."<sup>13</sup> Again, the implication was clear: the struggle of blacks was subordinated to the war effort and to national unity. In his memoir, Haywood expressed his deep dismay at the Party's *collaborationist* stance during the war and of its betrayal of the Black struggle. Not only had the Party abandoned its support for "the struggles of the oppressed and colonized peoples," it was also argued that they



should "rely on the good intentions of the great nations to gain their liberation."<sup>14</sup>

With the removal of Browder, the path was cleared to reverse the revisionist ideology and return to a more traditional approach with regards to minority groups. In that same year, in 1945, the Party in Los Angeles established a "Mexican Commission" whose purpose was

to work with the leadership to identify key issues, formulate strategies and educate the membership. Though the Commission stopped meeting regularly by 1950<sup>15</sup>, its establishment was evidence of the commitment in the local leadership to make serious inroads into Mexican American communities. Renewed efforts to attract and organize minority groups into the Party were encouraged once again, though they remained weak and sporadic.

The Second World War engendered in a number of Mexican American veterans an invigorated sense of American citizenship and pride. Steeped in the American spirit of victory and mission to bring democracy to the rest of the world, they too were compelled to confront injustice back home in their communities. From 1946 to 1947 there was increased political activity by Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles. They eagerly joined the resurgent labor movement and welcomed organizations into their communities that promised redress of civil rights injustices. One example was the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), a radical organization which focused on Mexican and Black equality, labor rights and civil liberties. The CRC, in time, set up a number of offices around the city and a permanent chapter in the City Terrace area on the East Side. This period also saw Mexican Americans make their first bid to break into the all white male dominated city council. Though Edward R. Roybal, a college-educated Mexican American and World War II veteran, would lose in his initial attempt in 1947, the experience and the mobilization it engendered proved crucial for future political action.

As with any political organization, the Party was often divided on various issues, but where there seemed to be some consensus was on the *crisis of capitalism*. For many in the Party, capitalism was in its final stages of collapse. It is perhaps this preoccupation that often

clouded or relegated to second status issues of minority group liberation. On this issue, the Party would remain divided well into the 1950s. As the documents will reveal, though the Party remained philosophically as well as actively supportive of the struggles of national minorities, this support was not always consistent.

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### The Mexican Question

Although there was some activity by Party rank and file to raise the status of Mexican Americans to that of Blacks, these efforts did not prevail. The national office often shied away from having to address the "Mexican problem" in any substantial manner, preferring instead to focus on the Black struggle. As Healey explains:

The national office was resisting defining Mexican Americans as a nationally oppressed minority because they wanted to keep the primary focus on the status of Black people--African Americans. And it was felt that once you started to include other oppressed minorities, that it diluted the pressure on the centrality of African Americans. We [the CP in California] argued that this was nonsense: that each question had to be considered independently, on its own merits, and that there was just no question in our minds that Mexican people in the United States constituted a nationally oppressed people.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Party, nationally and locally, remained firmly committed to supporting the struggle for democracy and equality for African Americans, there continued to be internal conflicts as to the most effective means of achieving this goal. Even as late as 1950, the Negro Question would not be any nearer to clarity. As Benjamin Davis stated:

In order to wage a successful fight on the day-to-day issues of Negro rights and to defeat the objectives of

capitalist stories, the ultimate, long-range perspective of democratic solution of the Negro question must be clarified and fully settled. Otherwise, one cannot distinguish which trends and developments are growing and permanent, however weak at the moment, and those which are temporary and disappearing, however strong at the moment. The conscious seizure development of that which is new and rising, sound and permanent--even though not frilly developed-is the key to the complete liberation of the Negro people, as it is to the emancipation of the working class of our country.<sup>17</sup>

The statement by Davis is reflective of the level of confusion and the lack of a consistent policy on the issue of oppressed nations. The increasing tension of the cold war and Party's pessimistic view that World War III and American fascism were around the corner, certainly clouded any final resolution on this question.

On a national level, the Party's position on the Mexican Question remained a low priority. Efforts to influence organized strategies for Mexican Americans appear to have sporadic and localized. Yet, in the Southwest, Mexican American Party leaders played a significant role in attempting to establish Party guidelines for organizing within these communities. One of the earliest efforts occurred in 1939 with an article written in *The Communist*, a periodical of the CP.

