

6. Carlos E. Castañeda Testifies on Job Discrimination Against Mexican Americans in War Defense Industries, 1945

STATEMENT OF DR. CARLOS E. CASTAÑEDA, SPECIAL ASSISTANT ON LATIN-AMERICAN PROBLEMS TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND EDUCATION IN THE HEARINGS HELD SEPTEMBER 8, 1944, ON S BILL 2048, TO PROHIBIT DISCRIMINATION BECAUSE OF RACE, CREED, COLOR, NATIONAL ORIGIN OR ANCESTRY.

Our Spanish-speaking population in the Southwest . . . are ill-dressed, ill-fed, ill-cared for medically, and ill-educated . . . because of the low economic standard to which they have been relegated as the result of . . . restricting their employment . . . to the lowest paid, least desirable, and most exacting jobs. . . . Not only have they been restricted to the lowest bracket jobs, but even in these jobs they have been paid wages below the minimum . . . in all the . . . industries in which they have been employed.

In the investigation of complaints filed with the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice involving discrimination against Spanish-speaking . . . citizens . . . , I have visited the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas and I have had an opportunity to study conditions at first hand. I have gathered statistics that reveal the magnitude of the problem . . . as it affects . . . the largest underprivileged minority group in the Southwest.

In the State of Arizona, according to the 1940 census, there is a total population of 449,261, of which about 30% are persons of Mexican extraction. . . . The mining industry in Arizona . . . employs between 15,000 and 16,000 men. The percentage of . . . American citizens of Mexican extraction . . . is over 50% . . . and in many mining centers . . . as high as 80%. . . . There are between 8,000 and 10,000 persons of Mexican extraction employed in the mining industry in Arizona. Their employment is restricted, however, . . . to common labor and semi-skilled jobs and even the urgent need of Manpower as the result of the war has not broken down the prejudice which bars large numbers of skilled laborers from promotion. . . .

The total population of California, according to the 1940 census, is 6,907,387. The number of persons of Mexican extraction according to the same census is 457,900. . . . In the Los Angeles area with a population of 1,673,000, the persons of Mexican descent number about 315,000, or approximately 20%. . . .

Carlos E. Castañeda Testifies on Job Discrimination Against Mexican Americans in War Defense Industries, 1945.

... Out of the 315,000 persons of Mexican extraction, only 10,000 were being employed in the Southern California shipyards, 2,000 in the San Diego aircraft industry, and 7,500 in the Los Angeles aircraft industry, making a total of 19,500 employed in essential war industries in the area included between Los Angeles and San Diego. Much better utilization was being made of Mexican labor in the San Francisco area where, with a ... population of ... 30,000 persons of Mexican extraction, 8,000 were engaged in basic war industries. ... 22% of the Mexican-Americans were being employed in San Francisco, while only 6% had found employment in basic war industries in the Los Angeles and San Diego area.

The failure to utilize ... Mexican labor ... in California, traceable in a good measure to prejudice, was not limited to essential ... war industries. ... Mr. Sid Panush, Personnel Examiner for the Los Angeles County Civil Service Commission, stated that ... of 16,000 employees, about 400 were ... Mexican ... ; that is, ... 2 1/2% of the total amount. Mr. John F. Fisher, Director for the Los Angeles Civil Service Commission explained ... that ... of the 16,500 civil service employees in the city government about 450 were ... Mexican ... , which makes the percentage the same as ... in the County.

The population of Colorado, according to the 1940 census, is 1,123,296. ... In the southern part of Colorado, ... there are approximately some 50,000 Spanish-speaking ... citizens. ... In Denver, in Pueblo, and in Trinidad ... these Mexican-Americans are restricted in their employment to common labor jobs. ... The number of Mexican-Americans employed in the steel industry in Civil Service jobs, in military installations and in other war ... industries, is less than 6%. ... Mexican-Americans have been refused employment in clerical and office positions, and they have been denied promotion and upgrading ... in private industry and by military installations in the area.

The State of New Mexico [has] a population of 531,818. ... The number of Mexican-Americans is about 40% of the total population. In the ... large mining area between Santa Rita and Silver City ... from 40 to 60% of the men employed by the mining companies are ... Mexican. ... They are barred from promotion into certain departments and ... they are refused upgrading into skilled jobs because of their national origin.

Texas, with a population of 6,414,824, has approximately 1,000,000 Mexican-Americans. ... Less than 5% ... are employed ... in war ... industries ... have restricted them to common or unskilled labor jobs ... regardless of their ability, training, or qualifications. In the oil, aircraft and mining industries, in the numerous military installations, in the munitions factories and shipyards, and in the public utility corporations, ... their employment has been limited and their opportunities for advancement restricted.

The prevalent ... belief among employers for the various industries, personnel managers, officials of military installations, and ... government agencies in the Southwest is that the Mexican-American is incapable of doing other than manual, physical labor; that he is unfit for the ... skilled labor required by industry and the crafts. ...

... The failure of the Mexican-American to enter the ranks of industry has been largely due to prejudice. ...

The belief . . . that certain racial or national groups have different mechanical aptitudes, a conviction that is at the bottom of the prejudice held against Mexican-Americans, is completely unfounded in fact. . . .

The urgent need of manpower, in view of the increasing shortage of labor, forced industry to give the Mexican-American an opportunity, but not without the greatest reluctance and misgivings. Wherever he has been given an opportunity he has shown the ability to learn and produce with the same efficiency as members of any other group. . . .

Bill S 2048, being considered by your Committee to prohibit discrimination in employment based on race, creed, color, national origin or ancestry will enable three million Mexican-American citizens throughout this country . . . to secure equal economic opportunities in employment in the post-war era. The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice is a war agency, designed to secure equal participation in the total war effort by all Americans regardless of race, creed, color or national origin. During its short period of operation it has done much to integrate Mexican-Americans in war and essential industries and in Government employ. Mexican-Americans have generously responded to their responsibility in the present world struggle for the victory of the democracies. They have unstintingly made the last sacrifice on a world-wide battle front in order that all peoples may enjoy the blessings of freedom and peace. Equal economic opportunities, the right to work and earn a decent living on a par with all other persons regardless of race, creed, color, national origin or ancestry, is a basic principle of American democracy.

E S S A Y S

In the first essay, Stuart Cosgrove, an independent scholar from Perth, Scotland, argues that during World War II the zoot suit held social and political importance as an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating identity for many Mexican American youth, or *pachucos*. The zoot suit riots of 1943 emerged at a time when American society was undergoing powerful structural change because of increased military recruitment and the entrance of women into the labor force, which in turn led to the erosion of parental control and authority. For Cosgrove, the hostilities that white servicemen expressed toward the zoot-suit-clad Mexican American youth, as the former tried to reestablish their status over the latter, revealed the polarization of wartime American society.

During the war Mexican Americans joined Americans' exodus to cities in search of jobs. By 1944, at the height of American war production, 16 percent of working women held jobs in war industries. In the Midwest over 5,000 Mexican American women were defense workers. They are the subject of the second essay, by Richard A. Santillán, professor of political science at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, who observes that these Mexican American women held a broad range of jobs and, despite discrimination, interacted with their fellow African American and Anglo American women workers. He contends that because the Mexican American women's experiences working in war-related industries expanded the boundaries of their social worlds, they would play a larger role in the post-World War II struggle for equality.