

The Minimum Wage March of 1966: A Case Study in Mexican-American Politics, Labor, and Identity

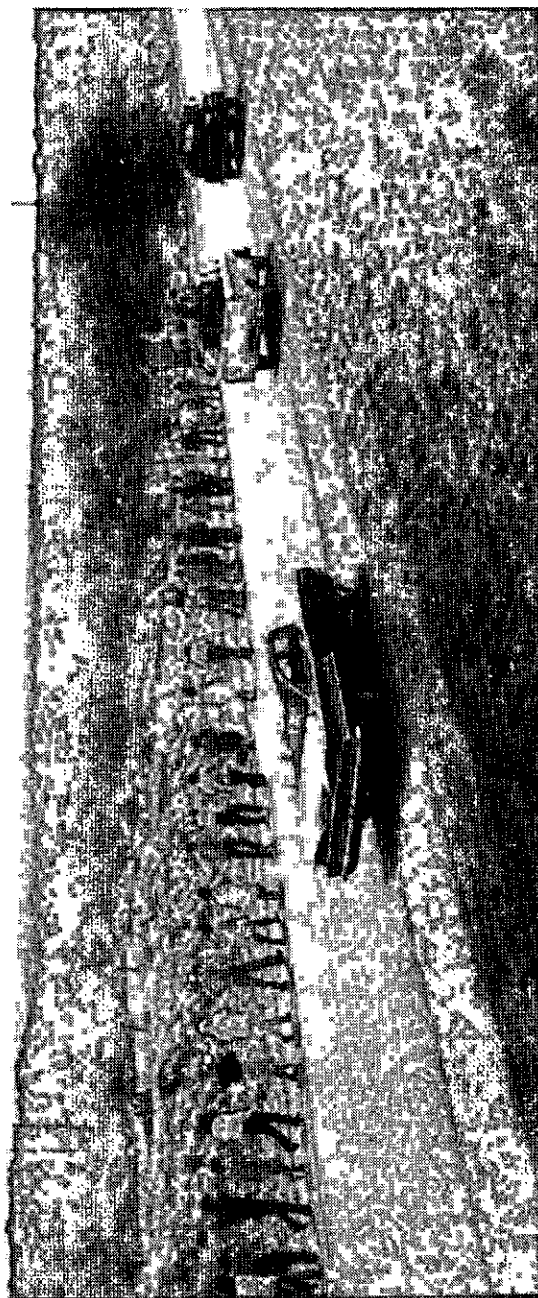
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During the summer of 1966, a farm workers' movement centered in the Rio Grande Valley spawned a 490-mile march to the Texas Capitol in Austin which represented a turning point in the political and ethnic consciousness of the Mexican Americans in the Lone Star state. Backed by the Catholic Church, organized labor, and Mexican-American organizations, this "walk in the sun" reflected the nationwide Chicano activism of the 1960s and the importance of the post-World War II alliance forged between Hispanics and organized labor to ameliorate the condition of the second largest minority group in the United States.¹ Most importantly, the Minimum Wage March of 1966 energized Texas Chicanos along the way and produced far-reaching consequences within the Hispanic community in regard to local, state, and national politics and Mexican Americans' growing sense of self-identity.

The Minimum Wage March and its surrounding events had a special relevance to Houston. Mexican Americans from the Bayou City were instrumental in its planning and execution, helping to formulate strategy. Two prominent Houston clergymen became co-leaders of the march, and Houston's chapter of the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO) actively participated in the entire affair. Additionally, longtime Houston Mexican American activists from other groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) participated, and *la marcha* became a *cause celebre* and a lasting part of the political lore of

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¹"La Marcha. . . Valley Farm Workers 491-Mile March for Justice," *Harris County PASO 5th Anniversary and Salute to Valley Farm Workers* (pamphlet, Houston, 1966), Alfonso Vasquez Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), Houston Public Library, hereafter referred to as "La Marcha"; Helen Rowan, *The Mexican American: A Paper Prepared for the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington, 1968), 1.



The Minimum Wage March of 1966 covered 490 miles, starting from Rio Grande City on July 4 and ending at the steps of the Capitol Building in Austin on September 5.

Houston's Hispanic community.