In this article, Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, State Chairman and State Secretary of the CP in Texas respectively, laid out the framework for tackling this issue. According to the authors, Mexican Americans in the United States exhibited many of the attributes of the Black nation (a common history, culture, language and communal life) except for *two*-territorial and economic community. According to their assessment, Mexican Americans were not territorially concentrated and were economically, and politically "welded" to the "Anglo-American people of the Southwest."<sup>18</sup> Though they presented some insightful comparisons between the two minority groups, their analysis was very weak. If anything, their argument had the opposite effect of its intended goal. The historical experiences of African Americans and Mexican Americans appeared even closer, and not

distant from each other. Nevertheless, their goal remained to etch out a special place (designation) for Mexican Americans within the Party.

What would be the special path to follow? According to Tenayuca and Brooks, "The task now is to build the democratic front among the Mexican masses by unifying them on the basis of specific needs and in support of the social and economic measures of the New Deal."<sup>19</sup> The torture would lie in supporting all struggles attempting to address economic discrimination, educational inequality, cultural deprivation and social and political oppression. Furthermore, success would lie in "trade union organization among the Mexican workers..."<sup>20</sup> However, the authors warned against taking "sterile paths" toward addressing Mexican Americans. Petty bourgeois, native-born Mexican American organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) were escapist organizations that should be avoided. Though the authors acknowledged that LULAC had undergone important internal changes and had recognized the role that some Mexican middle-class can play, they warned against organizations that did not address the general oppression of the Mexican people. In summary, Mexican American liberation would, for the most part, be linked to the Popular Front against fascism. Although the authors make a serious attempt to address how the Party ought to approach the Mexican Americans, they do not advocate the creation of a permanent organizational structure that would deal exclusively with this community. In effect, the important issues they outline, and the special approach they advocate, are meant to fall under the purview of individual organizations to implement and/or to determine on their own.

The analysis of Tenayuca and Brooks also neglected the uniqueness of the Mexican American experience. As Douglas Monroy explains, the Party ignored the "integral value of Mexican liberation with that of workers in general, they downplayed the individual character, wants, needs and desires of this group. By melding them together, they made Mexican Americans indistinguishable from other minority groups.

The article by Tenayuca and Brooks was not the final word on the subject. The Party would continue to struggle with how to approach Mexican Americans even after the ouster of Earl Browder. In a Party conference that took place two years later in 1947 titled "The Southern California Party Building Conference," echoes of

discontent were heard from a special panel established to report on the subject of "Mexican work." Though the panel reported that the Party was making important inroads into the Mexican community, they felt that more needed to be done to "organize the Mexican people into their own organizations" This work, however, was being hampered by "language difficulties" due to the fact that Party organizers did not, on the whole, speak Spanish. The other sticking point was that certain comrades felt that the work in the Mexican communities had to be done "slowly." Though the panel reported that an IWO (International Workers Order)<sup>22</sup> group was in the process of formation, it had "not yet sprouted because of this attitude." The lack of full commitment by the Party cadre to working among the Mexican population in Los Angeles was expressed in the final admonition of the panel to the conferees:

...Our trade union discussion on the problems of work among the Mexican people has amounted to nothing so far. . . It seems not to have occurred to some of the union leaders that the mobilization of the thousands of Mexican members of the Los Angeles trade unions could constitute an important part of their job, and would make their task more effective. What is needed is special leaflets with a special approach to the Mexican people, in both Spanish and English: special discussions and meetings on what affect these bills will have on the Mexican people. Then not only will the people respond to the particular issue, but they will also regard the union as their special protector, and will become strong defenders of the union itself.<sup>23</sup>

### Cuaron and the CP

Ralph Cuaron would come to focus his energies on convincing the Party of the need to take a special approach to Mexicans in the labor unions and to developing local leadership. But in 1947, Cuaron was only beginning to etch out a place for himself in the local political scene in Los Angeles. The irony is that as Cuaron's activist career was rising, the "iron curtain," as Britain's Winston Churchill declared, was descending over Europe and the world.

