



The Houston Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO) lent their support to the Rio Grande farmworkers, taking a bus from Houston to the Valley to march for a minimum wage of \$1.25 an hour.

Photo by Alfonso Vázquez courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0093;B1;F014.

Reverend James Novarro: Supporting La Marcha and Those in Need

By Joshua Valentino

Baptist minister James L. Novarro and fellow activists left Houston in the sweltering Texas heat in July of 1966, traveling several hours to Rio Grande City in Starr County, where they marched in solidarity with local farmworkers seeking a fair wage.¹ These laborers galvanized national attention when they organized a strike followed by a march, *La Marcha*, to the Texas capital in Austin, demanding a \$1.25 minimum wage for farmworkers and the right to unionize. Facing violent opposition from the Rio Grande Valley landowners who had police support, the strikers re-

fused to back down. This new generation of activists sought empowerment by confronting white supremacy and discrimination against Hispanics while rejecting the old ideals of assimilation into Anglo society.

The march received support from across Texas. Religious leaders, Reverend Novarro and his Catholic counterpart Father Antonio Gonzalez headed the Houston delegation. Although religious institutions were reluctant to support these organizing efforts, religion remained a central value in the movement, placing *La Marcha* at the crossroads of the many, sometimes conflicting, currents in the Mexican American activist community of the 1960s.

Reverend Novarro built an impressive career as a minister and community organizer. Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1919 and ordained in Fort Worth at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1939, James L. Novarro was an experienced organizer. His work in the religious communities he served and the local Mexican American community had a tremendous impact. He founded Houston's Kashmere Baptist Temple in 1943 and Calvary Baptist Temple in 1948. Novarro also became known for his daily, Spanish-language KLVV radio program *La Hora Bautista* (The Baptist Hour), which began broadcasting in 1950 and reached an audience of tens of thousands of Spanish speakers in the greater Houston area. Through the program Novarro ministered to Houston's Spanish-speaking Baptists, hosting a variety of religious speakers



A preeminent Hispanic Baptist minister and activist in Houston, Rev. James Novarro (center) became a key figure leading La Marcha to Austin, Texas, in 1966.

Photo courtesy of the James L. Novarro Collection at the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project, Houston, Texas.



Rev. Navarro hosted “La Hora Bautista” (The Baptist Hour), a radio program on KLVL, Houston’s first Spanish-language station. The program reached over 10,000 listeners in the area, and served as a platform for Navarro’s guests, religious music, and ministry.

Photo courtesy of the James L. Navarro Collection at the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project, Houston, Texas.

and musical programs. He distributed scholarships for Spanish-speaking students, gave Christmas food baskets to families in need, and supported children’s sports leagues.²

In the summer of 1954 when Hurricane Alice brought devastating floods to the Valley, destroying homes and taking between 53 and 153 lives on both the U.S. and Mexican sides of the Rio Grande River, Navarro reached out to his radio audience to offer aid. He helped mobilize five fifteen-ton truckloads of donated foodstuffs and clothing for the flood victims. A year later, Hurricane Hilda hit Tampico, Mexico, flooding 90 percent of the city and claiming Tampico’s communications and transportation networks. Rev. Navarro again ran a flood relief campaign, resulting in eighteen plane-loads totaling 250,000 pounds of foodstuffs and clothing reaching Tampico.³ Though the most sensational, the flood campaigns were only a small part of Navarro’s efforts to organize Houston’s Mexican American community.

In the 1960s, Mexican American organizing became increasingly diverse. Middle-class Mexican Americans had long been the dominant voices advocating for Mexican American rights in the United States. For the most part, they believed assimilating with white culture offered the best solution to discrimination against their community. Rev. Navarro was in many ways a member of this old guard. He was an active member and chaplain of the Houston chapter of League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the American GI Forum. LULAC was one of the leading national civil rights organizations for Mexican Americans prior to the 1960s, but it received increasing criticism for being too conservative and supporting Hispanic assimilation.⁴ The American GI Forum emerged after World War II “to fight for educational and medical benefits” for Mexican Americans, and later, “against poll taxes and school segregation.”