The seedbed for protest among Texas Chicanos was a fertile one by the summer of 1966. Over 1.5 million persons of Hispanic ancestry resided in Texas at that time, one of the highest concentrations of Mexican Americans in the nation.² The focus of discontent was in rural areas of South Texas, where the Mexican-American population was often poorly educated and subject to a social system with characteristics of both the Mexican colonial class structure and the American Old South plantation system.³ Since the 1930s, Hispanic leaders had utilized community institutions to protest their second class status, but with the 1960s the climate of social reform and labor activism from Washington, D.C., to the grape fields of California gave impetus to those who were committed to destroying the old stereotype of the "passive, docile" Mexican American reluctant to question his condition.⁴

In February 1966, as Cesar Chavez stood on the threshold of convincing California grape growers to accede to the demands of his striking National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), Texas labor leaders met in the Rio Grande Valley to formulate general plans for unionizing workers in the area.⁵ Local Teamsters and a Texas AFL-CIO project called "Operation Bootstrap" which specifically targeted Mexican-American workers in South Texas had already initiated labor and political organizational activity there in the early 1960s. In 1963 the state AFL-CIO created a Latin American Affairs Department which also signaled labor leaders' interest in and sensitivity to the acute problems of Hispanic workers.⁶ A year later the state labor agency's establishment of an Equal Opportunity Department headed by a Mexican American further indicated organized labor's interest in Hispanics.⁷

In the same month that Texas labor leaders met in the Valley, Chavez sent

²*Texas AFL-CIO News*, August 20, 1966, newspaper in John Castillo Collection, HMRC. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1960: Subject Reports: Persons of Spanish Surname, Final Report* (Washington, 1963), ix, the Mexican American population in Texas in 1960 was 1,417,810.

³Joan W. Moore and Ralph Guzman, "The Mexican-Americans: New Wind from the Southwest," *LULAC Extra*, October 1966 (reprinted from *The Nation*, May 30, 1966), newspaper in J. A. "Tony" Alvarez Collection, HMRC.

⁴See Charles Ray Chandler, "The Mexican American Protest Movement in Texas" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1968), 121-163.

⁵*Valley Evening Monitor*, February 13, 1966, clipping in Mexican-American Farm Workers' Movement Collection, Special Collections, Library, University of Texas at Arlington.

⁶*Houston Post*, August 11, 1963; Roy Evans to Members Permanent Latin American Affairs Committee, Texas AFL-CIO Records, Series VII, Special Collections, Library, University of Texas at Arlington.

⁷Typescript of interview with Henry Munoz, Jr., 1971, Special Collections, Library, University of Texas at Arlington; *Houston Post*, August 11, 1963, clipping in Farm Workers' Movement Collection.

a young associate, 36-year-old Eugene Nelson, to Houston to organize a boycott against produce sold by Schenley Industries, one of the largest growers in California. Shortly after Nelson's arrival in Houston, Schenley signed a contract with Chavez's union, leaving Nelson free to pursue other activities.⁸ Subsequently, Chris Dixie, a Houston attorney representing the NFWA, and Larry Skoog, a local sympathizer, joined other social and labor activists in Houston in convincing Nelson to stay in Texas to organize farm workers. From these discussions developed the vehicle for his work, an independent union called the Independent Workers Association. In May Nelson arrived in Rio Grande City, the county seat of Starr County on the Mexican border, where he was informed that Margil Sanchez and Lucio Galvan, two local businessmen who were also labor activists, had already begun some organizational activities among farm workers. Armed with membership and pledge cards for his independent union and a rough draft of a letter inviting the Valley growers to bargain collectively and to sign a contract guaranteeing workers the Federal minimum wage of \$1.25 per hour and an eight-hour day, Nelson began recruiting members.⁹

Coincident with the increased labor activity in the Valley, Mexican-American organizations across the state exhibited greater activism. According to John E. Castillo, then a young strategist in the Houston chapter of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO): "It seemed the time was right. . .to come out. . .into the political mainstream. The national climate gave you a feeling that you could do almost anything you wanted to—so we were doing it."¹⁰ In the 1940s and 1950s groups such as the American GI Forum and the League of United Latin American Citizens encouraged "enlightened" political activism among Mexican Americans, but the 1960s produced a more organized and broader effort to mobilize Mexican Americans into a significant political force. The VIVA Kennedy clubs served as a training ground, generating PASO in Texas and other

⁸Texas *Observer*, September 2, 1966. Important secondary studies of the Valley farm workers' movement include Jan Hart Cohen, "To See Christ in Our Brothers: The Role of the Texas Roman Catholic Church in the Rio Grande Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1974), and Charles Carr Winn, "The Valley Farm Workers' Movement, 1966-1967" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1970). The Texas *Observer* covered and analyzed the march in detail. See in particular Texas *Observer*, Special Issue, September 9, 1966.

⁹Texas *Observer*, September 2, 1966; typescript of interview with Larry Skoog, 1971, Special Collections, Library, University of Texas at Arlington; Eugene Nelson, telephone interview with authors, January 18, 1985; Valley *Evening Monitor*, May 23, 1966, clipping in Farm Workers' Movement Collection; rough draft of letter from Nelson to Starr County growers, Farm Workers' Movement Collection; John Herrera to Larry Skoog with minutes of first meeting of Independent Workers Association, April 14, 1966, Farm Workers' Movement Collection.