In 1947, Mexican American Party activists held a picnic gathering in Lake Elsinore (Southeast of Los

Angeles) to introduce new members and for old members to get re-acquainted. Longtime Party and labor activist Frank Lopez had invited Cuaron. At the event, Cuaron was introduced to a large core of the activists on the East Side including Francis Lym, Ben Cruz, Leroy Parra, Delfino Varela, Francisco and Lydia Moisa, Ramon Welch and Gilbert Orosco. Through their leadership, Cuaron was trained, guided and integrated into the local political milieu. Fifty-two years later, Cuaron still remembers this early encounter with fond memory: "I just thought they were great. I [had] finally found the Movement." In the same year, Cuaron was offered employment at the Crest Pacific Furniture Company located on North Broadway near Chinatown. Almost immediately he became immersed in the politics of the United Furniture Workers of America (UFWA), Local 576. A few months later, Cuaron opened up a storefront on Third Street near downtown Los Angeles-a satellite office of the Civil Rights Congress.

The CRC was not equipped to alleviate the tremendous need for its services on the East Side without help. The program of the organization was threefold: "the defense of the rights of labor, of Negro, Mexican and other national groups and the rights of political minorities."<sup>24</sup> Through the use of a Lawyer's Panel, which provided the free legal assistance of over fifty lawyers, a well-organized Bail Fund Committee and an extensive educational and public relations outreach program, the CRC was very successful in defending victims of police brutality, deportation and job discrimination. With only one office set up in 1947 and a staff of five dedicated individuals, the CRC reached out to community leaders to assist them in their efforts. Cuaron heeded the call and opened up his storefront office by using friends he collected from the community of Boyle Heights (in central Los Angeles) and surrounding neighborhoods as well as from

UFWA members sympathetic with his cause. The community response was immediate. He was soon referring cases to the CRC's main office up the street. However, the operation did not last very long. Within approximately two or three months, Cuaron was forced to close his doors. It was not local law enforcement or any other government authority that closed him down-it was the Party.

The local Party leadership was unsure of what to make of Cuaron's activities. His ad hoc approach was unsettling some in the Party. Cuaron had already made his priorities known to many in the Party and this concerned some who felt he might want to use this opportunity to create a personal power-base from which to launch a separate organization-outside the CP's orbit. In fact, Cuaron had made no secret of the fact that he would use this opportunity to educate Mexican Americans about their rights and recruit them into the Party. The Party, however, appeared not yet prepared to let loose this young and energetic comrade onto the Mexican American community. For the Cuaron's, the Party's decision sent a clear message: they were principally concerned with "[t]owing the line, following policy. . . their policy. This was a travieso [naughty/mischievous] child, almost a bastard child."<sup>25</sup> Cuaron had indeed not approached the Party before launching his ambitious project, and the Party let him know that this was the way things were to be done.

The closure of the office forced Cuaron to rethink his strategies on the issue of the Mexican Question. Far from being discouraged as a result of the Party's rebuke of his activities, Cuaron set his sights beyond East Los Angeles toward national Party politics. According to Cuaron, "Well, I became more active. . . more active nationally. I ended up in a national convention in Salt Lake City to discuss these questions. And I met vocal friends in the Midwest."<sup>26</sup>

In 1947, Cuaron was selected by the Party to attend a conference in New York organized to oppose military conscription. This period coincided with president Harry Truman's, and Congress's, resolve to shore up United States conventional forces to deter Soviet aggression without the use of nuclear weapons. As the crisis between both superpowers heated up in Germany, so to did calls for a peacetime draft. After completing his work in New York, Cuaron did not return to Los Angeles immediately as scheduled. Instead, he took a detour and attended a Party meeting in Denver, Colorado. This unauthorized meeting would be the

cause of the enmity between Cuaron and Ben Dobbs, the Los Angeles County Labor Secretary of the CP.

In Denver, Cuaron met with Art Berry, possibly the head of the CP in that city, and another woman by the name of Pat Blau. Berry had become familiar with Cuaron's

work on the national question and convinced him to make a presentation at a Party convention of the Rocky Mountain region, to be held in Salt Lake City the following week. At the convention, the majority of the delegates agreed with Cuaron's assessment that a new position on the Mexican American national question was necessary and that it ought to be a national priority for the Party. Furthermore, it was agreed that this issue should be presented at the national convention scheduled for 1948. The event went well for Cuaron, but the euphoria was short-lived.

