

4. Ernesto Galarza Defends Mexican Immigrants, 1929

The chief interest in the Mexican immigrant in the United States at the present moment centers around the question of whether Mexico shall be placed on the quota basis. The delegates to this Conference have already heard and probably will continue to hear the arguments marshaled by the opposing forces, and in these arguments they will have noted the usual alignment of racial purists versus economic expansionists. The restrictionists have mustered the familiar artillery of racial dilution and the color flood, while those who seek to keep the gates open, as they have been for the last eighteen years, are once more pressing the equally old argument that the very economic structure of the United States rests on the brawn and sweat of the immigrant.

. . . One effect of the controversy has been to obscure the very fundamental proposition that something must be done in the way of social and economic amelioration for those Mexicans who have already settled in the United States and whose problem is that of finding adjustment. Thus far in the discussion the Mexicans who have settled more or less permanently here have been taken into account negatively. . . .

For the moment . . . everyone has presented his side of the case except the Mexican worker himself. . . .

I speak to you today as one of these immigrants. I have only a simple and . . . suggestive statement based on a knowledge of the community life of these people and of what goes on in their minds concerning the economic aspects of "the Mexican problem."

First, as to unemployment. The Mexican is the first to suffer from depression in industrial and agricultural enterprises. . . . I flatly disagree with those who

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maintain that there is enough work for these people but that they refuse to work, preferring to live on charity. On the contrary, it is widely felt by the Mexicans that there are more men than there are jobs. . . . The precariousness of the job in the face of so much competition has brought home to the Mexican time and again his absolute weakness as a bargainer for employment. . . .

He has also something to say as to the wage scale. . . . The Mexican . . . recognizes his absolute inability to force his wage upward and by dint of necessity he shuffles along with a standard of living which the American worker regards with contempt and alarm. . . .

The distribution of the labor supply is felt by the Mexican to be inadequate. At present he has to rely mainly on hearsay or on the information of unscrupulous contractors who overcharge him for transportation. . . .

To these three aspects of the question—unemployment, wage scales, and seasonal migration in search of work—should be added . . . the persistence of race prejudice. . . .

. . . The Mexican immigrant still feels the burden of old prejudices. Only when there are threats to limit immigration from Mexico is it that a few in America sing the praises of the peon. . . . At other times the sentiments which seem to be deeply rooted in the American mind are that he is unclean, improvident, indolent, and innately dull. Add to this the suspicion that he constitutes a peril to the American worker's wage scale and you have a situation with which no average Mexican can cope.

I have tried to suggest some of the things which the Mexican would say if he were articulate. If his native reticence could be pierced, I believe these are his opinions on unemployment, wage scales, standard of living, seasonal migrations, and racial prejudices. . . .

First, some order should be brought out of the chaos of the seasonal labor supply, preferably by state initiative. As long as the present haphazard arrangement continues, surplus of laborers will be needed to compensate for the lack of correlation between the supply and the demand for farm workers. Control by private organizations of this phase of the question is subject to too many abuses to be recommended.

Second, a bilateral accord with the Mexican government should be sought to iron out the immigration question. . . .

Third, whenever feasible social service agencies working with Mexican groups should use workers of Mexican extraction to make the firsthand contacts.

Fourth, there should be more real understanding of the adjustment which the Mexican is making to his American environment. . . . Something more should be known also about how the Mexican lives and why before the stigma of a low standard of living is fastened on him.

Last, I would ask for recognition of the Mexican's contribution to the agricultural and industrial expansion of western United States. . . . From Denver to Los Angeles and from the Imperial Valley to Portland, it is said, an empire has been created largely by the brawn of the humble Mexican, who laid the rails and topped the beets and poured the cubic miles of cement. . . . If it is true that the Mexican has brought to you arms that have fastened a civilization on the Pacific slope, then give him his due. If you give him his earned wage and he proves improvident, teach him otherwise; if he is tuberculous, cure him; if he falls into indigence, raise him. He has built you an empire!