¹⁰John Castillo, interview with authors, November 15, 1984.

southwestern states and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) in California. These organizations identified political action as a primary tactic in the fight against discrimination. Although largely unsuccessful in its initial political activity, PASO made inroads into the Texas political establishment with poll tax drives, usually conducted in conjunction with the Teamsters or the AFL-CIO, the most dramatic of which occurred in Crystal City in 1963 and in Mathis in 1965-1966. The Houston PASO chapter, active since 1961, organized community action agencies in predominantly Mexican-American neighborhoods, conducted voter registration drives, and cooperated with the Teamsters and AFL-CIO locals and the Harris County Democrats to try to elect minority candidates to local and state offices.¹¹

By the spring of 1966, Mexican-American labor and political activism was reaching a crescendo. To placate increasingly outspoken Mexican-American leaders, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission held a regional conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on March 28 to address Mexican-American employment problems and invited fifty representatives of organizations such as LULAC, the GI Forum, PASO, and the AFL-CIO. To protest the absence of Mexican-American representation on the Commission and the attempt by conference organizers to dictate the statements which Mexican Americans on the program would make, all fifty delegates walked out of the conference, demanding a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson. Johnson later created the Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs, a Cabinet-level agency, to pacify the delegates.¹² At a LULAC "unity" banquet held in Houston to honor those who had boycotted the conference, a crowd of four hundred heard speakers preach the theme of unity and action. "In spite of our number we are America's invisible minority," Houston attorney Alfred J. Hernandez, president of national LULAC, said. "Because we have not demonstrated, because we have not cried out when we have been abused and exploited, we have been ignored."¹³ Three months later a strike in Rio Grande City produced the march to Austin, reminiscent of black civil rights demonstrations but with distinctively Mexican-American nuances. By its conclusion, the march had stimulated the development of a mass Mexican-American protest movement with statewide repercussions.

¹¹Chandler, 126, 130, 148, 159, 162-163, 172-174, 226; Roy C. Rodriguez, *Mexican-American Civic Organizations: Political Participation and Political Attitudes* (San Francisco, 1978), 24-26.

¹²Texas *Observer*, April 15, 1966; Judge Alfred J. Hernandez, interview with authors, November 27, 1984; *El Sol*, April 1, 1966; *Texas AFL-CIO News*, April 22, 1966, newspaper in Castillo Collection.

¹³Houston *Post*, April 29, 1966.



At Houston's Immaculate Heart Church, Father Antonio Gonzalez (center) and parishioners collected food and clothing donated locally for the striking farm workers.

The Independent Workers Association, with offices in Houston and in Mission, just outside Rio Grande City, launched a strike against the major Starr County growers on June 1. IWA leaders followed the precedent set in Starr County in 1963 when a Teamster/PASO alliance had been forged and requested the active support of state Mexican-American organizations. In Houston IWA supporters and PASO representatives met at PASO headquarters across from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Magnolia Park, a largely Hispanic suburb. The stories of abuse and intimidation encountered by IWA organizers as they attempted to enlist members and to force the growers to recognize the union in Rio Grande City encouraged PASO members, led by Alfonso Vasquez, to "infuse some help" to solve the social, economic, and political problems there.¹⁴ The Mexican Americans wanted two things: reassurance as to the motives of the largely Anglo Houston IWA organizers, and the kind of community support which had been central to Chavez's success in California. For these reasons, the group stepped across the street to consult Father Antonio Gonzalez, the assistant pastor at Immaculate Heart Church, who had served previously in South Texas and also worked with Houston's PASO in local voter registration drives.¹⁵ Gonzalez and PASO representatives agreed to collect food and clothing, solicit financial aid, and meet with Nelson in Rio Grande City the following weekend. At the second meeting, also attended by sympathetic Rio Grande area residents and members of the Catholic Bishop's Committee for the Spanish Speaking, Nelson emphasized the damage done to the strike by a district court restraining order prohibiting picketing against the growers and by heavy rains, seasonal migration, and intimidation by Texas Rangers. To attract media attention and thus to maintain the momentum of the fledgling strike, religious, political, and union representatives planned a July 4 pilgrimage from Rio Grande City to nearby San Juan Shrine Church, a site of special religious significance to Mexican-American Catholics.¹⁶

On Independence Day almost 120 marchers, including 40 Houstonians, began their trek through the "Valley of Fear" southeast to San Juan, Texas, under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe.¹⁷ Father Antonio Gonzalez and

¹⁴Houston, *Post*, August 11, 1963; Baytown *Sun*, June 2, 1966; Al Vasquez and Al Matta, eds., *The Harris County PASO Fact Book* (Houston, 1964), Vasquez Collection, hereafter referred to as *PASO Fact Book*; Castillo interview. For an overview of the strike, see Richard Bailey, "The Starr County Strike," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 4 (Winter 1979): 42-61.