On his return from the conference in Salt Lake City, Cuaron was castigated for his impromptu presentation and, as he recalls, especially so by Ben Dobbs. As Cuaron explains:

Then I got back to Los Angeles and Ben Dobbs got a hold of me and started chewing me out. He wanted to know where the hell I was and why I had not come back right away. I told him who I had met with and what we had done. He was pissed off. I had stepped on his toes. I had got him in trouble with the national office.<sup>27</sup>

Even Healy, his strongest advocate and supporter within the top leadership, was not amused with Cuaron's side trip. As he remembers, "Dorothy Healey was furious...because we were interfering with national politics in the CP. This was their territory."<sup>28</sup> Nothing serious seems to have come from this incident. In fact, as



Cuaron remembers, his popularity actually rose within the rank and file, especially among Mexican Americans. Although the national office did send an investigator, Bill Taylor, to look into the matter, Cuaron did not receive any official reprimand.

### Alienation from the Party

Party leaders in the West Coast as well as the rank and file felt, to some degree, that they were somehow stepchildren to the national leadership in the East Coast. Not only did this national leadership make all decisions, they also acted as the filters and disseminators of all official Party doctrine. If these feelings were prevalent among the Party leadership in the West, it was certainly felt many times over by party rank and file, especially Mexican Americans. As Sylvia Cuaron remembers:

We think that the Party at that point in time was an eastern organization. That the West [coast] was just an off shoot of the Party. The West had the vast number of Latino[s] whereas the East [coast] had the vast number of Jewish and Black people. So, there was not understanding of the coming issue of a minority in the West that was vastly becoming an entity in itself The West needed its own leadership, and the leadership had to come from that minority group which was the Mexican. It needed that element to become a viable force. I think that that was an issue at that time that wasn't even dreamed of That there was a clash between New York, the Eastern seaboard and the Western seaboard Party. It was a question of elitism. And here was a young Mexican, an upstart, who was saying, 'Wait a minute, we understand that there is a Negro question that needs to be taken into consideration and rallied to, but there is also in the West a Mexican American element that is crying for its identity.'<sup>29</sup>

These comments were central to Cuaron's frustrations with the Party. Mexican Americans often felt alienated from the Party because, as Cuaron succinctly explains, "They didn't know what the hell the Party was talking about." The Party often conducted its discussions and business utilizing Marxist lexicon that most community members were not familiar with. The local clubs, the nucleus of organization and recruitment, were not always successful in transmitting understanding of class and Marxist analysis or any

other aspect of Party ideology. As Cuaron recalls, most Mexican Americans who came to club meetings did so out of an interest in civil rights cases and issues that affected the community. As a result, Party activists often failed to recruit community activists into the organizational fold. When they did succeed in recruiting, retaining these members was difficult.

### The Resolution on the Mexican Question

In 1948, the momentum within the Party was moving forward on the issue of the Mexican Question. In July of that year, the Party in Los Angeles held a county convention where it discussed and consolidated its platform in preparation for the upcoming national convention. In those proceedings, some attention was given to the continuing need of the Party to organize among the Mexican people. Healey's report to the convention floor revealed these concerns. According to Healey:

There is still not enough concern for the growth of the Party among the Mexican-American people..During the height of the mass campaigns among the Mexican-American people, our two Spanish-speaking clubs did not meet....Our concentration policy must include the selection of maybe just a few blocks in the Mexican-American community where systematic sales of the PW [Peoples World], our literature, and the distribution of leaflets take place, and where new Party clubs can be established.<sup>30</sup>

During the same convention, differences in opinion could be discerned among the top leadership with regards to Mexican Americans. Ben Dobbs' position supported a more cautious approach to this community. According to Dobbs, the labor movement and the Party had failed to specifically focus on Blacks and Mexican Americans. The fourth of his five-point plan to alleviate these deficiencies is significant:

The organizing of a campaign in some one shop or department for the hiring of minority workers. This fight should reach out to the community and to mobilize

other unions. *This must be a sustained fight with gaining results as its objective and over a long period of time if necessary* [my emphasis] 31

It was precisely this last point that Cuaron was most concerned and which he felt was a self-defeating approach. In other words, this slow and deliberate approach had not achieved any significant positive changes. Cuaron felt that this fixation on *patience* and *long-term* work was precisely what allowed many in the Party to relax into complacency and to neglect Mexican work.