The sixties brought new forms of activism for Mexican Americans. In 1960 John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign kicked off the decade with an injection of ambition for Latinos seeking a political voice, led by Viva Kennedy

clubs established across the country. The Viva Kennedy campaign marked the first significant mobilization and recognition of Mexican Americans and Latinos as a national voter base. The campaign also provided a platform to bring the issues facing the Mexican American community to a national political stage. In Houston, the Viva Kennedy campaign revitalized Mexican American activism and launched voter registration drives. The Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO) in Houston emerged from LULAC, American GI Forum, and other groups that came together for the Kennedy campaign. Viva Kennedy clubs attributed the president’s narrow victories in many southwestern states to their hard work.⁵

While the success of the Viva Kennedy campaigns instilled a belief in pursuing change through political means, Kennedy’s performance as president disheartened many activists because his administration failed to adopt reforms they hoped to see and he did not appoint Mexican Americans to high-level administrative positions.⁶ As a result, new voices emerged in the Mexican American civil rights movement, advocating alternative means for pursuing change.



Rev. James Navarro (center, wearing a light suit) and other individuals gathered food and clothing to help victims of Hurricane Hilda that hit Tampico, Mexico, in 1955.

Photo courtesy of the James L. Navarro Collection at the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project, Houston, Texas.

Rev. Navarro remained active in Houston’s Mexican American political scene in the sixties and served as the state chaplain for PASO, which was more willing than organizations like LULAC to criticize the white establishment. Nonetheless, Navarro seemingly remained steady in his belief that those in political power could be made to serve Mexican Americans’ interests. Navarro prioritized his religious commitments to his Kashmere Baptist Temple congregation and his radio audience while he remained a respected and involved organizer. He ran for the Houston Independent School District board in 1964 and chaired the Anti-Poverty Council of Houston (APCH), an organization



Rev. James Novarro, leaning into a microphone, smiles as he watches the relief efforts in response to Rio Grande flooding from Hurricane Alice in June 1954. Novarro's relief campaign gathered and delivered 150,000 pounds of supplies to both sides of the flooded Rio Grande Valley.

Photo courtesy of the James L. Novarro Collection at the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project, Houston, Texas.

created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 under President Lyndon Johnson to combat poverty at the local level. The APCH sought to ensure effective allocation of aid to in-need communities by avoiding duplication of efforts between organizations and preventing misallocation of aid. Operating through government channels showed Rev. Novarro to be a tactically conservative organizer. He later, however, embraced a more overt form of activism with his participation in La Marcha, while keeping to some of his core conservative political and religious values.⁷

The Minimum Wage March of 1966 manifested demonstration techniques used earlier by Mexican American farmworkers in California. Interestingly, the eventual successes of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in the West began with the actions of a priest, Father Donald McDonnell. McDonnell evoked César Chávez's interest in labor organizing and helped recruit Chávez to the Community Services Organization (CSO) in 1950. Although the CSO became limiting, Chávez learned the techniques that enabled him to mobilize Southern California farmworkers to win union contracts.⁸

The California union organizers' success resulted from the efforts of César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, Gil Padilla and the NFWA members who worked tirelessly in laying the groundwork for the campaigns. In April 1966, the NFWA strike moved into the national spotlight with a march to the California capital of Sacramento and garnered the public support that NFWA needed to launch an effective boycott of targeted grape growers.⁹ The Texas march in 1966 descended from the California organizers' efforts and grew from a similar set of circumstances.

Starr County had an adult literacy rate of 22 percent and farmworkers there lived in difficult conditions. The laborers received between forty and eighty-five cents an hour, leaving

70 percent of the county's families living below the poverty line. Furthermore, roughly a third of the families had annual earnings of less than \$1,000, or approximately \$7,700 today when adjusted for inflation.¹⁰

To survive, Starr County farmworkers, predominantly of Mexican descent, were forced to migrate to other regions following growing seasons.¹¹ The laborers had no say in their employment conditions, and the landowners maintained strict control of governmental power in the Valley, which they exercised to maximize their profits at the expense of the workers. The landowners also used the endless supply of labor from across the border to their advantage when dealing with the existing workforce.