¹⁵Skoog interview; Castillo interview; Alfonso Vasquez, interview with authors, November 15, 1984; "La Marcha."

¹⁶Castillo interview; Nelson interview; *LULAC Extra*, October, 1966; Bailey, 49.

¹⁷Quoted from Rev. Joe E. Christiansen, *El Sol*, September 2, 1966 (reprinted from *Houston Chronicle*); *LULAC Extra*, October, 1966; *Orange Leader*, July 5, 1966; "La Marcha."



Houstonians Father Antonio Gonzalez (left) and the Reverend James Novarro (right) joined labor organizer Eugene Nelson (center) as co-leaders of the march.

the Reverend James Novarro, pastor of the Kashmere Baptist Church in Houston, a member of LULAC, and state chaplain of PASO, accompanied the Houston delegation to Rio Grande City and emerged as co-leaders of the march by the time the pilgrimage reached Mission. At the same time the march began to assume a broader purpose than originally envisioned, somewhat to the chagrin of union leaders who feared a dilution of their efforts to draw attention to the strike and demands for a union contract.¹⁸ The expansion of purpose, nevertheless, served the interests of a diverse group of supporters and facilitated the development of a united front once the march finally ended.¹⁹ "La huelga" (the strike) thus became "la causa," the demand for a state minimum wage law of \$1.25 to improve the standard of living of Valley farm workers who earned less than one dollar an hour and a call for justice for the largely Mexican-American population there.²⁰ Novarro recounted how the transition occurred in his own outlook. Arriving in Rio Grande City with the intention of marching only one day, Novarro stated: "I had no idea I would be involved [but] when I got there and saw the people, the farm workers themselves, such fine people, simple-hearted, honest, hard-working, family-oriented, and sincere, it just gripped me. They were symbolic of the need of the Hispanic . . . community throughout the whole Southwest." The solution to their problems, he concluded, lay "not . . . in San Juan, nor in the Valley, but in Austin."²¹ Houstonian John E. Castillo, who helped plan the march, also recognized the opportunity at hand to attract national media attention and thus, he said, to "have an impact on the social conscience of the state if not the country."²² Thus the march evolved from a strike protest to an economic, political, and social demonstration with a highly coordinated display of strength and unity from Catholic officials, Texas AFL-CIO executives, and Mexican-American organizations. On July 14 the Texas AFL-CIO Executive Committee decided to throw its "full support" behind the Valley strike and the minimum wage march, assuring the marchers of a massive rally on their behalf when they arrived in the state's capital.²³

¹⁸"La Marcha"; *PASO Fact Book*; Rev. James Novarro, interview with authors, December 13, 1984.

¹⁹Castillo interview.

²⁰*LULAC Extra*, October, 1966 (reprinted from *Dallas Times Herald*, September 4, 1966); Texas Good Neighbor Commission, *Texas Migrant Labor: The 1968 Migration* (Austin, 1968), 3.

²¹Novarro interview.

²²Castillo interview.

²³*Austin Statesman*, July 15, 1966; Resolution on Minimum Wage, Executive Board AFL-CIO Resolution, July 14, 1966, Farm Workers' Movement Collection; Skoog interview; typescript of interview with F. F. "Pancho" Medrano, 1971, Special Collections, Library, University of Texas at Arlington.

The march would cover 490 miles, ending at the steps of the State Capitol building on Labor Day. Eleven marchers set out from San Juan, their number periodically supplemented by well-wishers as the demonstration, under constant supervision by Department of Public Safety officials, continued through towns along the route.²⁴ At McAllen on July 9 the marchers finalized their plans to walk to Austin to ask Governor John Connally to call a special session of the State Legislature to consider passage of a state minimum wage bill.²⁵ At Edinburg Mayor Al Ramirez left a hospital bed to greet the demonstrators as they reached the city limits.²⁶ At Kingsville four hundred people turned out for a rally the march coordinators led.²⁷ In nearby Robstown a group of cotton pickers along the roadside stopped work and marched for a mile with the slow-moving parade. When the marchers approached Corpus Christi 1500 supporters awaited them. Dr. Hector Garcia, the founder of the national GI Forum, arrived with fifteen Forum members to carry the organization's banner into town with the marchers. After a stop at the steelworkers' hall, the demonstrators continued through town to the cathedral where the Most Reverend Thomas J. Drury, Bishop of Corpus Christi, conducted services for the group and gave his "total endorsement" of their action. At a rally that evening on the Corpus Christi docks, over five thousand heard the exhortations of religious, political, and labor leaders for moral and financial support.²⁸ Having "walked into a very receptive environment" because of the strong labor movement in Corpus Christi, the marchers received a boost in morale which strengthened their commitment to walk all the way to Austin.²⁹

As the contingent moved northward from Corpus Christi, an outpouring of support surprised observers. At Beeville over 1000 greeted the marchers.³⁰ In Floresville, Governor Connally's home town, the Methodist Church fed the march participants.³¹ On August 27, as the demonstration reached its last leg, the march entered San Antonio where the Catholic Archbishop Robert E. Lucey, an early supporter of the strike and the march, delivered mass at San Fernando Cathedral. In a brief sermon he addressed the spirit which he felt the march had inspired. "Through the years," he said, "our Spanish-speaking people have suffered in silence. . . . But the presence here of so many Texas citizens of Mexican descent is a symbol of a new era in human

²⁴Texas *Observer*, Special Issue, September 9, 1966; Castillo interview; Navarro interview.