Nemmy Sparks, the County Chairman, on the other hand, stated that "rapid recruitment" of Mexican Americans was a preferred strategy as well as more concerted efforts at fighting chauvinism. Interestingly, Sparks also highlighted another concern that Cuaron often voiced: "overcoming of sectarian tendencies to place excessive demands on Mexican workers before taking them into the Party."<sup>32</sup>

By now Cuaron was fully engaged in organizing for the Henry Wallace campaign for president in 1948. He had taken an official leave from his union activities in the UFWA and was allowed to work full-time on the presidential race. His principal work was to organize among Mexican Americans. In fact, Cuaron was a key organizer who helped form *Amigos de Wallace*. Through this grass-roots organization, Cuaron mobilized the East Side of Los Angeles en masse to provide Wallace with a large army of supporters and vast organizational network within the community. After attending the founding convention of the Independent Progressive Party in Philadelphia in June of 1948, at which Wallace was nominated as its candidate, Cuaron then attended the CP's national convention held in New York on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. At the convention Cuaron delivered a resolution which addressed important issues concerning Mexican Americans.

According to Cuaron, the "*Resolution On Party Work Among the Mexican People*," which passed by unanimous consent, was the culmination of the combined efforts of a number of members of the Mexican American Commission of the CP in Los Angeles. In summary, the national Party promised to do the following: one, devise a final scientific formulation of the Mexican question; two, print Party material in Spanish; three, develop leadership training schools for Mexican Americans; four, push for a one dollar minimum wage for migratory workers; five, pledge full support for development of the Amigos de Wallace movement; six, coordinate on a national level for effective work among the Mexican people; seven, campaign effectively to combat racist attacks against Mexicans; eight, integrate and promote Mexican American leadership in the trade-unions; nine, increase the struggle in all facets of civil rights work including police brutality and deportations. A second resolution titled, "*Resolution on the Conditions of the Mexican People*," provided a general condemnation of the economic, political and social suppression of this community and the Party's pledge to struggle along side Mexican Americans against these attacks.

The introduction and final passage of the resolutions before the body of the national convention was a high point in Cuaron's activist career. He had achieved an important goal and felt confident that significant changes would come from these Party platforms. He now had the endorsement of the Party to continue, if not accelerate, his work in Mexican communities, and not only in Los Angeles but throughout the entire Southwest. Organizing could now take place on a mass scale; to formulate, as he understood it, a radical organization exclusively targeted at Mexican Americans. As Cuaron explains, these efforts began the first stirring of what would culminate, in 1949, in the formation of the Mexican American National Association (ANMA).

Within a year dozens of ANMA chapters were formed throughout the country. In 1949 ANMA represented a new start for progressives and radicals looking to organize Mexican Americans on a mass scale. And Mexican Americans within the Party had been frilly engaged, prior to 1949, in soliciting community energies toward establishing such an organization. In a Party resolution on Mexican work, a group of Mexican

American Party activists from the *Eastern Division* described the significance/importance of this period prior to the formation of ANMA:

Briefly then we believed that pride in our background, special consideration due to the special oppression suffered and the demand for equality and first class citizenship was the correct characterization for an organization and for a program of action. What did this conclusion mean in terms of our day to day work?

There was no organization that fit the characterization which we made of the "correct" type. Consequently we began to raise the demand for such an organization. This organization we insisted would merge both the culture and heritage of the Mexican people with the struggles for first class citizenship within the framework of the general political activity in the community.<sup>33</sup>

The principal thrust and support for the formation of ANMA came from organized labor. Most important was the initial support by the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill) which provided funding and volunteers from its ranks to help organize the fledgling organization. According to Burt Corona, a long-time labor and political activist in Southern California, ANMA would have formed without the direct participation of Mine, Mill, "but it might not have been so strongly oriented toward *Mexicano* workers and toward helping to stimulate trade unionism among them"<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it was from labor that ANMA developed its militant and left tradition. ANMA became the leading voice for the protection

Of civil, economic and political rights of Mexican Americans. Unlike conservative and reform-minded organizations—mutual aid societies, fraternal associations, Community Service Organization, League of United Latin American Citizens—ANMA was more confrontational and “approached the questions more directly...by placing the blame for the conditions of the [Mexican] people on the powers that be.”<sup>35</sup> ANMA also made no secret of its additional mandate to defend cultural and language rights of the Mexican people: this at a time when most middle-class activists were pursuing cultural assimilationist goals and ideals.

