

Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America. By Zaragosa Vargas. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. xvi + 375 pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-691-11546-X.

Reviewed by Clete Daniel

In his first book, *Proletarians of the North*, Zaragosa Vargas sought to illuminate the largely unknown presence and unappreciated activism of Mexican and Mexican American workers in the industrial wage-labor force of Detroit, Chicago, and other cities of the upper Midwest during the early decades of the twentieth century. In his new book, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, he has a substantially more ambitious purpose, which is to distill from the welter of regionally focused, topically circumscribed scholarship on Chicano (Mexican American and Mexican) workers in the turbulent middle decades of the twentieth century, and to select from a rich archival trove common themes that bind the discrete parts of their history into a coherent whole. Nearly all the occupational groups that Vargas considers—including Chicago steelworkers, Colorado sugar-beet harvesters, Arizona copper miners, and California farmworkers, among others—have already been described at length by other scholars. But while he travels what some readers will regard as a well-trodden path, Vargas's larger purpose is to show how these seemingly disparate experiences of Chicano workers, no matter how well explained by others, actually constitute a historical continuum that yields fresh understanding.

There are certainly insights yet to be gleaned and linkages yet to be disclosed by rigorous analyses of the sprawling and complex body of evidence that Vargas has consulted. However, he deserves credit for bringing us considerably closer to understanding how a history of Chicano workers notable for an absence of unifying themes can be plausibly retold in ways that, while neither oblivious to nor dismissive of contradictions and incongruities, identify commonalities sufficiently influential in compass to sustain an a comprehensive interpretation. And whether or not his readers are disposed to agree that a population as resolutely diverse as the Spanish-speaking peoples of the Midwest, Southwest, and Far West is accessible to understanding on the basis of the particular commonalities that he emphasizes, Vargas admirably accomplishes what a good scholar should: he obliges us to reconsider our thinking in the light of his.

The book's two most compelling themes are, in some ways, different sides of the same coin. Vargas contends that because the civic identity of Mexican Americans was nearly always held hostage to Anglo convictions, a pattern that was especially virulent in the regions nearest the Mexican border, Chicanos were unlikely ever to become "authentic" Americans. The labor

struggles they engaged in from the depression era through the postwar period were inevitably fought to secure civil rights as well as worker rights. Vargas further contends that because the means and methods of their activism were drawn, almost exclusively, from the repertoire of the labor movement, Chicano workers were somewhat slower than other historically disadvantaged groups, most notably African Americans, to create protest vehicles that were able to transcend the inherent limitations of work-related organizations better suited to promoting class solidarity than to forging ethnic solidarity.

Moreover, by pursuing their goals of civic equality through labor activism, Chicanos were, Vargas suggests, probably more susceptible than they might otherwise have been to the influence of the American Communist Party, which centered its efforts to win a following in the United States among workers. To his credit, however, Vargas is not reluctant to acknowledge that the Communists, despite their primary allegiance to the party line, were willing to fight battles from which more feckless allies of racial and ethnic minorities often demurred. Unlike the unions belonging to the American Federation of Labor, whose overall record of indifference to, or complicity in, racial and ethnic inequality in the workplace had long been a stain on the integrity of organized labor, the union leaders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations were always willing to proclaim their devotion to equal employment opportunity. Too often, however, many of these same unions were reluctant to act forcefully when their Anglo members made it plain that they were unreconciled to the thought that the Chicanos working alongside them were, in fact, their equals. In contrast, Communist-influenced unions of the CIO, like the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union, which had a large Chicano membership in the Southwest, distinguished themselves by usually living up to their egalitarian creed, even at the risk of offending their Anglo members. In the postwar era, Vargas concedes, this willingness to associate with communists in the cause of winning labor and civil rights came at a high cost to Chicanos, who, during the antiradical hysteria of the early cold war, saw their struggle for equality complicated by new doubts about their loyalty.

Notwithstanding the limitations that their reliance on labor activism may have imposed, Chicanos benefited from engagement in the struggle for rights more often than they were hurt by it as they endeavored during the last third of the twentieth century to realize the promise of equal citizenship. Indeed, Vargas claims, although not entirely persuasively, that the deepening attachment of Chicanos to the labor movement marked “an important turning point in Mexican American history, for it fundamentally changed the way that Mexican Americans dealt with economic and social injustice thereafter” (p. 282).

While Vargas's analysis is at once informative and illuminating, his conclusions sometimes outdistance his evidence. He is, in particular, overly generous in his assessment of the benefits conferred on Chicano workers by the policies of the Roosevelt administration. He is unquestionably right that workers, including some Chicanos, empowered themselves during the New Deal, but, more often than not, those advances were made despite FDR's attitudes toward labor rather than because of them. Similarly, Vargas goes well beyond his evidence in claiming that Chicano workers made particularly important strides in the direction of greater occupational equality during World War II. Despite the palpable bigotry that Chicano workers confronted throughout the war, the Roosevelt administration never took significant political risks in the cause of greater workplace equality in the Southwest. On the contrary, the wan efforts of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice to promote equal-employment opportunity for Chicano copper miners in the region were, with FDR's knowledge and consent, blocked at every turn by administration functionaries openly contemptuous of its mission. Vargas may be correct in claiming that Chicano workers learned lessons from these bitter disappointments that served them well in their future campaigns for equal rights. One thing clearly emerges in this account: the "greatest generation" was more successful at defending the democratic creed abroad than at living it at home. In considering its treatment of Mexican Americans and other minorities, the war years could not be called its finest moment.

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