²⁵LULAC *Extra*, October, 1966 (reprinted from *Houston Post*, September 4, 1966.)

²⁶"La Marcha."

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*; Texas *Observer*, September 9, 1966.

²⁹Castillo interview.

³⁰"La Marcha."

³¹LULAC *Extra*, October, 1966; Texas *Observer*, September 16, 1966.

relations throughout the Southwest. . . . Mexican Americans have learned that they have a certain dignity as human beings. . . ." and that "they must stand up and defend themselves against discrimination and oppression." The following evening, one thousand demonstrators marched by candlelight to the Alamo for a spirited rally.³²

Five days and fifty miles out of Austin, Governor Connally, Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr, and Speaker of the Texas House Ben Barnes met the marchers just north of New Braunfels. The widely publicized confrontation which followed became a mobilizing political event for Mexican Americans across the state. Connally announced he would not call a special session of the Legislature nor "lend the dignity of [his] office" to a Labor Day rally in Austin. Although he commended the marchers for the nonviolent nature of the march, he expressed his fear that outside agitators would create a violent scene in Austin and counseled them to halt.³³ This incident generated enormous Mexican-American antipathy toward the three public officials, especially toward Waggoner Carr, whom they had previously considered a friend to Texas Hispanics.³⁴ At first the confrontation dampened the morale of the marchers; within two days, however, the Connally confrontation appeared to have heightened their resolve. National LULAC President Alfred J. Hernandez had joined the march on its first day in the Valley and subsequently participated on the weekends, not as a LULAC representative, but out of his own personal commitment to the farm workers' cause. He recalled that the New Braunfels incident had focused the "eyes of the nation on the problems of the farm worker. Whatever happened. . . in Austin [would be] anticlimactic because they had done what they had proposed to do."³⁵

On the morning of September 5, Labor Day, 150 farm workers led the marchers along the last three miles of the trek up Congress Avenue to the steps of the Capitol building. An estimated eight thousand persons walked behind the farm workers, the march line extending for more than a mile from the Colorado River to the Capitol building. At Sixth and Congress Streets, U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough, a consistent supporter of the march, joined the participants, the only national public figure to do so.³⁶ At Eighth and Congress the demonstrators, by that time joined by at least forty blacks from the town of Huntsville, sang "We Shall Overcome." At Ninth Street and Congress the marchers gave the thumbs down sign as they passed

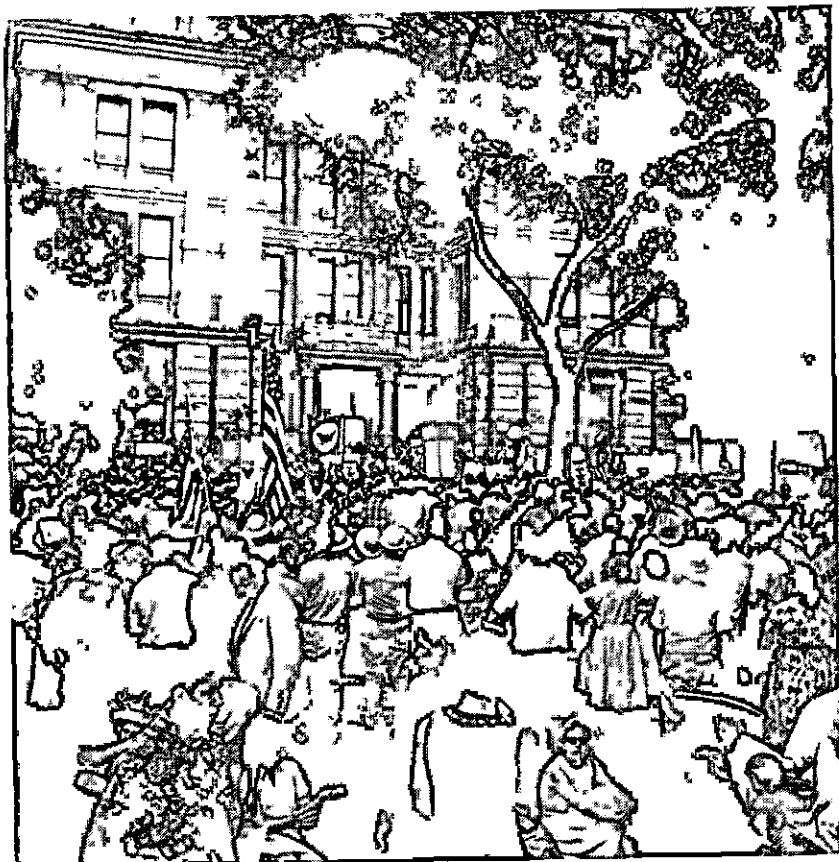
³²"La Marcha"; quote from LULAC *Extra*, October, 1966 (reprinted from *Dallas Times Herald*).