Ralph Cuaron and the Mexican American Commission played an important role in the formation and growth of ANMA in California. Cuaron was a delegate to the first series of meetings held in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1949, which officially organized ANMA.<sup>36</sup> He and other members of the Party, including Francis Lym and Ramon M. Welch as well as leading non-Party activists on the East Side, participated in ANMA's first convention held in Los Angeles in October 1950. In fact, Cuaron was the Youth Director of the National Executive Board of Provincial Officers during that first convention.<sup>37</sup> However, though this large gathering was hailed as a great success and step forward, the intensification of the anti-Communist hysteria and the demands faced by individual activists in their own communities placed large obstacles on ANMA's abilities to sustain a concerted and proactive momentum.

For Mexican American Party members, the challenge to remain active within ANMA was great. The Party often pulled these activists away from focusing solely on ANMA by having them involved in a number of other activities. The result was that Mexican American Party members were often stretched too thin.

The specific struggles pertaining to the Mexican community which indirectly related to the fight against the war and the danger of a new world war and against fascism were soon lost sight of. The issues for struggle which the Party posed were –END THE WAR IN KOREA-STOP THE SMITH ACT INDICTMENTS-STOP DEPORTATIONS-STOP McCARTHYISM-STOP THE McCARRAN ACT-BAN THE A-BOMB-AMNESTY-ETC....The Mexican forces who were drawn upon to fight on these issues were forces active in mass organizations including ANMA.<sup>38</sup>

There were, however, other obstacles that helped stultify Mexican American efforts to more effectively organize—the persistence of *chauvinism*. According to Corona, Alfredo Montoya, president of ANMA, often expressed "puzzlement" at the contradictory policies and behavior of "CP groups."

He [Montoya] especially believed that the CP did not really understand the issues *mexicanos*

were facing. He observed that even while the CP fought for the attainment of full rights for Mexicans, some of the party leaders manifested a chauvinism against *mexicanos* and displayed a certain amount of discrimination and even racism when it came to accepting *mexicano* leadership with the party.<sup>39</sup>

By mid decade the Mexican American Commission of the CP was inactive and

ANMA was all but defunct in Southern California. ANMA in particular had fallen victim to the Cold War and anti-Communism: a victim of FBI infiltration and harassment by local and state authorities. As a result of ANMA's activities, the organization was placed on the national House Un-American Activities Committee's list of disloyal organizations. The FBI made connections where they did not exist. As Mario Garcia explains: "Not content with implicating ANMA with the CP in personal and institutional connections, the FBI additionally claimed that ideologically ANMA and the CP were one... Guilt by ideological association was likewise extracted from comparison of stands on other issues such as racial discrimination, mass deportations, Mexican culture, the peace movement, the labor movement, the history of the Southwest, and black-Mexican unity."<sup>40</sup>

Thus, ANMA's fate was sealed.

In 1956, Mexican American Party activists of the Eastern Division convened a special conference named after one of Mexico's most venerable revolutionary heroes: Emiliano Zapata. In their final report submitted to the regional Party leadership, the conference participants lamented the organizations' sorry state of affairs with respects to the Mexican community. By their accounts, the Party had not done enough to "combat all Anglo-chauvinistic influences" within its ranks; had not produced sufficient material in Spanish or English about important issues affecting this national minority; had not provided the necessary support to those grass-roots organizations forming around issues of education, employment discrimination and political representation; and, finally, had not seriously studied strategies to advance Mexican American representation on school boards, city councils and in County and State Central Committees of political parties including their own.

One year later, the situation had not improved. At the Los Angeles County convention of the CP held 1957, the subcommittee on Mexican Work painted yet another dismal picture. According to a resolution presented at the convention, the County leadership of the Party "had failed to give more than lip service even to

the existence of the Mexican American people and have not taken even the most elementary steps of organized activity in support of their struggles." The Committee also lamented the fact that outreach to the Mexican community had been left solely to "the Eastern Division, leaving the rest of the Party leaderless on the questions."<sup>41</sup> In other words, issues pertaining to the Mexican community were largely left in the hands of a small group-the Eastern Division-and were not widely discussed or integrated into a wider, and permanent, program within the Party.