Efforts to unite the farmworkers began early in 1966. Eugene Nelson, an organizer with Chávez's NFWA, arrived in Texas to organize a boycott of a California grape grower, but by the time he arrived in Houston, the grower had signed an agreement with the NFWA. Nelson turned his attention to Starr County farmworkers instead, where an organizing strategy was already underway. The workers invited Nelson to the Valley to lead a rally announcing the unionization efforts, and a few hundred workers authorized the nascent union to negotiate on their behalf. Much of the organizing took place in Houston, and the newly created Independent Workers Association (IWA) began meeting in the local PASO headquarters, where the activists felt they could best tap into the hotbed of Mexican American organizing in Texas.¹²



Carrying his crucifix, Father Antonio Gonzalez leads farm workers and their supporters during La Marcha.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0093-0128.



Houstonians came out to support the demonstrators at the capitol in Austin. African American civil rights activist Curtis Graves stands in the middle of a crowd, illustrating the solidarity across civil rights groups. Civil rights activist, attorney, and judge, Alfred J. Hernandez, seated in front wearing a cowboy hat, was serving as national president of LULAC at the time.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0093-0141.

The Valley landowners refused to recognize the union or to comply with any of the workers' demands. On June 1, 1966, facing the political might of landowners, and risking their already precarious subsistence, the Valley farmworkers voted to strike. To survive, and unwilling to break the strike, many of the workers migrated to other regions in search of harvest work. In Starr County, sheriffs forced the remaining strikers into the fields, where some were sprayed with insecticide. A district judge also outlawed picketing in any form.¹³

The onset of physical violence made it clear that for all the successes of the Mexican American civil rights movement, the United States maintained its deep-rooted and brutal racism. Regardless, news of the picketing ban allowed Nelson to garner support in Houston for a march in Starr County. Originally, the march was planned to proceed from Rio Grande City to the Catholic shrine dedicated to Our Lady of San Juan del Valle in San Juan, Texas, about forty-five miles away.¹⁴

From the strike's inception, religion played a vital symbolic role. When the IWA established itself in Houston, the organizers looked to assistant pastor Father Antonio

Gonzalez at Immaculate Heart Church to provide a connection between the strike organizers and the Mexican American activist community. Fr. Gonzalez mobilized his religious community in support of the farmworkers by collecting food and clothing to donate to the strikers. As religious leaders and supporters of the labor movement, Fr. Gonzalez and Rev. Navarro were invited to march with them. Although the action came directly from Valley laborers in the movement, the national LULAC president, Alfred J. Hernandez of Houston, also marched in solidarity with the workers.¹⁵ LULAC's early approach to generating change did not include strikes, but the new decade and the emergence of a vibrant generation of organizers brought a willingness to confront the establishment more directly.

The farmworkers welcomed the support that activists from these organizations like LULAC and PASO provided. On July 4, Rev. Navarro, Fr. Gonzalez, and fellow Houstonian activists left Rio Grande City, marching with the farmworkers southeast toward San Juan, Texas. The march progressed through the town of La Joya where the Mexican American mayor met and welcomed the marchers. At some point between Rio Grande City and Mission, Fr. Gonzalez's diocesan leadership forced him to return to the diocese until he received permission from the bishop to participate in the march. As Fr. Gonzalez left, he tasked Rev. Navarro with carrying his crucifix to represent the priest's continued commitment to the march. When they reached Mission, the city denied them entry until a march representative received permission from the Mission Police Department to continue on if the marchers walked in single file on the sidewalk. That night, the marchers set up camp in a community park in Mission. Navarro remained with the march for the rest of its journey into San Juan because, he said, "the need...was so obvious, so evident."¹⁶

A Catholic church in Mission refused to support the march, causing anger among the farmworkers. Seeing the potential for violence that would endanger the march, Rev. Navarro called on the marchers to refrain from demonstrating at the church and continue on their journey to San Juan. Heeding the religious leader's call for non-violence, the marchers followed Navarro out of Mission and on to San Juan, where Bishop Emberto Mendeiros greeted the marchers and extended support from the Catholic Church.¹⁷

Religious support for the march originated at the individual level, for the most part, rather than being an institutional decision. For Rev. Navarro, certainly, participation in the march required a tremendous belief in the cause; the Baptist leadership and churches along the march route offered no support, and many criticized Navarro's participation. For the marchers, Navarro's role as a minister made him a natural leader. Much as the NFWA marchers in California had drawn from the black civil rights movement's use of mass prayer, Navarro began leading the Texas farmworkers in prayer every morning and noon. Eugene Nelson also saw the importance of religious guidance and decided to leave the march for a few days to encourage and facilitate a transfer of leadership to Navarro.¹⁸