³³"La Marcha"; quote from Texas *Observer*, September 16, 1966.

³⁴Castillo interview; Hernandez interview; *El Sol*, September 9, 1966.

³⁵Texas *Observer*, September 16, 1966; quote from Hernandez interview.

³⁶"La Marcha"; Texas *Observer*, September 16, 1966.



More than 10,000 people gathered in a rally at the State Capitol on the final day of the march.

the headquarters of Waggoner Carr's Senate campaign, in which he was supported by Connally.³⁷ Finally at the Capitol, the crowd of over ten thousand created a picture so "visually moving" that Houston PASO chairman Alfonso Vasquez, a professional photographer, recalled that "I took . . . pictures by instinct because I couldn't see—I was crying so much."³⁸

Platform guests from the ranks of farm workers as well as union, political, and religious organizations addressed the massive assembly on the Capitol lawn. Noticeably absent was Governor John Connally whom the Houston-based Spanish-language newspaper *El Sol* assailed for "show[ing] with finality his true lack of concern for the Mexican American in Texas."³⁹ Father Antonio Gonzalez cast his prepared remarks aside to introduce his migrant-worker parents and to announce the beginning of the Vigil for Justice on the Capitol steps. As a reminder of the need for a minimum wage to legislators returning to Austin for the new legislative session, Gonzalez assigned two representatives of the farm workers to stand at the south entrance to the Capitol. Gonzalez implemented the plan, opposed by strike leaders who felt the funds could be better utilized in the Valley, as an expression of an old Indian custom where an Indian waited outside the home of one who owed him a debt until paid or the two reached an agreement. Only by addressing the minimum wage issue, Gonzalez concluded, could the debt to Mexican Americans be paid.⁴⁰ Following the Capitol rally, where each speaker emphasized the spirit of unity and consciousness evident among Mexican Americans that day, the demonstrators celebrated in Zilker Park where Cesar Chavez addressed the crowd.⁴¹

The strike itself, which lasted until the fall of 1967, failed. The brutality of the Texas Rangers, the importation of nonresident labor, the lack of a well prepared base of operations in the Valley, restrictive Texas labor laws, and a hurricane which destroyed the Valley crops in September 1967, all severely weakened the farm workers movement. The state did not institute a minimum wage law, and after four months the Vigil for Justice ended.⁴² Nonetheless, the cooperative effort between Mexican Americans and labor, aided by the Catholic Church, produced important results.

In an August 1966 edition of *El Sol*, editor Moses "Moe" Sanchez, who covered the march extensively in his fledgling newspaper, urged his readers: "Don't be afraid or bashful to ask for help. When you are abused or

³⁷*Texas Observer*, September 16, 1966.

³⁸Vasquez interview.

³⁹*El Sol*, September 9, 1966.

⁴⁰*El Sol*, October 14, 1966.

⁴¹*Texas Observer*, September 16, 1966; Hernandez interview; Castillo interview; Navarro interview.

⁴²Cohen, 117; Winn, 144-148; *Texas Observer*, March 31, 1967; Bailey, 58-59.

wronged, SPEAK UP!"⁴³ Such exhortations grew steadily in the march's aftermath. In Lubbock County in September 1966, more than one hundred workers, most of them Mexican Americans, called a strike against a cotton processing and storage company not only to protest their economic plight but also to challenge the obvious discrimination practiced against Hispanics in the Lubbock area.⁴⁴ The Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDF) Office, established in 1968 under an eight-year Ford Foundation grant, heard two hundred complaints, all allegations of discrimination based on ethnic origin or poverty, in the first eleven months of its operation. Consequently, MALDF sued various organizations and businesses around the state on behalf of Hispanics.⁴⁵