By 1957 Cuaron had experienced much disillusionment with the Party. Two years earlier, in 1955, after losing an election for the position of business manager within the UFWA at Crest Pacific Furniture, the Party did not help him find another job. Cuaron's campaign to depose a fellow comrade and long-time labor activist Gus Brown gained him a negative reputation within Party circles. Brown went to great lengths to intensify the negative campaign to secure his own position and to nullify any attempt by Cuaron to challenge him in the future. Thus, Cuaron was increasingly perceived as being reckless, headstrong and untrustworthy; prone to following his own agenda at the expense of the Party. His activist and outspoken reputation had caught up with him.

Cuaron was blacklisted in the entire industry and was unable to find work anywhere in Los Angeles. When he was refused a job at Abel's Sheet Metal shop, well known in the Eastside community for hiring blacklisted communists, Cuaron, for the first time, felt the sheer depth of his ostracism in some circles. He managed to survive by acquiring odd jobs for short periods of time. He still retained contact with the Party and stubbornly refused to be made "irrelevant."

The year 1956 was another pivotal year. In that year, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made public Stalin's record of atrocities. The effect of these revelations was devastating for Cuaron as well



as the Party. As Cuaron explained: "It tore me to pieces. I never was the same [again]. It took me years to recoup. I never could regain my faith in the Party. It took me years to understand." As Sylvia recalls:

Things weren't the same anymore. . .they could never be the same. The split gave people the opportunity to be more critical of their beliefs. Friendships were broken. There was a rift. Do you or don't you. Are you still [in the Party] or... So things were really never the same again. Around that time I don't recall any meetings anymore. Attending meetings as we used to in the very beginning. And doing the various activities like precinct walking, leaflet distribution, and selling of the Peoples World. That seems to have come to a halt. And so it's been ever since, really. Then we became very involved with finishing raising our family.<sup>42</sup>

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## Conclusion

As president Truman and Congress moved toward cold war, the Communist Party retreated to a more antagonistic position vis-à-vis capitalism and the United States government. Under the increasing assault by federal and state authorities, the Party reorganized, purging members it perceived as weak and tightening its control over the entire organization. Under these conditions, the organization became more inflexible and paranoid. Its inconsistent and fluctuating stance with regards to Mexican Americans as well as with community leaders, such as Cuaron, may be viewed as a reflection of these conditions. With the Party clearly under attack, the leadership called for tighter controls and a limit to freewheeling membership. While Cuaron was not a

danger to the Party, Party leaders were not always certain what to make of his activities in the Mexican community. Cuaron's unwavering persistence on the Mexican Question certainly complicated matters for a political organization under increasing strain.

Cuaron was cognizant of the Party's predicament during this period, but he did not view the assaults on the organization as necessarily lethal. However, if the Party was going to be a viable organization in Los Angeles, he felt it was imperative that Mexican Americans be allowed a meaningful role: even if that meant allowing this group their own organizational space. In other words, some semblance of independence from direct Party control was necessary in order that Mexican Americans might pursue their own goals and priorities.

Cuaron was not a nationalist, nor did he advocate a separatist ideological position. His purpose was to gain recognition of the fact that Mexican Americans could and should be active agents on their own behalf

Cuaron was an internationalist. As he explained, "My view was much broader. My internationalism was much stronger than [that of] isolationists."<sup>43</sup> Cuaron felt that his position was morally and theoretically more sound. Certain Mexican American comrades within the Party, however, held nationalist views that Cuaron felt were too narrow in scope and would ultimately lead "nowhere." The worldview of the separatists saw "Mexicans as Mexicans and Blacks as Blacks. But in the Party we had to be internationalists." In other words, under the nationalist view, each group should be on its own by following a separate path to development. Cuaron wanted Mexican Americans to be prepared to struggle on a global scale: to become conscious of the international implications of their status as workers. Only through international solidarity could Mexican Americans, and workers as a whole, defeat capitalism and bring an end to imperialism.

Had Mexican Americans achieved their goal of becoming more fully integrated within the Party structure? The documents appear to reveal a mixed record. Though the Party clearly did recognize the importance of developing Mexican leadership and prioritizing Mexican work, actual implementation fell

short of the official rhetoric. According to Cuaron, the Party appeared poised after 1945, with the end of Browderism, and again in 1948, after the introduction of the resolution on the Mexican Question, to tackle this problem, but it was consistently hampered by internal and external pressures--chauvinism, elitism and, ultimately, by the Cold War.