By the time the march reached San Juan, its success motivated the organizers to carry the message on to the state capital in Austin. The growing scale of the march brought



Out of necessity, children accompanied parents on the march to Austin. These boys have signs showing support for the minimum wage from the United Farm Workers.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0228-0016.

grand receptions in cities along the way. Bishops opened their cathedrals to the marchers first in Corpus Christi, where the marchers received a police escort when Hector P. Garcia, founder of the American GI Forum, joined them, and then again in San Antonio.¹⁹

They received a chilly reception in New Braunfels from Texas Governor John Connally and Representative Wagoner Carr. Connally told the marchers not to come into Austin because he would not honor their request for a special session or “lend the dignity of his office” to their requests. He also predicted violence could occur. Connally’s advice had the opposite of its intended effect, reenergizing the marchers who perceived it as a validation of their cause, and they proceeded on to Austin. Having walked 65 days and 500 miles, the 150 farmworkers who led the march were joined by somewhere between eight thousand, and twenty-five thousand supporters on the final forty-nine miles into Austin and up to the state capitol on Labor Day, September 5, 1966.²⁰

La Marcha had launched the Rio Grande Valley farmworkers’ strike onto a national stage, and now those marching in solidarity with the laborers included César Chávez and Senator Ralph Yarborough (D-TX). Carrying a red bandana given to him by the farmworkers and otherwise reserved for those marchers who had made the whole journey from the Valley, Chávez expressed support for the march, asserting that the California and Texas farmworkers’ movements were one and the same. Upon reaching the capitol, the marchers gathered on the lawn to hear speeches from organizers. To maintain a lasting presence and as a reminder of the demand for a minimum wage for farmworkers, Fr. Gonzalez announced the Vigil for Justice, with two farm-

workers standing at the entrance to the capitol building as a visible reminder to legislators of the laborers’ demands.²¹

Back in the Valley, the farmworkers continued striking, but by 1967 it became clear the Texas legislature would not respond to their demand for minimum wage protection.²² Farmworkers held rallies throughout the Valley, organizing a union to pressure the growers directly for better wages and working conditions. The Valley landowners, however, began bussing laborers from across the border in Mexico who willingly worked for meager wages, presenting a significant problem for the strikers. After an unsuccessful blockade of the Roma Bridge on the Mexican border in October, the strikers received temporary help from the Confederation of Mexican Workers in May 1967. Members picketed, thereby blocking the route in Mexico for the “green-card commuters.” After two days, though, the picket collapsed and the flow of Mexican labor resumed. The growers effectively bypassed the Valley farmworker’s strike, and by fall 1967, the strike ended.

The experience of the Valley farmworkers resulted in tangible achievements, even though they did not immediately win their demands. Although the Texas legislature failed to pass a farmworkers’ minimum wage, in the summer of 1967 the Immigration Department issued a ruling prohibiting the importation of international strike-breaking laborers. Likewise, the Senate Migratory Subcommittee held hearings in Rio Grande City to investigate the abuse unleashed upon the striking farmworkers. Most importantly, the march to Austin energized the Mexican American civil rights movement in Texas. The organizing structures put in place by the strike and march maintained their strength and went on to serve other organizing efforts.²³

The Baptist hierarchy reprimanded Navarro for participating in La Marcha and for having carried Fr. Gonzalez’s crucifix. Navarro paid a high price for his political expression when influential members of the Kashmere Baptist Church congregation removed him for his actions. Regardless, he continued to minister to Houston’s Hispanic Baptist community. Navarro did not see the march, or its new tactics, as antithetical to the organizing that he had done with Houston’s LULAC and PASO chapters. For him, farmworkers “were the core of the march. Everybody else in every town and city, everybody else had to be behind the farmworkers.”²⁴

In addition to empowering Texas farmworkers, La Marcha deeply impacted Navarro, as he explained in 1984, “Sixty-five days of my life under the boiling sun of Texas are a part of that march in all of its fullness and it’s an experience that has stayed with me and even to the last of my life because I could never do it again, and I don’t know that it will ever happen again because it had never happened before.”²⁵ In his eyes, and the eyes of history, the march was a high point in the fight for Mexican American civil rights that he and his fellow organizers had been waging for the better part of a decade.

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