In the same year a paper prepared for the United States Commission on Civil Rights pointed to signs of "increasing solidarity and militancy within the [Mexican-American] community" and concluded that "the most pervasive force among Mexican Americans" was "a growing sense of identity and a quest for unity to achieve equality of opportunity in every phase of life."⁴⁶ In specific reference to Texas, the *Texas Observer* reported that "the 1960s have been the decade in which Texas' brown population has made its most determined effort to achieve equality, social justice and self-respect in this Anglo-dominated society."⁴⁷ Project SER (Service, Education, and Redevelopment), established in July 1966 as a joint effort by Council #60 of LULAC in Houston and the GI Forum and funded by the Department of Labor, reflected that determination to realize a position of equality and helped Americans of Mexican descent across the Southwest to receive training and to locate jobs throughout the 1960s.⁴⁸ Under the direction of Dr. George I. Sanchez at the University of Texas, an active supporter of the march to Austin, Mexican-American leaders held a "summit conference" in January 1967 to create a "think tank" to address issues of special concern to Hispanics. Although the group did not operate much beyond the initial planning stages, the *Texas Observer* viewed the planning of such a program as evidence of "the growing self-awareness" in the Mexican-American population in Texas which had emanated from Starr County "tremors."⁴⁹

Not only did the march contribute to a greater sense of group identity, it also mobilized and politicized Mexican Americans on a scale wider than ever seen before in Texas. This was apparent not only in local politics in South

⁴³*El Sol*, August 26, 1966.

⁴⁴*Texas Observer*, January 20, 1967.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, April 11, 1969.

⁴⁶Rowan, 2, 66.

⁴⁷*Texas Observer*, April 11, 1969.

⁴⁸*El Sol*, July 1, 1966.

⁴⁹*Texas Observer*, January 20, 1967.

Texas and other heavily Hispanic areas of the state, but in state and national politics as well. On the eve of the opening of the legislative session in Austin in 1967 the Mathis City Council, controlled by Mexican Americans since 1965, passed the first minimum wage bill in the state, covering even such employees as maids, farm and garden hands, waitresses, and clerks. The mayor signed the ordinance into law on the steps of the capitol the morning the legislature convened. In 1968 Del Rio elected its first Mexican-American mayor and a city council dominated by Hispanics.⁵⁰ La Raza Unida Party emerged from continuing Anglo/Mexican-American conflict in Crystal City and sent Hispanic candidates to office in unparalleled numbers across the state. In 1972 the party ran a candidate for governor and won over six percent of the vote.⁵¹ Conditions in Texas "were never the same," PASO representative John Castillo recalled. "It really was a people's movement. . . which left behind a political cadre of people" who, as precinct judges, mayors, city council members, and state representatives and their appointees, provided Mexican Americans a meaningful voice in shaping their future.⁵²

In state politics Mexican Americans actively campaigned in opposition to Waggoner Carr in his unsuccessful Senate race against John Tower in 1966. Mexican-American animosity toward Connally even reached the President's ears. Robert Canino, District VIII Director of the American GI Forum in Texas, wrote Lyndon Johnson in May 1967 to ask for help with the ongoing problems in Starr County. "We have sent numerous letters to our impious Governor. . . about the situation. . . Many of us worked to elect him as our governor, but we have realized our mistake and we will have the opportunity to correct this by again using our voting privilege in the 1968 election."⁵³ At hearings of the Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs in El Paso in October 1967, Lyndon Johnson unexpectedly joined a meeting of delegates to introduce the Texas governor. Connally was greeted with "a blast of boos" and shouts of "throw him out," as the "startled" Johnson quickly finished his introductions and left. The "Connally boos," the *Houston Chronicle* concluded, "arose from political conflict that started long before the conference was scheduled. Mexican Americans, aided both morally and financially by the Texas AFL-CIO, have made Connally their number one target since he refused to sit down and talk with them about a state minimum wage." Texas Hispanics also blamed Connally for a yearly

⁵⁰*Texas Observer*, September 17, 1965; *ibid.*, April 11, 1969; *Houston Chronicle*, January 15, 1967.

⁵¹Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied Americans: A History of Chicanos* (New York, 2nd ed., 1981), 362, 389.

⁵²Castillo interview.

⁵³Robert Canino to Lyndon B. Johnson, May 28, 1967, Lyndon Baines Johnson Papers, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin.



The Minimum Wage March helped focus a new spirit of political activism, in which Mexican Americans from across Texas united to demand attention to their concerns from politicians such as Governor John Connally.

voter registration requirement, adopted when the poll tax was declared unconstitutional, which discriminated against a highly mobile population such as the migrant workers.⁵⁴

Sensitive to increasing Mexican-American criticism of his administration, especially when reminded of the inordinate number of servicemen in Vietnam with Hispanic surnames, President Johnson appointed a Task Force on Migratory and Other Farm Workers in 1966, conducted a publicity campaign to emphasize how Great Society programs had assisted Mexican Americans, and made several historic nominations from within the Mexican-American community.⁵⁵ In 1967, a liberal-dominated Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor received testimony from farm worker organizers and march participants at hearings held in Rio Grande City and Edinburg on the difficulty of organizing farm workers into unions and recommended legislation to broaden the protective scope of the National Labor Relations Act to include migrant workers.⁵⁶ After the success which the "Texas Rebuilding Commission" had experienced in lining up Mexican-American voters behind John Tower, the Republican Party actively sought the Mexican-American vote in the 1968 election year.⁵⁷ In 1972 an investigation initiated five years earlier by the Texas Civil Rights Commission, the United States Civil Rights Commission, the Justice Department, and the Department of Labor culminated in a three-judge Federal panel declaring five Texas statutes, used largely during labor disputes, to be unconstitutional. The panel also agreed with the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, which had brought the suit, that Texas Rangers had blatantly and

⁵⁴Houston *Chronicle*, October 30, 1967.