As Cuaron's activities with the CP slowly diminished, many Mexican American supporters of his began to drop out. Many of these activists saw Cuaron's experience as a clear message: the Party would not tolerate Cuaron-style activism. Not all Mexican Americans abandoned the Party, however. But the increased attacks on the CP left a weakened organization, unable to sustain a high level of activity. Under these conditions, the Party's efforts to maintain effective outreach and leadership development among Mexican Americans suffered significantly.

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Ralph Cuaron, interview by author, Riverside, California 24 February 1999

Ibid.

Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 200.

Douglas Monroy, "Anarquismo y Comunismo: Mexican Radicalism and the Communist Party in Los Angeles During the 1930s," *Labor History* 24 (Winter 1983): 53.

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"*The Mexican Question in the United States*", Dorothy Healey Collection, Mexican Americans File, California State University, Long Beach, University Library, Special Collections/University Archives, (hereafter Healey Collection)

Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 91.

Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of Communism: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), 106. William Z. Foster replaced the deposed Browder and was instrumental in reestablishing the Party's traditional line against capitalism. The following excerpt is taken from Foster's book *The New Europe* (1947). "The masses in Europe are again striking at the root evil that is producing the ever-more disastrous

series of devastating world wars, economic crises, and tyrannous governments, namely, the monopoly controlled capitalist system itself. They do not accept the stupid notion, current in some American political circles, to the effect that the capitalist system is a sort of divinely ordained institution which can do no harm,

and that the war was caused merely by Hitler and a few other unscrupulous and ambitious men in the fascist countries. Instead, they are trying to abolish the real evil, the capitalist system...."

*"The Mexican Question in the United States,"* Healey Collection, 6.

Albert Fried, *Communism In America: A History In Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 335.

<sup>0</sup>Ibid.

"Resolution on Mexican Work," CPUSA Collection, File 1956, SCLSSR, 1.

Dorothy Healey, interview by author, 27 January 1999.

Conference material. CPUSA Collection, File 1956, SCLSSR, 1.

Dorothy Healey, interview by author, 27 January 1999.

Conference material. CPUSA Collection, File 1950, SCLSSR.

Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, "The Mexican Question in the Southwest" *The Communist* 18 (March 1939): 262.

Ibid., 263

Ibid., 265

Monroy, "Anarquismo y Comunismo," 43-46.

Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 5. "The International Workers Order (IWO), for example, was a communist-led benevolent society organized in New York City in the early 1930s to appeal to different ethnic groups by offering cultural activities and insurance benefits. It ran summer camps and sold cemetery plots

*"Southern California Party Building Conference,"* CPUSA Collection, File 1947, SCLSSR, 11.

*"The Civil Rights Congress Tells The Story,"* Information pamphlet, 1951, Civil Rights Congress Collection, SCLSSR, 2.

Ralph Cuaron, interview by author, Riverside, California. 24 February 1999.

Ibid.

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Communist Party USA Collection, "Convention Bulletin: Excerpts From Major Reports Delivered to Los Angeles County Convention, July 10-11, 1948," CPUSA Collection, SCLSSR.

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Mario T. Garcia, "Mexican American Labor and the Left: The Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana, 1949-1954," *Beyond 1848: Readings in the Modern Chicano Historical Experience*, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1993), 221.

ANMA Letter, August 16, 1950, See CPUSA Collection, File 1950. Other members of the National Executive Board in 1950 included: Alfredo Montoya, president; Virginia X. Ruiz, executive-secretary; Bebe Grijalva, treasurer; Carlos Salgado, director of education; Ramon Moran Welch, publicity director; and Chris Ruiz, cultural director.

"*Resolution on Mexican Work*", CPUSA Collection, SCLSSR, 1. Corona, *Memories of Chicano Corona, Memories of Chicano History*, 189.

Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 223-224.

"Resolution by Sub Committee on Mexican Work", CPUSA Collection, File 1957, SCLSSR.

Ralph Cuaron, interview by author, Riverside, California, 29 January 1999.

Ralph Cuaron, interview by author, Riverside, California, 2 May 1999.