⁵⁵Letter, Homero Alvarez del Castillo to President Johnson, June 9, 1967, Johnson Papers, demonstrates the emphasis Mexican Americans placed on their participation in the Vietnam conflict; memo, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., to W. Willard Wirtz, October 4, 1966, with Task Force Report, Califano Collection, Johnson Papers; various clippings on Mexican American activism, Fred Panzer, Aides Files, Johnson Papers; memo, Fred Panzer to Jim Jones, July 30, 1968, on purpose of Mexican-American "epic," Fred Panzer, Aides Files, Johnson Papers; memo, Fred Panzer to Charles Maguire, with copy of script for "epic," Fred Panzer, Aides Files, Johnson Papers; Vicente Ximenes (appointed to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and as Chairman of the Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs) to friend, press release on outcome of El Paso meeting, listing Great Society accomplishments in regard to Hispanics, Fred Panzer, Aides Files, Johnson Papers; Irvine Sprague, Aides Files, Mexican American Conference (2) File, Johnson Papers, contains numerous letters and clippings related to Mexican American criticism of Johnson programs. Johnson also nominated Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the American GI Forum, to be the first person of Spanish surname to serve on the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.

⁵⁶See *Migratory Labor Legislation Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Migratory Labor of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare*, U.S. Senate, 90th Cong., 1st Sess. [June 29, 1967, in Rio Grande City and June 31, 1968, in Edinburg] (Washington, 1968).

⁵⁷Castillo interview; Acuna, 385.

illegally sided with the growers in the Valley strike. Two years later the United States Supreme Court upheld the latter decision.⁵⁸ Eugene Nelson contended that such Federal attention to the Valley situation, the result of growing pressure from civil rights, labor, church, and Mexican-American leaders, gave a "tremendous impetus" to the largely Mexican-American farm workers' movement in the Valley.⁵⁹ Clearly, mounting Mexican-American activism in Texas and other states was producing important dividends.

The emphasis on and commitment to unity, political strength and activism, and group identity among often-splintered Mexican-American organizations throughout the duration of the march constituted a milestone in the effort to reap this political and social harvest. The march held a special poignancy for many of Houston's Mexican American activists. "The expression of La Raza was there [among Mexican Americans]," Hernandez contended, but it needed "a catalyst to bring it out—the United Farm Workers."⁶⁰ Novarro likewise concluded: "If there has been an expression that solidified the Mexican-American people throughout the whole state, it was this march. It became a symbol of the unity. . . the pent-up frustration of more than one hundred years. You could say that it became the catalyst [for] . . . cooperation within the Mexican-American community on a statewide basis."⁶¹ Larry Skoog, convinced the strike in Starr County achieved little in an immediate economic sense, nevertheless argued that "the Valley farm workers' movement in 1966 provided the underpinnings for the Chicano movement in Texas. . . and for the growth and prospering of that movement."⁶² The march had aroused a "sleeping giant."⁶³ After his return to California, Eugene Nelson wrote Larry Skoog and identified a more basic result of the 1966 experience. "The *Tejanos*," he asserted, "no longer tip their hats to the *gabachos*."⁶⁴

⁵⁸*United States Reports*, 417 (Washington, 1975), 802-803, 821; *Corpus Christi Caller*, June 27, 1972.

⁵⁹Nelson interview. See also telegram, Pancho Medrano to the President, May 10, 1967, Johnson Papers; telegram, Polly C. Baca, Chairman American GI Forum Ladies' Auxiliary, to the President, May 19, 1967, Johnson Papers; Mr. Fay H. Smith, Associate Secretary Illinois Council of Churches, to the President, June 2, 1967, Johnson Papers; Frank Osuna, Field Program Director, Arizona Migrant and Indian Ministry, to the President of the United States, May 31, 1967, Johnson Papers; telegram, Burt N. Corona, President Mexican-American Political Association, to the President, June 4, 1967, Johnson Papers; telegram, Cesar E. Chavez to the President, June 3, 1967, Johnson Papers.

⁶⁰Hernandez interview.

⁶¹Novarro interview.

⁶²Skoog interview.

⁶³See Alfonso Vasquez cartoon, *PASO Brochure*.

⁶⁴Eugene Nelson to Larry Skoog, undated letter, Farm Workers' Movement Collection.

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